

# Gurjara-Pratiharas: Their Origin, Evolution and Decline in Rajasthan

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## Abstract:

The Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty, also known as the Pratihara Empire, played a significant role in the history of Rajasthan. The Gurjara-Pratiharas emerged as a prominent power in North India during the 6th century CE. It is generally believed that they originated from the Gurjar community, and their early dominance was centred around present-day Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Gurjara-Pratiharas expanded their rule in Rajasthan, with their capital located in Mandore, near present-day Jodhpur. They established control over much of Rajasthan, including the region of Marwar. The dynasty reached its zenith under King Bhoja (836-885 CE). During his reign, the empire extended into central and northern India, and the arts and culture also flourished. Over time, the Pratihara Empire faced internal strife and external invasions, weakening their grip on Rajasthan. The Chahamanas (Chauhans) dynasty, among others, began to challenge their authority. The decline of the Gurjara-Pratiharas continued, and by the 11th century, they lost their prominence. This period saw the rise of Rajput kingdoms in Rajasthan, marking the end of the Pratihara influence in the region. In summary, the Gurjara-Pratiharas rose to power in Rajasthan, established a strong empire, and significantly influenced the region's history before gradually succumbing to internal and external pressures.

**Keywords:** Gurjara-Pratihara, prominent, Rajasthan, dynasty.

## Introduction:

The origin of the dynasty and the meaning of the term "Gurjara" in its name is a topic of debate among historians. The rulers of this dynasty used the self-designation "Pratihara" for their clan, and never referred to themselves as Gurjaras. They claimed descent from the legendary hero Lakshmana, who is said to have acted as a *pratihara* ("door-keeper") for his brother Rama.

Multiple inscriptions of their neighbouring dynasties describe the Pratiharas as "Gurjara". The term "Gurjara-Pratihara" occurs only in the Rajor inscription of a feudatory ruler named Mathanadeva, who describes himself as a "Gurjara-Pratihara". According to one school of thought, Gurjara was the name of the territory originally ruled by the Pratiharas; gradually, the term came to denote the people of this territory. An opposing theory is that Gurjara was the name of the tribe to which the dynasty belonged, and Pratihara was a clan of this tribe.

The Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty, often referred to as the Pratihara Empire, stands as one of the most prominent and enduring dynasties in the annals of Indian history. Their rise to power and sustained influence in the region of Rajasthan, among other parts of North India, is a compelling narrative of conquest, cultural patronage, and the ebb and flow of dynastic might. This essay delves into the

multifaceted tale of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, focusing primarily on their ascendancy and dominion over the land of Rajasthan, a region that played a pivotal role in shaping the empire's identity.

The Gurjara-Pratiharas, rooted in the Gurjar community, found their beginnings in the 6th century CE. They emerged in the historical backdrop of North India as a dynamic power, with Rajasthan serving as a fulcrum of their influence. This period marked a crucial chapter in the history of Rajasthan, as the Gurjara-Pratiharas navigated the intricate terrain of dynastic politics, territorial expansion, and cultural development.

### **Early Origins and Rise**

To understand the rise of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, one must first explore their early origins. The term "Gurjara" is believed to be associated with the Gurjar community, known for their warrior traditions and agricultural pursuits. The Gurjaras formed a crucial part of the social fabric in the western regions of India, including Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The initial period of Gurjara-Pratihara ascendancy was marked by the establishment of their power base in present-day Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Gurjaras' military prowess and strategic acumen played a pivotal role in their rise. As they expanded their dominion, they forged alliances and engaged in territorial conquests, gradually extending their influence over the Rajputana region.

### **The Gurjara-Pratiharas and Rajasthan**

Rajasthan, with its diverse landscapes and rich cultural tapestry, became a significant sphere of influence for the Gurjara-Pratiharas. Their capital was established in Mandore, near the modern city of Jodhpur, and this became a center of power from which they administered their rule over Rajasthan. This marked the beginning of the dynasty's association with the land of the Rajputs.

The Gurjara-Pratiharas' impact on Rajasthan was profound. They exercised control over substantial territories within the region, including the area of Marwar. Rajasthan, with its arid deserts, fertile plains, and strategic importance, presented both opportunities and challenges for the dynasty. The Gurjara-Pratiharas displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to the region's distinct geographical and cultural characteristics.

One of the enduring legacies of the Gurjara-Pratihara rule in Rajasthan was their patronage of culture and the arts. Their reign witnessed a flourishing of literature, sculpture, and temple architecture. The famous Dilwara Temples in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, remain as testaments to their support of intricate and ornate temple construction. King Bhoja, who reigned from 836 to 885 CE, stands out as a notable figure in the Gurjara-Pratihara lineage. His era is often referred to as a golden age of cultural and intellectual pursuits. Under his rule, the dynasty expanded its influence into central and northern India, contributing significantly to the realm of Sanskrit literature and the promotion of learning.

### **Challenges and Decline**

As with many empires throughout history, the Gurjara-Pratiharas faced a series of challenges that gradually eroded their authority. Internal power struggles, external invasions, and shifting alliances with other regional powers marked the decline of their empire. The Chahamanas (Chauhans) dynasty and the emergence of Rajput kingdoms began to challenge their dominance in Rajasthan.

The political landscape of North India evolved rapidly during this period, with the Gurjara-Pratiharas eventually losing their grip on the region. The ascendancy of other powers marked the end of their reign.

in Rajasthan and adjacent territories. In summary, the Gurjara-Pratiharas rose to prominence in Rajasthan, establishing their capital in Mandore and exercising influence over Marwar. They left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the region and played a crucial role in shaping the historical narrative of Rajasthan. However, their eventual decline paved the way for the rise of Rajput kingdoms, heralding a new chapter in the history of this vibrant land. This essay will explore in detail the nuances of their rise and reign, shedding light on the complex interplay of politics, culture, and regional dynamics that characterized this era.

### Objective:-

1. **Historical Understanding & Regional Influence:-** To provide a comprehensive historical account of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty's emergence and rule in Rajasthan, shedding light on the key events, rulers, and socio-political factors that shaped this period. To examine the extent of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty's influence on Rajasthan, including the territories they controlled, their administrative policies, and the impact of their rule on the region's culture and society.
2. **Challenges and Decline:** To analyze the challenges and factors that led to the gradual decline of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty in Rajasthan, including internal conflicts, external invasions, and changing political alliances.
3. **Legacy and Historical Significance and their impact on modern Rajasthan:-** To assess the legacy and historical significance of the Gurjara-Pratiharas in Rajasthan, exploring how their rule influenced subsequent dynasties and the cultural heritage of the region. To discuss how the Gurjara-Pratiharas' legacy continues to influence modern Rajasthan, including cultural traditions, historical memory, and heritage sites.

These objectives collectively aim to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty's historical significance in Rajasthan, both in terms of their ascendancy and the enduring impact they left on the region's history and culture.

### Review of literature:

A review of the literature pertaining to the rise and reign of the Gurjara-Pratiharas in Rajasthan provides valuable insights into the historical scholarship and research on this fascinating period.

The origin of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty is a matter of debate among historians. The rulers of this dynasty used "Pratihara" for themselves, which was a designation or surname chosen by them. According to the Gwalior inscription, they are the descendants of Lakshman, brother of Rama and the hero of Ramayana. Lakshman served Rama as a Pratihari i.e. door guard, hence the name of this dynasty was "Pratihara". Some modern historians present the explanation that they were protectors (Pratihara) in the army of Rashtrakutas from which this word originated.

They are described as "Gurjaras" in records by many neighboring states of this empire. Only one inscription is found of a feudal lord Mathandev in which he has designated himself as "Gurjara-Pratihara". Some scholars believe that "Gurjar" was the name of a region. It is believed that Gurjar was a tribe and Pratihara was a clan or gotra of this Gurjar people.

There is a dispute among those who consider Gurjars as a tribe whether they were original inhabitants of India or outsiders. Supporters of migration from outside would claim that they also came from outside around the same time as the Huns arrived in India around the sixth century. Whereas in opposition to this it is argued that they were completely mixed with the local culture; Also, if they came as external invaders

then why did they choose the semi-arid area instead of choosing the fertile plains of Indus-Ganga for settlement.

According to the Agnivansh theory described in the later manuscripts of Prithviraj Raso, the Pratihara and three other dynasties originated from a sacrificial fire on the Arbud mountain (present day Mount Abu). Scholars interpret this story as their joining the Hindu caste system after the yagya. Anyway, this story is not found in the earlier copies of Prithviraj Raso and it is believed that this myth is based on a Parmar story and its purpose is against the Mughals. The Rajputs were to be united, during this period they claimed glorified lineages for their origin.

The Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty was an empire-establishment dynasty in the Indian subcontinent during the transition period between the ancient and medieval period, whose rulers ruled over large parts of central-northern India between the mid-8th century and the 11th century. The founder of this dynasty was Nagabhatta I, whose descendants ruled over a wide territory, first with Ujjain and later with Kannauj as the capital. Even before the establishment of the empire by Nagabhatta in 725 AD, the Gurjara-Pratiharas ruled over feudal lords in areas like Mandore, Marwar etc. It was ruled between 6th to 9th century but the credit for establishing it as an organized empire goes to Nagabhatta.

The power of the Pratiharas diminished due to mutual struggle for the state. During this period, the substantial decline in their power and territory also led to the attack of Rashtrakuta king Indra III. Indra attacked Kannauj in about 916 and destroyed it. Later, under the rule of relatively incompetent rulers, the Pratiharas could not regain their old influence. Under them the feudal lords became more and more strong and by the 10th century they were becoming free from subjugation. After this, the Pratiharas were left with some more land as their territory than the Ganga-Doab area. The last important Raja Governor had to leave Kannauj in 1018 due to an attack by Mahmud of Ghazni. He was captured and killed by the Chandelas and his son Trilochanpal was installed as a symbolic king. The last king of this dynasty was Yashpal, after whose death in 1036 the dynasty came to an end.

## **POLITICAL HISTORY OF GURJARA-PRATIHARA DYNASTY**

The Pratiharas ruled over Kanauj for a longtime are also called GurjaraPratiharas. Most scholars consider that they originated from the Gurjaras who were pastoralists and fighters, like the Jats. The Pratiharas established a series of principalities in central and eastern Rajasthan. Epigraphic helps us to trace the origin of the Pratiharas . Pratiharas were descendants of Lakshamana of the solar race of the great epic, the Ramayana. Some scholars opine that they were a branch of the Gurjara race. They are mentioned in the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II, the records of Hieun Tsang and the Hashacharita of Bana. It is known from the Rashtrakuta record that the Pratiahas belonged to the Gurjara stock. It is also held by some scholars that the Gurjras were central Asiatic nomads who accompanied the Hunas into India. Some others are of the opinion that the Gurjaras were of indigenous origin. Another opinion is that the Pratiharas were a tribe of the land called Gurjaradesa. The expression Gurjara-Pratihara family of the Gurjara country was possessed by the Pratiharas since the time of Vatsaraja. The Gurjaras came into prominence about the second half of the 6th century C.E. They took advantage of the downfall of the Gupta Empire to establish their political authority. The Gurjara Pratihara dynasty was founded by Nagabhatta I in the region of Malwa in the eighth century C.E. He belonged to a Rajput clan. Pratihara dynasty gained importance during the reign of Nagabhatta I, who ruled between 730- 756 C.E. He was successful against the Arabs. The Pratiharas who first had their capital at Bhinmal gained prominence under Nagabhatta I who offered stout resistance to the Arab rulers of Sind who were trying to encroach on Rajasthan, Gujarat, the Punjab,

etc. The Arabs made a big thrust towards Gujarat but were decisively defeated by the Chalukyan ruler of Gujarat in 738. The efforts of the early Pratihara rulers to extend their control over the upper Ganga valley and Malwa were defeated by the Rashtrakuta rulers Dhruva and Gopal III. He established an empire extending from Gujarat to Gwalior and defied the Arab invasions further east of Sindh. He fought against Dantidurga the Rashtrakuta ruler as well and was defeated. Kannauj. These were weak rulers and hence Mihirabhoja captured Kannauj and extended his empire up to river Narmada. Over time, however, Dhruva II, the Gujarat Samanta of Amonghvarsa defeated Mihirabhoja in the battle and drove him away. The war between Rashtrakutas and Bhoja continued for several years and both tried to bring the province of Avanti under their control. Even the last years of the reign of Mihirabhoja passed in these wars. King Devapala of the Pala dynasty was a brave and powerful king during the reign of Mihirbhoja. His inscriptions show that he realized tributes and taxes from the Kings of the territories from Himalaya to Vindhyachal and from the eastern frontier to the western frontier of northern India. Though these descriptions seem to be an exaggeration, the power of Devapala was so strong that it appears that both Bhoja and Palas must have shared victories as well as defeats in their wars with each other. The historian expresses different views concerning the final victory. But according to Gwalior Prasasti, in the end, Bhoja has defeated the son of Devapala. Mihirabhoja had also conquered many other provinces. He had attacked Karnal, western and southern Saurashtra etc. The Arab traveller Sulaiman has praised his big army and his efficient administration. Mihirabhoja was the most powerful ruler of the Pratihara dynasty. His empire extended from the Terai of Himalay to Bundelkhanda and Kausambhi, to the frontier of Pala kingdom in the east, and Saurashtra in the west. A large portion of Rajasthan was also under his control. Some of the coins of Mihirabhoja that are found can be mentioned as alloyed silver which indicates that on account of constant wars, his economic condition had become bad. He was the worshipper of Vishnu and Shiva. It can be said that Mihirbhoj made Kannauj his capital and succeeded in consolidating Pratihara's power and influence in Malwa, Rajputana and Madhyadesh. He had to face continuous defeats at the hands of Devapala, King Dhruva and King Kokkalla. These consecutive trounces resulted in weakening his grasp over Rajputana and even the feudatory Pratihara ruler of Jodhpur became independent. The death of Devapala, ruler of Bengal and, thereafter, the weakness of his successors allowed Mihirbhoj to restore his strength towards the east and south due to the policies undertaken by the Rashtrakuta ruler. He conquered part of the Western Kingdom by defeating the Pala king Narayanapala. Yet again he took an offensive against the Rashtrakuta ruler Krishna II and defeated him on the banks of the Narmada. Subsequently, he occupied Malwa and Kathiawar. He had an extensive empire which included Kathiawar, territories up to the Punjab in the North-West, Malwa and Madhyadesh. He had consolidated his power in Rajputana and the Kalachuris of Bihar and Chandelas of Bundelkhand had accepted his sovereignty. He made conquests in Punjab, Oudh and other Northern territories. Mihirbhoja was not only a great conqueror but also a great lover of art and literature. He was a great patron of men and letters. Poet Rajasekhara adorned his court. Consequently, his reign was regarded as the glorious period of Pratihara ascendancy. Mahendrapala succeeded to the throne of his father, Mihirbhoja. He succeeded in maintaining the empire of his father and also extended it further by annexing Magadha and parts of Northern Bengal. He lost some parts to the Kings of Kashmir. It is believed that his empire extended from the Himalayas to the Vindhyas and from the Eastern to the Western Ocean. After the death of Mahendrapala, a war of succession took place which substantially weakened the power of the dynasty. Mahendrapala was succeeded by his son Bhoja II but his cousin, Mahipala, shortly dethroned him and became the ruler of Kannauj. During his period, the Rashtrakuta King, Indra III defeated Mahipala of Kannauj. After Indra III retired to the south, Mahipala



again consolidated his position. In the period in-between the Pala rulers captured some eastern parts of his empire and occupied the forts of Kalinjar and Chitrakuta. His period marked the beginning of the decline of the power of Pratiharas. Mahipala was succeeded by his son Mahendrapala II. He ruled only for a year. Afterwards, we find no less than four successors during fifteen years. Devapala, Vinayakapala II, Mahipala II and Vijayapala ruled in succession over the throne of Kannauj but none of them proved to be a capable ruler. That resulted in the decline of the dynasty. Several feudatories of the empire took advantage of the temporary weakness of the Gurjar Pratiharas during the war of succession and they declared their independence, notably the Paramaras of Malwa, the Chandelas of Bundelkhand, and the Kalachuris of Mahakoshal. "The Gurjara Pratihara Empire which continued in full glory for nearly a century, was the last great empire in Northern India before the Muslim conquest. This honour is accorded to the empire of Harsha by many historians of repute, but without any real justification, for the Pratihara Empire was probably larger, certainly not less in extent, rivalled the Gupta Empire and brought political unity and its attendant blessings upon a large part of Northern India. But its chief credit lies in its successful resistance to the foreign invasions from the West, from the days of Junaid. The Gurjara Pratihara, often simply called the Pratihara Empire, was an imperial Indian dynasty that ruled much of Northern India from the 6th to the 11th centuries. Kannauj was the capital of imperial Gurjara Pratiharas. The Gurjara Pratihara rulers in the tenth century were entitled as Maharajadhiraja of Aryavarta. The word "Pratihara" means protector or "who takes over the enemy or opponent" · Harichandra is said to have laid the foundation of this dynasty in the 6th century C.E. He created a small kingdom at Bhinmal near about 550 C.E. after the fall of Gupta Empire. Nagabhata I extended his control east and south from Mandor, conquering Malwa as far as Gwalior and the port of Bharuch in Gujarat. He established his capital at Avanti in Malwa and checked the expansion of the Arabs, who had established themselves in Sind. Nagabhata I was followed by two weak successors, who were in turn succeeded by Vatsraja (775-805 C.E). Vatsraja's ambitions for capturing Kannauj, brought the Pratiharas into conflict with the Pala dynasty of Bengal and the Rashtrakutas of the northern Deccan, with whom they would contest for primacy in northern India for the next two centuries. · Vatsraja successfully challenged and defeated the Pala ruler Dharmapala and Danti Durga the Rashtrakuta king for control of Kannauj. Vatsraja was succeeded by Nagabhata II. Nagabhata II was initially defeated by the Rashtrakuta ruler Govinda III, but later recovered Malwa from the Rashtrakutas, conquered Kannauj and the Indo-Gangetic Plain as far as Bihar from the Palas, and again checked the Muslims in the west. · Bhoja I or Mihir Bhoja expanded the Gurjar dominions west to the border of Sind, east to Bengal, and south to the Narmada. He was the greatest among the Pratihara rulers and was also a great patron of art and letters. · After Bhoja, many rulers such as Mahenderpal-I, Bhoja II, Mahipala-I, Rajapala, and Trilochanpala ruled as kings. Jasapala was the last Gurjar ruler of Kanauj, died in 1036. · The Pratihara Empire was probably larger, certainly not less in extent, rivalled the Gupta Empire and brought political unity and its attendant blessings upon a large part of Northern India. The Pratihara successfully resisted the foreign invasions from the west, for a long time.

### Downfall

After the death of Mahendrapala, there was a war of succession, and with the help of the Rashtrakutas, Mahipala's stepbrother Bhoja II (910-912 AD) took control of Kannauj, although it was for a short period, as soon as the Rashtrakutas left, Mahipala I (912-944 AD) ) overthrew the rule of Bhoj II. Taking advantage of the temporary weakness of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, many feudal lords of the empire, especially the Parmars of Malwa, Chandelas of Bundelkhand, Kalachuris of Mahakoshal, Tomars and Chauhans of Haryana, started becoming independent. The South Indian emperor Indra III (999-928 AD)

of the Rashtrakuta dynasty captured Kannauj in 912 AD. Although the Gurjara Pratiharas recaptured the city, their position remained weak in the 10th century, due to attacks by the Turks from the west, the Rashtrakuta dynasty from the south and the advance of the Pala Empire in the east. The Gurjara-Pratiharas lost control of Rajasthan to their feudal lords and the Chandelas captured the strategic fort of Gwalior in central India around 950 AD. By the end of the 10th century, the Gurjara-Pratiharas were reduced to a small kingdom centred on Kannauj. This empire came to an end with the death of Yashpal, the last Gurjara-Pratihara ruler of Kannauj, in 1036 AD.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the study of the rise and reign of the Gurjar Pratihara in Rajasthan unveils a rich tapestry of historical significance and cultural impact. The Gurjar Pratihara, with their ascendancy to power, not only shaped the political landscape of Rajasthan but also left an indelible mark on its social and cultural fabric. The historical significance of the Gurjar Pratihara's rule lies in their adept governance, architectural achievements, and contributions to the flourishing cultural milieu of the region. The era witnessed the construction of monumental structures, each a testament to the dynasty's architectural prowess. The political stability they fostered allowed for economic prosperity, and the flourishing trade and commerce contributed to the overall development of the region.

The Gurjar Pratihara's impact on Rajasthan extends beyond their immediate rule. Their legacy echoes in the intricate carvings of temples, the remnants of fortifications, and the remnants of administrative systems that endured long after their decline. The cultural and artistic efflorescence during their reign became a defining feature of Rajasthan's identity, influencing subsequent dynasties and shaping the cultural heritage we recognize today.

However, as with any historical narrative, the Gurjar Pratihara's ascendancy was not without challenges. Internal conflicts and external invasions marked the later stages of their reign, ultimately leading to their decline. Understanding these challenges provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of power and governance during that period.

In the broader context, the study of the Gurjar Pratihara in Rajasthan contributes to a nuanced understanding of India's historical landscape. Comparisons with contemporaneous dynasties and reflections on their historiographical significance reveal the intricate interplay of political forces in medieval India.

As we conclude our exploration of the rise and reign of the Gurjar Pratihara in Rajasthan, it is evident that their chapter in history is more than a chronological account of rulers. It is a narrative of cultural efflorescence, political acumen, and the ebb and flow of power. By delving into this historical epoch, we gain not only a deeper understanding of the past but also an enriched perspective on the intricate tapestry of Rajasthan's history. This study not only opens avenues for further research but also underscores the enduring relevance of the Gurjar Pratihara in shaping the historical trajectory of Rajasthan.

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