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Position of women in ancient Kashmir

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Abstract

In the entire sub-continent, Kashmir has the distinction of possessing a well recorded history since ancient times. The old Kashmiri texts, *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana and *Nilmata Purana*, throw light on the status of women in early Kashmir society. The most revealing feature of the family-life of Kashmir, as seen in these texts is the position of women. Nowhere is she considered 'the living torch illuminating the way to hell' or 'the devourer of the intellect of men'. There is no reference to seclusion or veiling of women in Kashmir and she moves quite freely in the society, emulating as it were the free-going sparkling waters of the springs of her country. The picture of society as depicted by Kalhana in his chronicle shows that by this time, woman had emerged from the domestic arena on the political stage. The queens had their own treasures and were actively associated with the affairs of the state. Through this research paper I would highlight the position of women in ancient Kashmir.

Keywords: Position of women, old Kashmiri texts, *Nilmata Purana*

Introduction

The *Nilmata*, the oldest text of Kashmir allows her to participate in almost all the festivals and religious ceremonies. In the moonlit night of Kumauni- Mahotsava, we find her sitting beside the sacred fire in the company of her husband, children, servants and husband's friends. It is not clear, however, as to whether she is merely a silent spectator or takes active part in the musical and dramatic performances performed during this night. She is present in the common feast which takes place on the next day not only on the festivals celebrated at home but also in the outdoor festivals; she is seen freely enjoying herself. Thus, on the ceremonial day for ploughing the fields and sowing the seed characterized by music, dancing and feasting, the peasant's wife is not behind the walls of her home. Women of the time enjoyed high position in society, which is the prominence of the goddesses in the religion depicted in the old text of Kashmir. The gods are mentioned often with their consorts. Sakra plays with Saci; Visnu's feet rest in the lap of Laksmi; Parvati accompanies Siva; Sita is worshipped during the celebrations of Rama's birthday and Kisna's wife receives worship on the birthday of her lord. The mothers of the gods are also referred to. Besides these, we come across various other female deities. The goddesses Asokika, Syama, Durga, Sri, Karisini, Bhadrakali, Bheda, Kapinjal, Suresvari, Bhadesvari, Gautamesi, Kalasila, Udyogasri, Gavaksi, Canaika, Gauri, Suvijaya, Sakuni, Brahmacarini, Cakreavari and Gihadevi form the shining galaxy of female deities worshipped by the people of Kashmir. The rivers of Kashmir are also personified as goddess Uma. The genuineness of the account given by the *Nilmata* is proved by the corroboration it receives from the works of many Kashmiri writers. Bilhana gives a testimony to the literary efficiency of the women of Kashmir. The *Rajatarangini* is full of instances showing the higher status of women in the fields of religion and politics.

Education

Kalhana, in his work gives the impression that women, of at least the upper classes, received education and from the picture which Kalhana has depicted in his chronicle, it becomes clear that women of this period were not only receiving education of a general nature but in diplomacy and statecraft too. Bilhana, the Poet Laureate at the court of the Calukya King Paramadi (11th century A. D.), says in the last canto of his "Life of Vikramankadeva", while describing his homeland, that the women of Kashmir spoke Sanskrit and Prakrit fluently. There is, however, reason to believe that women of lower castes did not have this distinction

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and they had to be content with their vernacular speech. A closer study of Damodargupta's *Kuiiannimata Kavya* shows that women of higher castes and affluent classes received education which included the sexual sciences of Vatsyayana, Dattaka, Viuaputra and Rajaputra, the art of dancing as propounded by Bharata, art as in the treatise of Visakhila and music as for instance in the works of Dantila. They had, moreover, to learn botany, painting, needlework, woodwork, clay-modelling, cookery and receive practical training in instrumental music, singing and dancing. No wonder, we find the women of Kashmir as active as men in the discharge of Public duties. There is no indication of women being in seclusion or relegated to the background. The use of the veil was non-existent. We find, for instance, women seated along with other officials and ministers in the court of Harsa. We find them fighting alongside men on foot and on horseback. Vijaymalla, while retreating after the unsuccessful coup against his brother, King Harsa, was ably assisted by his brave wife, who clinging to him on his horse kept the pursuers at bay. Both of, they and their horse swam across the flooded Vitasta near Shadipur, and thus, escaped to the country of the Dards. We have examples of heroism displayed by queen Didda and later by Koua Rani.

Marriage

Marriage is a very important event in the life of woman. Matrimony, in the course of time, is followed by maternity, and its recurrence makes the women periodically helpless and absolutely dependent on her husband for some time. Marriage, therefore, determines the fate of a woman to a much greater extent than it does the destiny of man. A good marriage is a welcome protection for a woman, a bad one is worse than a painful chain. So women should be mature enough to understand its importance. The most revealing feature of the family life of Kashmir as seen in the *Nilmata Purana* and the *Rajatarangini* is the position of women in society. Married women were given full respect in the society. For example, on *Iramanjari-Pujana*, a festival of flower, the ladies of house were honoured with presents of flowers and garlands. The ladies of the house were honoured on various other occasions too. The householder enjoyed upon to honour them on the new snow-fall day.

We do not get a single reference to child marriage in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. There are plenty of references which show that women were married after puberty. A story related by Ksemendra in the *Desopadesa* may indicate that girls were married at a mature age. There are references which indicate that marriages were purely either based on the choice of marriageable match or were arranged by their parents. Some verses from the *Rajatarangini* show that sometimes marriages were done for political ambitions as well, but with the consent of the bride and the groom. In one verse, Kalhana has mentioned the practice of *Svayanvara* which was attended by King *Aryaraja* who received the bridegroom's garland by the princess *Amitaprabha*.

In another reference, King *Jayapida* married his only daughter to the prince of *Kamala, Kallata*. Although it was not accepted fully by the society but we get a plenty of references related to inter-caste marriages in the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana. We learn, for instance, from a passage describing *Sussala's* fight for the throne that the wife of his ally, the powerful *Damara* lord, *Gargacandra*, brought her two youthful daughters; one of whom was married to *Sussala* and the another to his son *Jayasinha*. It

brings another significant practice of inter-caste marriages. *Damara Kosuhaka* was too married to a *Rajput Lady*. We have the example of *Cakravarman* marrying *Domba* girls and elevating them to the position of chief queens. There is not even single reference of dowry in the *Nilmata Purana* or in the *Rajatarangini*. However, it is not to be presumed that the custom of giving dowry was absent in the Kashmirian society of that time. The institution of dowry, if it exists, must have been voluntary as not to attract the special attention of the writers of the period.

Married women were expected to be of good virtue. She should be loyal to her husband, should take good care of household affairs etc. The Women in Kashmir society, were usually allowed to marry only once in their life time. After the death of a husband widows were expected to live a pure life, devoid of all luxury. The ornaments or gorgeous dress were forbidden to them. But the remarriage of widows and other women does not seem to have been absolutely forbidden. We have the example of King *Pratapaditya II* marrying the wife of a rich merchant. Since the Hindu system of joint family was universal, we find the daughter-in-law under constant supervision and control of her mother-in-law. Queen *Suryamati*, for example, treated the wives of her son, *Kalasa*, harshly and required them to clean the palace with their own hands.

Undoubtedly, the practice of polygamy was not only prominent but respectable from Gupta period onwards. The *Hunas* of Central Asia, who invaded Kashmir during the fifth and Sixth centuries A. D., were polygamous people and they left a notable imprint on the society of Kashmir. The influence of the *Hunas* on the local populace, which also influenced them, in turn, to the point of their total absorption in the Indian community, is clearly brought out by *Kalhana* as he says that "Brahmanas from *Gandhara*, resembling himself in their habits and verily themselves the lowest of the twice-born, accepted *agraharas* from them". Thus by this period Polygamy was quite prominent in the society of Kashmir. There are many references, given by *Kalhana* related to it in his work which shows the family life of the king and the nobility was polygamous. The seraglios of the kings were full of queens, concubines from all castes and their example was followed by the countries and aristocrats. Polyandry does not, however, seem to have been in vogue, though in certain hill states bordering on Kashmir, among some aboriginal tribes it might have been practised.

Property rights

By 12th century, woman's share in husband's property was restored, to an extent equal to that of her sons. This general improvement in the property rights of women were recognized due to a number of factors. Due to foreign invasions, the central authority broke down and a large number of small states came into existence. Various local traditions began to influence the law of inheritance in different regions of India. The moral fibre of society became weak and women became confined to the household more than ever and they needed protection of their rights in a more formal way. During this period of time, the women in Kashmir probably had some proprietary rights and independent legal status. A passage from the *Rajatarangini* tends to show that after the death of her husband probably, the widow became heir to his immovable properties and not his sons. Woman owned private property, is illustrated by another illuminating reference by *Kalhana*. While

enumerating the chief *Damara* lords, who remained neutral in the rebellion raised by Bhoja, another pretender to Jayasinha's throne, he mentions a Damara lady also who held the fief in her own right. Another passage appears to point out that women were owners of landed estates. Ksemendra, in one of his works, also refers to an incident in which a prostitute becomes mistress of a rich man and on latter's death, because she was living like his wife, inherits his property. The property became legally hers through the decision of the crown.

We cannot deny that by this time the position of women had started deteriorating. In the words of Kalhana, women are mere objects of senses. It seems that the birth of a daughter was seldom preferred to that of a son. The historical evidence indicates that the birth of a son who was considered as "savior or protector in the both worlds and in whose company, the mothers, along with their husbands were considered lucky. Nilmata mentions about the worship of a Naga deity, *Naga-Bahuputra*, who was worshipped in order to be blessed with many sons. However, it is important to mention that, historically, female infanticide was unknown in Kashmir society. Kalhana gives ample evidences to the gross immorality and laxity of character prevailing among certain classes of women. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* delineates in niceties of details, the sensual excesses of the ladies of the palace and the court. Evidences related to it can also be had from the works of Ksemendra and Damodargupta. It appears that, by this time, prostitution was very popular in society. They often adorned the King's inner departments and were usually the power behind the throne. Numerous references to the courtesans in connection with the description of festivals, indicate that prostitution was freely allowed in the society of the days of the *Rajatarangini*. The *Rajatarangini* does not decry the courtesans. The prominent ones of them, on the other hand, are enjoined upon to visit the king on his coronation day and take due part in the ceremonies—a fact proving evidently their high political status. Many other social evils like *sati* and *jauhar* customs, dancing girls (*Devadasis*) attached to temples etc. were present in the society.

Role in politics

One of the most significant and surprising features of the early Kashmir polity was the power that women enjoyed. The picture one gets from various references is not that of servitude or deprivation, but of happy participation in different spheres of political activities. Several women have played a significant role in shaping the political history of Kashmir. Yasovati became the first queen in Kashmir to be enthroned as a ruler even though as a regent. Queens like Sugandha and Didda gave very impressive account of their administrative acumen. Many others, like Khadone, Amritprabha, Cakramardika, Kayanadevi, Ratnadevi, Kamala Devi, built Shrines and Marketplaces and towns. Candrapid's queen Kalyanadev was exalted by the king as Mahapratiharapala, something like the chief Chamberlain. Queen Kalhanika was the chief queen of king Jayasinha of second Lohara dynasty. She played a brief but very significant role in the politics of the Kashmir as she was sent on a dedicated diplomatic mission of bringing about a rapprochement between Jayasinha and Bhoja, the son of Salhana, and a rival claimant to the throne. Rani Yasomati, attained enviable position which enabled her to exercise envomour influence to the extent that even at times her foes

had to bow to her decree. She attained the throne in the state when chaos and pell-mell was life of Kashmir. Yasomati or Jasomati was the wife of king Damodar, who was the son of king Gonanda the first king mentioned in the history of Kashmir by Kalhana. Kalhana has given many references which show that women of Kashmir were quite active directly or indirectly in the political field.

Thus, women of Kashmir played a significant role in the political field from time to time. Some of them carved out a permanent place for themselves in the political history of Kashmir through their efforts and ability, in the male domination sphere at that time like queen Sugandhā. She was the chief queen of king Sankaravarman of the Utpala dynasty. According to Kalhana, queen Sugandha was the first queen who not only entered the political arena but also exercised her power. Kalhana does not say anything about her political participation during the life span of her husband. But scholars believe that she must have been an educated woman. She is believed to have close administrative knowledge because immediately after husband was wounded in Urawa region, she handled the administration with the guardianship of her son Gopalavarman. When other queens of Sankaravarman performed Sati along with their husband, Sugandha chose to survive. She took over the reins of administration in the name of her minor son Gopalavarman. She fully exercised her powers for managing the affairs of the state. She was helped by her minister Prabhakaradeva. Kalhana says that the capture of power was also the beginning of her moral downfall. She fell in love with minister, who was killed through black magic. After two years of rule she was dethroned and Samkata, who was the son of Sankaravarman, was placed on the throne but he too died after a few days. In A. D. 904, Sugandha assumed the royal power again, and tried to please her subjects through acts of religious merits like the construction of temples and installation of images. She successfully completed her next two years of rule but she could not handle her enemies strongly and was deposed in A. D. 906 by Tantrins and a minor son of Nitjitavarman was placed on throne. She stayed at Hushkapura for next two years and at last was imprisoned and ultimately was put to death. Amongst the women of Kashmir who played significant role in the politics, the name Didda stands out prominently. She virtually ruled over the valley throughout the second half of the 10th century. Her influence behind the throne spans 50 years, covering the reign of her husband, King Ksemagupta, the time of her regency, and later as sovereign ruler.

The widowed Queen Didda ruled Kashmir from A. D. 958 - 1003. She was the grand-daughter of the famous *Hindusahi* ruler Bhīma and a daughter of Sinharaja who was the king of Lohara. She was married to Ksemagupta. Her marriage to Ksemagupta is seen as a landmark in the history of Kashmir, as it ultimately brought Kashmir under the rule of a dynasty hailing from Lohara. Ksemagupta was a weak ruler and was under full influence of his queen Didda. Kalhana informs us that Didda's influence was so deep on Ksemagupta that he comes to be known as Diddaksema. This is attested by the copper coins of that ruler bearing the legend di- kshema. After the death Of Ksemagupta in A. D. 958 Didda become the regent of her minor son Abhimanyu. Next half a century she was busy in handling her ministers, and frequent rebellions sponsored by the dislodged councilors. Didda was very beautiful but was apparently lame. She was able to

transform herself from a comparatively unsure and politically naive persona into a ruthless, decisive and ambitious one. Her alternate bribe-and placation policy helped in quelling rebellions. She bribed her enemies and those to whom she could not buy, she punished them ruthlessly. Kalhana explicitly tells that, "those treacherous ministers, who, during sixty years from the year (39)77 (i. e. A. D. 90 1-02) onwards had robbed sixteen kings, from Gopala to Abhimanyu, of their dignity, lives and riches-they all together with their descendents and followers, were quickly exterminated by the angry queen Didda, with a mere terrifying frown, just as the great asuras (were exterminated) by Durga". This is very much in consonance with the description of her character as a queen who knew no mercy and had no scruples. Her son Abhimanyu died in A. D. 972 and his son Nandigupta was enthroned. His death softened her and she took to act of piety. She established as many as 64 religious establishments and got all the old and dilapidated temples repaired. Amongst the most important of these were the two temples of god Vishnu named Abhimanyusvamin and Diddasvamin and a mauha for the residence of visitors from other parts of India. But her acts were for short period. When her grandson become hindrance in her political ambitions, he was dethroned in A. D. 973 and her grandson Tribhuvana was put on throne, but he too met the same fate in A. D. 975. She now placed her grandson Bhimagupta on the throne. But soon he also became aware of his grandmother's ambitions and as a result of his expressed concern, he was imprisoned and tortured to death in A. D. 980-81. Now she came in for front and took all powers on her name. She raised her paramour Tunga to the position of Prime-Minister.

When some Brahmanas objected it, she bribed them and won them, which also created split in her rebels and ultimately their strength declined. She now established undisputed control over Kashmir. She appointed her brother Udayaraja as heir- apparent and ensured the sovereignty of Kashmir to her Kinsmen from Lohara before her death in A. D. 1003. In spite of her gross licentious and immoral character, Didda had the Qualities of statesmanship and political acumen which not only helped her in maintaining her hold over Kashmir for about half a century but also entitled her to the rank amongst the ablest sovereigns of the valley. The next name who actively participated in the state affairs was Suryamati. She was the younger daughter of king Inducandra, the lord of Jalandhara.⁸⁵ Stein has identified Inducandra with his namesake mentioned in the genealogical list of the Katoca kings of Kangra.⁸⁶ She was the queen of Ananta, who was the ruler of third Lohana dynasty. Though she never assumed the royal power like Sugandha or Didda, but still played very important role in the political history of Kashmir. She used to guide her husband in matters of importance and her influence over Ananta was so great that he acted almost entirely according to her advice. After the death of Ananta's brothers Diddapala and Anangapala, Ananta was totally under the influence of Suryamati. It was due to her insistent advice that Ananta abdicated in favor of their unworthy son Kalasa. Kalhana has compared King Ananta with a 'mirror reflecting queen Suryamati. This queen founded a temple of Siva named Gaurisvara and a mauha named after her own name as Subhatamauha. Two more mauha near the shrine of Vijayesa and Amaresa were founded by her.⁹⁰ Beside these religious foundations, she granted a number of Agrahas to

Brahmanas and also made lavish gifts of cows, gold, jewels and horses to them.⁹¹ When their son Rajaraja died, both Suryamati and Ananta were in deep sorrow and they decided to live their rest life at the shrine of Sadasiva. According to Kalhana, Ananta spent recklessly and very soon, not only emptied his treasury but a situation arose when he had to pawn his royal throne and diadem to a trader of Malava settled in Kashmir. Kalhana tells

Thus, we can say that during the period of our study, women of Kashmir enjoyed very prominent position in society. Time to time, she seems to come in forefront and play very distinguish part not only at family level but sometimes her acts transformed the whole history of Kashmir. She enjoyed certain rights like right to proper education and right to choose husband. But the society of Kashmir was also not free from social evils like Sati and Jauhar customs, polygamy, prostitution and temple dancers or Devdasi system etc.

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