

Beyond Patriarchy: Redefining Gender Roles and Identities in Early Kashmir

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Abstract: *The early period in Indian history marks a significant period in terms of social, economic, and political history. A notable aspect of this period is the apparent decline in the status of women within society. Law books from this period outline practices such as early marriage, restricted access to education, limited property rights, the prohibition of widow remarriage, endorsement of polygamy, and the prevalence of child marriages. In the context of Kashmir, we observe a unique scenario regarding the issues mentioned above. These issues somehow no longer hold true for Kashmir. During this period, women in Kashmir held a respectable position and, in some instances, even higher status than men – an anomaly not commonly found in other regions of India during this period. It prompts a deeper inquiry into why women in Kashmir enjoyed greater political, religious, and social rights than their counterparts elsewhere. Hence, this paper aims to delve into the roles and identities of women in Kashmir concerning property rights, marriage practices, sati system, access to education, child marriage, and their involvement in political or administrative spheres.*

Keywords: *Early Kashmir, Gender, Patriarchy, Polygamy, Caste, Class, Child Marriage.*

Introduction

Since the 19th century, scholars have been intrigued by the study of women, drawing attention from both Indian and Western perspectives. Their research has shed light on the status of women in early India. However, examining historical writings on women reveals diverse viewpoints rather than a consistent narrative. This diversity can be traced back to colonial interpretations of Indian society. Colonial historians often depicted Indian gender dynamics as unfair,

portraying men as dominant figures guiding women in all aspects of life.¹ A.S. Altekar brought about a significant shift in the discourse on women by challenging the colonial perspective. He argued that colonial interpretations overlooked numerous instances in ancient Indian history where women excelled in traditionally male-dominated fields, including politics and professions. His writings were influenced by a reaction against the colonial portrayal of India, fueled by socio-religious reform movements and the spirit of nationalism.² Altekar's work, which inspired many subsequent authors, primarily focused on women's roles within the family, neglecting other aspects of their lives that were considered less important.³

In the post-independence period, the prevailing trends in historical writings on women persisted. However, scholars began to recognize the importance of considering the issue of women within a broader societal framework.⁴ Historians such as Uma Chakravarti⁵ and Kumkum Roy⁶ advocated for placing women within the broader context of society. Rather than solely focusing on women's status and position, they explored the intersection of gender, class, caste, and state formation.⁷

The change in historical approach at a pan-Indian level has yet to quite extend to the study of women in early Kashmir. While there is a wealth of scholarship on women in the region, much of it still follows the Altekarian paradigm. One crucial aspect often overlooked in the study of early Kashmir is examining gender issues, which remains insufficiently analyzed. There exists an indifferent attitude towards understanding the roles and contributions of women during this period. There is a pressing need to broaden the scope of study to understand women in a larger context. A close examination of literary texts reveals that women held significant socio-economic, religious, and political roles during early Kashmir.⁸

Historical Background of Kashmir

Kashmir, situated in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent, is renowned for its breathtaking scenery, encompassing snow-capped peaks and verdant valleys of the Himalayas. Throughout its history, Kashmir has been a melting pot of diverse cultures. It boasts a well-documented history, unlike many other regions in the subcontinent.⁹ The old historical texts in Kashmir like the Nilamata Purana and the Rajatarangini by Kalhana provide insights into the roles and status of women in early Kashmiri society.¹⁰ These texts shed light on the significant position held by women in Kashmiri family life, distinguishing them from other societies of the time. Women in Kashmir enjoyed notable influence and participation across various spheres of daily life, including socio-economic, political, and religious domains. During the early period, Kashmir witnessed the rise of three powerful dynasties - the Karkotas, Utpalas, and Loharas.¹¹ Women under these dynasties assumed diverse roles and displayed their strength and influence, setting them apart as a formidable segment of

society compared to other regions in the subcontinent.

Breaking Barriers: Women's Impact on Kashmiri Politics

In the early period, politics was primarily dominated by men, reflecting a masculine-centric domain. Brahmanical literature typically upheld male authority while restricting women from public leadership roles. However, Kashmir stood out, as women held significant sway in its political history. Many women played pivotal roles in shaping Kashmir's political landscape, transitioning from domestic life to active participation in governance. Contrary to notions of subservience or exclusion, historical references depict women in Kashmir as actively and joyfully engaged in various political activities, directly and indirectly.¹²

The Rajatarangini provides notable examples of female rulership during the early period of Kashmir. It highlights the influence and activities of women in royal court culture in two significant ways: as sovereign rulers in their own right and as influential figures behind the throne. This dynamic indicates a noteworthy shift in power within what is traditionally a patriarchal structure, leading to tension and uncertainty in various phases of Kashmir's history, as portrayed by Kalhana.¹³ Female rulership in Kashmir, as depicted in the Rajatarangini, transcended different periods and dynasties, being culturally accepted. Both royal and non-royal women found legitimacy and authority through the throne, either as direct rulers or as regents. This presents a clear challenge to the traditional norms of succession, which typically favoured males and barred women from public roles of authority. The text mentions three female rulers of Kashmir, Yashovati, Sugandha, and Didda, amidst 104 male rulers.¹⁴ According to the Nilamata Purana, Yashovati, the pregnant wife of a deceased king, Damodara I, was appointed as the first female ruler by Lord Krishna himself. Kashmir's origin myths link the land to Goddess Parvati, reinforcing the idea that rulership is also divinely connected. When Yashovati ascended to the throne, ministers hesitated due to historical gender biases against female rulers. However, Lord Krishna's decree, stating that 'all rulers are embodiments of Siva and should be respected,' justified her rule. This divine endorsement strengthens the legitimacy of both male and female leadership in Kashmir.¹⁵ Sugandha was another notable woman ruler of Kashmir, belonging to the Utpala dynasty. She was the chief queen of King Shamkaravarman. Her reign marks a significant milestone in Kashmir's history as the first historically confirmed rule by a woman. Sugandha's prominence grew during the latter part of her husband's reign. She even accompanied him on a military campaign that tragically ended in his death. Despite knowing of his demise, she kept it hidden for political reasons. Eventually, she assumed the throne with widespread public support, indicating her popularity. During her brief rule from 904 to 906 CE, Sugandha endeavoured to win the favour of her subjects by undertaking religious endeavours. She sponsored the construction of temples

and the installation of sacred images, aiming to please her people and foster their devotion. These endeavours reflected her commitment to the welfare of the people and her dedication to religious and cultural development during her brief but impactful rule.¹⁶

Didda stands out prominently among the notable women who left a lasting mark on Kashmiri politics. She rose to prominence as the third woman ruler of Kashmir, dominating the valley's affairs during the latter half of the 10th century. Didda's story, vividly depicted by Kalhana, unveils a fascinating narrative. Her role transcended mere consortship; she emerged as a potent queen regent and eventually as a ruler in her own right. Didda's captivating personality and astuteness ensured her enduring dominance in the political arena, solidifying her place in Kashmir history. Born to King Simharaja of the Lohara dynasty, Didda's marriage to Kshemagupta was important. This union paved the way for the Loharas to ascend to power in Kashmir. Despite facing physical challenges as she was lame, Didda possessed remarkable intellect and charisma, effortlessly wielding influence over her husband. According to Kalhana, Didda's influence over her husband was so profound that he became widely known as 'Diddakshema' a testament to her dominance. This was further evidenced by the appearance of the name Di-Kshema on copper coins. In CE 980-1, she herself ascended the throne, facing down rebellious factions and contenders vying for power. Despite these challenges, Didda emerged triumphant, navigating the political landscape with skill and determination without relying on male advisors. Didda ruled Kashmir efficiently, assuming formal queenship and bringing about peace, stability, and effective governance. Her reign was marked by a strong administration that ensured the well-being of her subjects. Of particular note are epigraphic records that depict Didda with masculine epithets such as *deva* and *rajan* in inscriptions from CE 989 to 992, respectively, rather than the expected feminine forms.¹⁷ This gender reversal adds an intriguing layer to her story. Apart from that, Kalhana does not show favouritism when it comes to judging male and female rulers. He critiques Didda and Sugandha, along with other rulers, for their unconventional relationships just as he evaluates their other actions. He portrays them with a balanced view, highlighting both their positive and negative qualities realistically.

The Rajatarangini also highlights the significant influence wielded by women, particularly queens. One notable figure in this regard was Queen Suryamati, daughter of Inducandra, the ruler of Jalandhara, and the chief queen of King Ananta from the Lohara dynasty. She played a pivotal role in the political landscape of Kashmir, exercising considerable authority over her husband. Suryamati's power was evident when she effectively resolved a financial crisis using her own resources and strategic acumen, ultimately securing supremacy in the realm. Kalhanika, the wife of Jayasimha from the Lohara dynasty, was another remarkable queen known for her role in diffusing a rebellion posed by Jayasimha's cousin, Bhoja. Her mediation skills were instrumental in preventing

the looming Damara rebellion, showcasing her significant influence and diplomacy. The final Hindu ruler of Kashmir, Udayana Deva, saw his chief Queen Kota Rani, emerge as the *de facto* leader, demonstrating remarkable bravery and governance skills. When the valley faced invasion from Mongol and Turkish forces led by Achalla, Udayana Deva sought refuge in Tibet. However, it was Queen Kota Rani who took charge, defeating Achalla and expelling all foreign troops to safeguard her kingdom from the invaders. Thus, the queens were considered politically as important and powerful as the king, which is an important aspect of the early political scenario of Kashmir.¹⁸

The discussion above highlights the prominent position enjoyed by royal women in society during the early period of Kashmir. Additionally, many women actively participated in court politics in various roles, such as courtesans, temple dancers, low-caste wives, concubines, and servant girls. These women played substantial roles in the political affairs of early Kashmir, not only offering advice to kings but also making crucial contributions during times of crisis. They were involved in patronizing religious buildings and other activities, showcasing their power, influence, and access to wealth through both formal and informal channels.

Partners in Power: The Evolution of Women's Roles in Political Marriages

The family life depicted in the Nilamata Purana and the Rajatarangini sheds light on the prevailing customs regarding the appropriate age for women's marriage in Kashmir. Upon examining the Rajatarangini, it becomes apparent that early Kashmir likely did not practice pre-puberty marriages. Moreover, it emphasizes that married women were highly respected members of society. It seems that Kashmiri society did not strictly adhere to the laws outlined in Dharmashastras, as evidenced by the absence of documented cases of pre-puberty marriages as prescribed by these texts. Kshemendra in his works, *Samayamatika*, *Desopadesa* and *Narmamala*, also supports this notion by indicating that girls were married at a mature age. References in the text suggest that marriages were either based on the mutual choice of the individuals or arranged by their parents. Unlike many regions in South and Central India, social organization in Kashmir was relatively less rigid. This flexibility allowed different groups and communities to adapt according to their preferences. The caste system in Kashmir appeared to be less rigid, which possibly contributed to the practice of inter-caste marriages in the Kashmir valley during the period being studied. From a careful examination of the Rajatarangini, it appears that child marriage was not common in the valley, as there is no mention of it throughout the text.¹⁹

The Rajatarangini contains numerous verses describing marriages arranged for political reasons as well. Among these, four marriages are pivotal in shaping dynasties during the early period of Kashmir. These alliances gained particular significance when rulers hailed from humble backgrounds and sought to elevate

their status by marrying into a more prestigious family. The construction of elaborate genealogies through such marriages was highly valued, as it gave legitimacy to the ruler's lineage. In this context, it is noteworthy that the rise of the Karkota dynasty marked the first instance of a woman being linked to a dynastic change in Kashmir. Durlabhavardhana, the dynasty's founder, ascended to the throne through marriage to Anangalekha, the daughter of the preceding king, Baladitya. It was the first succession in Kashmir's history based on a woman's name, and this marriage marked a significant departure from previous succession practices in Kashmir.²⁰ Similarly, the Utpala dynasty represented another dynastic shift in Kashmir influenced by a woman. The dynasties of Yasaskara and Loharas also saw women playing important roles in their ascension to power. These alliances were intricately connected to the process of state formation in the region.

From Widowhood to Sati: Women's Role

Widows were expected to live a modest and austere life, refraining from using ornaments or indulging in luxuries. However, there were instances where widows remarried. For example, King Pratapaditya II is recorded to have married the wife of a merchant named Nona. Similarly, Kota Rani, the daughter of Minister Ramachandra from the Lohara dynasty, remarried Udyandeva after the death of her husband Rinchin. These cases indicate that widow remarriage was allowed during that time.²¹

In mainland India, the tradition of Sati, where a widow is burned on her husband's funeral pyre, was prevalent for a long time, particularly among royal families.²² Although the Nilamata Purana does not mention Sati, Kashmir was also familiar with this practice, as seen in stories from Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara.²³ Damodaragupta in his Kuttanimata Kavya refers to Sati as the duty of woman (Stridharma).²⁴ From Kalhana's Rajatarangini, we learn that Sati was practised in Kashmir, with historical accounts of queens like Surendravati and two others immolating themselves with their husband's pyres. Queen Suryamati, wife of King Ananta, also followed this tradition. Moreover, Sati was not exclusive to royalty; even courtesans and prostitutes practised it. While there are numerous references to the practice of Sati in Kashmir, it is crucial to note that in Rajatarangini, no societal compulsion is observed regarding this practice except for one incident mentioned in the eighth book. In this incident, Jayamati, the wife of King Uchchala, attempted to avoid becoming a Sati by bribing one of her ministers. However, the minister did not help her, and she reluctantly immolated herself. Kalhana records several incidents related to Sati, indicating that the practice was largely voluntary. Additionally, there are instances where women choose not to become Sati. For example, in one verse, Candrakida is depicted in an argument with a Brahmin widow. During their conversation, the widow reveals that she chose not to become a Sati because she wanted to avenge her husband's murder. These

references suggest that the practice of Sati was not as widespread in Kashmir compared to other regions. This was mainly because Sati was voluntary in nature in Kashmir and also because of the influence of Tantra philosophy, which did not endorse the custom of Sati. In fact, followers of Tantra philosophy believed that those who performed Sati would be condemned to hell.²⁵

Women's Rights to Property and Education

Exploring women's proprietary rights is a captivating field with significant implications for understanding their societal status during different periods. Historical sources of our period indicate that women possessed property rights, which added to their significance in political realms. In Kashmir during this period, women likely enjoyed certain proprietary rights and independent legal status. References from Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and Kshemendra's *Samayamatrika* indirectly mention instances where widows, particularly those with grown-up children, inherited their husband's immovable property upon his demise.²⁶ Moreover, there are illuminating accounts of women-owned private property, such as the mention in *Rajatarangini* of Damara women who held fiefs in their own right. These instances shed light on the existence of women's property rights and their economic agency during that time.

Kalhana's writings suggest that women, particularly upper-class ones, received education during this period. His chronicles depict a scene where women not only received general education but were also trained in diplomacy and statecraft. Bilhana, the Poet Laureate in the court of the Chalukya King Vikramaditya, noted in his work that Kashmiri women were fluent in Sanskrit and Prakrit.²⁷ Abhinavagupta, the renowned Trika philosopher, emphasized women's equal rights to study philosophy and participate in religious rituals. A deeper analysis of Damodargupta's *Kuttanimata Kavya* reveals that women from higher castes and affluent backgrounds received education encompassing various fields, including the sexual sciences, dance, and more.²⁸ However, it is likely that women from lower castes did not enjoy the same privileges and were limited to vernacular education. Overall, ample evidence suggests that women during this period received literary education and training in practical and fine arts, highlighting their intellectual and cultural contributions.

Untangling Complexity: Polygamy, Polyandry, and Prostitution

Polygamy was practised in early India, allowing men to have multiple wives. In Kashmir, during the fifth and sixth centuries CE., the invading Huns from Central Asia further ingrained this practice in society. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and the *Kuttanimata Kavya* of Damodaragupta depict kings and nobles with multiple wives, setting a precedent for others. Despite its prevalence, the *Kuttanimata Kavya* also illustrates the challenges faced by polygamous men with managing all women. Polyandry was not commonly practised in the valley. However, it may have been observed in certain hill states neighbouring

Kashmir and among indigenous tribes.²⁹

While examining the works of Kshemendra and Damodargupta, it becomes evident that prostitution was prevalent in Kashmir during the period under scrutiny. Prostitutes formed a distinct social group within Kashmiri society.³⁰ The literary sources, particularly the writings of Damodargupta and Kshemendra, extensively discuss this class and detail the methods employed by courtesans to trap innocent young men. These women sometimes assumed various roles, such as Buddhist nuns, nurses, or flower sellers, indicating societal acceptance of their presence in different capacities. This observation sheds light on the contemporary social landscape, revealing a tolerance towards their diverse roles.³¹ Additionally, these courtesans often acted as spies in various administrative spheres, aligning with Kalhana's indication of the public involvement of women in early Kashmir. While the practice of prostitution existed in Kashmir, it also underscores the greater freedom enjoyed by Kashmiri prostitutes compared to other women of the time. This freedom enabled them to undertake diverse roles during this period.

Women as builders

There is no mention of women wearing a veil, and they move about freely in society. The Nilamata Purana allows her to participate in nearly all festivals and religious rituals.³² During the Kaumudi Mahotsava under the moonlight, we see her seated beside the sacred fire with her husband, children, servants, and her husband's friends. Bamzai notes that there is no evidence of women being confined in seclusion in Kashmir, and the practice of wearing veils was non-existent.³³

With no veil system, women played an active role in constructing various buildings in early Kashmir. Their patronage significantly contributed to the completion of numerous structures. The Rajatarangini, a historical text, highlights the building endeavours of both men and women, shedding light on the gender dynamics within Kashmiri politics and society. Both royal and non-royal women are depicted as paralleling their male counterparts in construction activities. The influence of women is evident in the physical landscape, with many towns, shrines, and buildings bearing their names. For example, Kalyanapura town was named after Kalyanadevi, and the Diddasvamin temple after Didda. Didda is credited with laying sixty-four foundations within stone walls, although many surrounding temples have since been destroyed by fire. Among the first Lohara dynasty members, Queen Suryamati notably founded the Shiva Gaurisvara temple and consecrated the second Sadashiva temple near the royal palace.³⁴ These constructions served as tangible reminders of women's agency and societal contributions. While the power of kings is often associated with building projects, women were also motivated to engage in such endeavours.³⁵ Their involvement in construction activities reflects their influence and role in shaping early Kashmir's physical and cultural landscape.

Conclusion

Exploring early Kashmir's history reveals how women were active participants in various parts of society, not just at home. They played important roles in religion, social life, and politics. In politics, women showed they were just as capable as men, even taking on titles usually reserved for men. They issued land grants, commissioned the construction of monuments and played vital roles in running the state. This shows us that we must look again at history to ensure we give women their fair share of credit. In early Kashmir, women had a significant role to play as we witnessed in above writings. They had authority and responsibilities and were highly respected. This teaches us that women have always been influential in shaping society.

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