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**Exploring Spaces for
Women in Early Medieval Kashmir**

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Early medieval Kashmir constitutes a discursive space that has been comprehensively delineated in terms of 'relevant' factors like its politics and topography. Yet one of its most cardinal aspects — that of gender — remains in relative obscurity, an obscurity that is deepened by limited attempts to analyse this issue and by a general indifference towards women and their role in this time span. Ironically, the very sources that are used for this seemingly all-inclusive yet gender-blind outline are the ones that lend themselves to a fruitful gender analysis and point to the extensive power and public presence enjoyed by royal and non-royal women in early medieval Kashmir. This paper discusses the potential of some of these sources for an understanding of gender relations in Kashmir between the seventh and the twelfth century AD. The focus here is on three literary sources that represent different genres of work — Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Kṣemendra's *Samayamātykā* and the *Nilamataṭpurāṇa*. The epigraphic evidence for this period in Kashmir is very inadequate and can, at best, be used as limited corroboration for textual material.

I. KALHAṆA'S RĀJĀTARAṄGIṆĪ¹

The selected time span of this study roughly corresponds to the historical subject matter provided by Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, the most important and exhaustive source for this period. The text provides a sequential narrative of the rulers of Kashmir from the earliest period (for which only legendary traditions exist) till Kalhaṇa's own (AD1149/50) in the form of a *kāvya* of 7,826 verses divided into eight books/ *tarāṅgas* of differing length. It owes its pivotal position in reconstructing Kashmir's history to several factors. On the one hand, it is the fullest and most authentic account of early Kashmir and is seen

Earlier versions of the paper have been listed in the Bibliography under my name.

as a singular example of the genre of historical chronicles. In his endeavour to provide an authentic account of the history of Kashmir, Kalhaṇa consulted other types of evidence as well, such as sculptural and architectural remains, inscriptions and coinage. Additionally, his lucidity, coherence and attempts towards chronological precision imbue this text with great significance.

On the other hand, the text's treatment of women as historically relevant figures and the depiction of the immense formal and informal power wielded by them in this period indicates its lesser-known yet equally meaningful potential in the realm of gender studies.² Kalhaṇa's text highlights the power and agency of women in royal court culture in two essential ways — as sovereign rulers in their own right and as powers behind the throne. Power is wrested and exercised by them in what is essentially a patriarchal edifice, thus causing a certain amount of tension and ambiguity, not only in specific phases of Kashmir's history but also in Kalhaṇa's portrayal of them. The contrast between the narrative and didactic sections of Kalhaṇa's text, evident in his alternate glorification and denigration of women, not only stresses their agency but also reveals the complex power equations in the royal domain. This deliberate narrative style, however, has either been ignored or misinterpreted in secondary writings on Kashmir.

WOMEN AS RULERS

The *Rājataranṅinī* reveals female rulership in Kashmir as an aspect that cut across time spans and dynasties and was, moreover, a culturally acceptable factor. The throne was a source of legitimate authority for both royal and non-royal women, either as direct rulers or as regents. This, naturally, posed a distinct challenge to prescriptive norms of succession that favoured the male and that denied women access to public roles of authority.

It may be pertinent to note here that the origin myths of Kashmir identify the land as Goddess Parvati's material

manifestation. This is reiterated in the context of the definition of its rulership and is used, additionally, as justification for the rule of Yaśovatī (Gonanda dynasty, dates unknown), the first woman ruler of Kashmir.³ Thus, although Yaśovatī herself has a shadowy presence, the rule of a woman is justified by Lord Krishna's injunction that all occupants of the throne are portions of Shiva and, therefore, need to be obeyed, thereby providing a strong divine sanction to male and female rulership in Kashmir. The exercise of formal authority by women rulers of Kashmir is automatically validated by this comprehensive, divine endorsement. A detailed description of Yaśovatī's reign is not available but the paucity of details on her persona could be linked to the fact that her significance seems to lie in giving birth to the future heir, Gonanda II.

The reigns of Sugandhā and Diddā, the two most prominent women rulers of Kashmir, are based on much firmer historical ground. Sugandhā, daughter of King Svāmīrāja of the northern region, appeared as a prominent figure in the last stages of the reign of her husband, Śaṅkaravarman, of the Utpala dynasty (AD883-902). She accompanied him on a fatal military expedition, acquiesced in a bid to temporarily conceal the fact of his death for political reasons, and was spared from becoming a sati owing to the task of guardianship of their minor son, Gopālavarman, thrust upon her. Sugandhā eventually ascended the throne of Kashmir, backed by strong public approval, thereby testifying to her popularity. Thus, Kalhaṇa shows her role and influence to span Gopālavarman's reign (AD902-4) and her own (AD904-6).

Sugandhā's reign was marked by conflicts between rival military bodies, the *ekāṅgas* (royal bodyguards) and the *tantrins* (courtiers), interspersed with the growing influence of her lover, Prabhākaradeva, and her own forays into power politics, as, for instance, her determined attempt to crown her relative, Nirjītarman, on the throne 'as he would follow her will'. Interestingly, Sugandhā was also implicated in Gopālavarman's death, apparently engineered by Prabhākaradeva. Subsequently

thwarted by an open rebellion by the *tantrins*, who overruled her preference by crowning Nirjitavarman's minor son, Pārtha, instead, Sugandhā left the palace. Her abortive bid to regain power in AD914 resulted in her imprisonment and eventual execution. Kalhaṇa's tone here is evenhanded and he recounts the events of Sugandhā's reign in a largely objective manner.

Diddā, the third woman ruler of Kashmir, also commenced her pursuit of power as a regent. Daughter of Siṃharāja of Lohara and maternal granddaughter of the powerful Bhīma Śāhī of Udabhandā (who later built the magnificent Bhīmakeśava temple in Kashmir to underscore Diddā's power),⁴ Diddā's formidable influence spanned the reigns of her husband, Kṣemagupta, of the Yaśaskara dynasty (AD950-58), and that of their son and grandsons, until she herself ascended the throne in AD980/1. Her influence on the largely ineffectual Kṣemagupta was amply proved by his coins where, unusually, the *dī* prefixed to his name was intended as an abbreviation of hers.⁵ Coins bearing Kṣemagupta's name alone are rare whereas the other type with *dī-kṣemagupta de(va)* are very common. Kalhaṇa provides corroborative information and reveals *Diddākṣema* to have been Kṣemagupta's popular nickname. Kṣemagupta's death in AD958 resulted in Diddā exercising total power as guardian during the reign of their son, Abhimanyu (AD958-72), displaying great political sagacity and fortitude.

As with Sugandhā, her growth to political maturity involved confrontations with rebellious factions and contenders to the throne. However, it was here that Diddā emerged triumphant, quelling her opposition with a sure hand and soon dismissing the help of male councillors in her solitary pursuit of power. Interestingly, Diddā was physically disabled and was carried around by a porter-woman, Valgā, but she did not let this deter her in her quest for authority.

Kalhaṇa provides an account of the ministerial rivalries that faced the regent Diddā, prompting her to take unsound and impulsive decisions. However, with time, her potential to rule

surfaced and the shrewdness of her schemes for safeguarding her power, as in her alternate bribe-and-placation policy, is noteworthy. On the one hand, she bribed the brahmanas to rectify the impasse between her and the rebel grandsons of Parvagupta (Kṣemagupta's father), and bestowed offices on other malcontents. On the other hand, she destroyed the more intractable rebels by 'witchcraft', thereby exhibiting a ruthless streak that subsequently came to the fore. The minister, Naravāhana, who gave Diddā sound advice and defended her against rebel forces, was of great help to her initially. However, she soon shook off his support and managed to get rid of her enemies in a systematic and ruthless purge.

After Abhimanyu's death, Diddā speedily disposed off her three grandsons, Nandigupta, Tribhuvana and Bhīmagupta, in quick succession. She then assumed formal power and continued to rule Kashmir in a competent manner, providing peace and stability as well as a strong and effective administration. It is, perhaps, in Diddā's case alone that epigraphic evidence shows some relevance. Thus, the Srinagar Buddhist image inscription of AD989 and the Srinagar inscription of AD992 refer to her by the masculine epithets of *deva* and *rājan*, respectively, rather than *devī* and *rājñī*, an interesting gender reversion.⁶

Interestingly, both Sugandhā and Diddā formed part of a succession of women who precipitated important dynastic changes in Kashmir's history. Thus, Sugandhā enabled her lover, Prabhākaradeva's family to gain prominence in that Yaśaskara, his son, was later able to start his dynastic line. Likewise, Diddā bequeathed the throne to her maternal family from Lohara after a shrewd selection contest that her nephew, Saṁgrāmarāja, won. Consequently, on her death in AD1003, the rule of Kashmir passed to the house of Lohara in undisputed succession, the latter holding sway until and beyond the date of the *Rājataranṅiṇī*'s completion. Interestingly, Kalhaṇa lauds this 'third wonderful change' of dynasties caused 'by association with women'.⁷

Female rulership, therefore, was a strikingly significant feature of early medieval Kashmir, attesting the agency of its women in a very emphatic manner. Yet the evidence of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* in this regard is routinely ignored or trivialized in secondary writings. Accounts of Sugandhā and Diddā are rife with such uncritical portrayals. For instance, M.L. Kapur's endeavour to mould Sugandhā into a feminine stereotype of political ignorance, helplessness and passivity militates against Kalhaṇa's deliberately ambivalent portrayal that portrays her as a puppet of various political factions, on the one hand, but clearly indicates her ambition, shrewdness and desire for power, on the other.⁸

Kapur exonerates Sugandhā of any real desire for the throne. Nevertheless, the circumstances leading to her assumption of power and the cooperation of rival groups of *ekāṅgas* and *tantrins* in her reign, among other factors, are clear indicators of her diplomatic talents and ability to rule. Kapur further invests Sugandhā with a halo of martyrdom, noting that her comeback bid was due to her love for the people and her desire to free them from *tantrin* misrule. This, again, flies in the face of Kalhaṇa's evidence. The queen's reluctance to abandon the palace the first time around implies her reluctance to relinquish power. She was obviously not burdened by royal power, as Kapur believes, and was clearly interested in staking her claim to it more than once.

Kapur similarly tries to conventionalize Diddā's figure, although her rule is shown to parallel and even overshadow the impact of various male rulers.⁹ Stressing her 'first impulse' to immolate herself on Kṣemagupta's death, he notes her intelligence and political talents but hastens to add that she was 'uncommonly voluptuous, profligate and dissolute' with a 'limitless' lust for power.¹⁰

Similarly, several historians like S.C. Banerjee, U.N. Ghoshal and P.V. Kane focus on Diddā's cruelty and ambition — in short, her temerity in desiring total power. Epithets like 'dissolute',

'notorious' and 'self-indulgent' freely abound while, ironically, male rulers who display the same ambition or cruelty are accepted as strong political figures who clearly did not vitiate the political atmosphere in the way these transgressive women figures did.¹¹ Ironically, Aurel Stein, the principal translator of the *Rājataranginī*, is himself guilty of minimizing the text's potential by completely ignoring the presence of Kashmir's women rulers in the genealogical tables in his introductory preface.¹² Here, Yaśovatī, Sugandhā and Diddā appear only as spouses and not as rulers in their own right.

Interestingly, although the coinage of the women rulers of Kashmir can also be used as an entry point to study their power and presence, there is hardly any information or analysis available on this aspect in secondary works on Kashmir.¹³ Both Sugandhā and Diddā issued coins in their capacity as sovereigns that refer to them by masculine epithets — as *śrī sugandhā deva* and *śrī diddā deva*, respectively. This is an important attestation of their power, raising the issue of the popular association of political authority with maleness and whether women rulers needed to conform to it to gain acceptance. Notably, the copper issues of Sugandhā and Diddā (and those of their spouses) were common in Kashmir for a period spanning several centuries. However, this is a fact that evokes very little interest.

Incidentally, this attitude of indifference not only permeates works dealing specifically with early medieval Kashmir but also those that deal with royal life or social/ political conditions in north India in this period. The overweening male focus, the factual errors, ambiguous references and dismissive statements with regard to women, and the desire to view them only within the parameters of 'social conditions' seem alarmingly consensual.¹⁴ This is an offshoot of the overall tendency to view women as a peripheral, non-reactive, non-participatory group, whose 'status' or 'position' mechanically changes to reflect larger changes around them, rather than envisaging a certain degree of agency for women vis-à-vis historical processes.

M.K. Dhar's *Royal Life in Ancient India* is an illustrative case where women rulers form a part of 'Social Conditions' and Diddā's motives for ruling are completely distorted.¹⁵ She is referred to as a queen (unnamed, with no mention of Kashmir) who killed her three grandsons for power. Dhar then makes the inexplicable observation that this was the result of Diddā's frustration with the king for neglecting her and bestowing favours on the principal queen and her children instead! As noted earlier, Diddā was Kṣemagupta's chief and most desired queen and, in fact, was a widow by the time she felt the need to dispose off her grandsons. Likewise, Saroj Gulati who attempts a 'critical appraisal' of different social institutions/customs in north India and 'their influence on the position of women' dismisses Sugandhā and Diddā in a obscure reference and trivializes facts relating to women rulers in general.¹⁶ B.N.S. Yadava, too, blames Kashmir's 'ambitious queens' rather than ambitious kings for ruining the political atmosphere and is similarly dismissive of their rule and contributions.¹⁷

Vina Mathur's *The Role and Position of Women in the Social, Cultural and Political Life of Kashmir* that purports to undertake a pioneering study of the position of women in Kashmir and then proceeds to lambast Kalhaṇa's 'chauvinistic' attitude is another illuminating example.¹⁸ What is missed in Mathur's intensely critical view is the fact of Kalhaṇa treating women as historically relevant figures and charting their rise to power.

It should be noted that the examples cited here form only a small percentage of the inadequate analyses available on the women rulers of Kashmir. Works that appreciate their role and contributions are, predictably, minimal. Kumkum Roy's analysis, however, forms a welcome and notable exception to the trend of invisibilizing or explaining away the masterful presence of women in Kashmir.¹⁹ Roy notes the existence 'of alternative socio-political norms' here and of the tension in the *Rājataranṅinī* inherent in reconciling śāstric norms with a situation that clearly did not conform to them.²⁰ She observes that the patrilineal (and patriarchal) ideal was only one among

several contending power sources in Kashmir.

Another rare avowal is Ashvini Agrawal's work that notes the 'significant role' played by women in the political life of Kashmir 'from time to time'. The role of Sugandhā, Diddā, and other prominent queens 'as king-makers, sovereigns, mediators and diplomats' is conceded. However, Agrawal's work is more a straightforward rendition of details than an analytic exercise.²¹

Very few works, however, actually focus on the pertinent question of how the women of Kashmir were able to bypass ideological stipulations that associated political authority with maleness and emerge as powerful political figures. There are two ways of examining this problem. On the one hand, the prescriptions contained in the *Dharmasāstras* and other texts can be juxtaposed with the actual exercise of political authority. A general survey of prescriptive and normative literature shows a distinct hostility to the idea of formal female authority. However, the prescriptions were clearly not inflexible/hegemonic and could be subverted on occasion. The divergence of views among lawgivers itself strengthens this contention.²² Female power in Kashmir can be traced to this gap between theory and practice.

What may also be kept in mind is that Sugandhā and Diddā are not entirely unrepresentative of the situation in early medieval India. Interesting parallels can be drawn with the Bhaumakara queens of Orissa, and other notable dowagers like Prabhāvatīguptā of the Vakataka family (fourth century AD) and Vijayabhāṭṭārikā of the Chalukya house (seventh century AD). The evidence would indicate that women in ruling families, including the women rulers of Kashmir, had some familiarity with politics and administration.

On the other hand, Cynthia Talbot's study of early medieval India and Europe can be examined for its relevance.²³ Talbot considers women political leaders from three regions between the ninth and thirteenth century AD — Sugandhā and Diddā of Kashmir, the women rulers of the Orissan Bhaumakara

dynasty (Gaurīmahādevī, Daṇḍīmahādevī, Vakulamahādevī and Dharmamahādevī), and the four women rulers of Andhra (Rudramadevī, Gaṇapamadevī, Muppaladevī and Vīryālā Nāgasānī). She then draws a parallel with medieval European women who possessed greatest political power in roughly the same period, pointing to the decentralized nature of the medieval European polity that associated political authority with particular families, thereby blurring the distinction between public and private spheres.

Claiming that medieval Kashmir, Andhra and Orissa all resembled early medieval Europe in their lack of centralization, Talbot notes that women occupied a pivotal role in this decentralized situation where political power was personalized and could be embodied through marriage relations. Women were allowed to exercise political authority on several occasions to ensure the retention of a throne within the immediate kin group. Sugandhā's reign is a case in point. Thus, the centrality of the family in certain political cultures of the time could explain the phenomenon of ruling queens.

In addition, regency provided a justification for female authority. Talbot notes that the regent queen is shown as foregoing the 'attractive' option of self-immolation in order to fulfil her responsibilities towards her family and kingdom. Yet it is crucial to note here that both Sugandhā and Diddā used their regency as a stepping-stone towards acquiring power and, hence, were not passive regents in the conventional sense.

The phenomenon of women exercising power in Kashmir, therefore, served to indicate constantly fluctuating social processes. Talbot stresses the flexibility of the prevalent gender ideology and construction of identity as well, whereby the gap between theory and practice could be reconciled through manipulation of gender imagery and privileging of maternal obligations. However, unlike rulers like Rudramadevī and Raziya Sultān who deliberately adopted masculine clothing, styles and titles to gain public acceptance, Kalhaṇa does not

indicate any such attempt by the women rulers of Kashmir, except for the masculine titles on their coins. This indicates that women were tacitly accepted as legitimate wielders of power in the area.

One should also note that Talbot's theory cannot be rigidly applied to Kashmir. For instance, Diddā's bestowal of the throne to the Loharas was unorthodox in that the rights of her maternal family triumphed over that of the Yaśaskaras, her husband's family with whom the sovereignty was associated. Thus, her natal ties were given precedence over her husband's family. The formation of another dynasty, the Kārkoṭas, was similarly unusual in that the sovereignty was vested in the descendants of a king's daughter.²⁴ The specific conjunction of social and political circumstances that allowed women to exercise authority in Kashmir still remains a largely unexplored issue. One could, however, speculate that the strong tribal roots of this region, as also its geographical location that isolated it from the other kingdoms of north India, combined to produce a political and social climate that was conducive to the public presence of women with relatively unstructured gender roles.

WOMEN AS POWERS BEHIND THE THRONE

The *Rājataranginī* shows power being exercised by royal and non-royal women of Kashmir in a range of situations as queens, courtesans, court participants, mediators, dynasty makers and destroyers, and other capacities, thereby stressing women's access to the public domain of politics. Prominent among the powerful queens was Sūryamatī, daughter of Inducandra of Jalamdhara and wife of Anantavarman of the Lohara dynasty (AD1028-63). She acquired supremacy by solving a financial crisis with her independent resources and acumen. Thereafter, she took over the administration, dictated orders to Ananta and eventually forced him to abdicate in favour of their son, Kalaśa. Despite Kalaśa's subsequent wayward behaviour, Sūryamatī restrained Ananta from punishing him, thereby prompting Ananta to kill himself. Sūryamatī's definitive political role was

discernible even after her death in that Kalaśa's son, Harṣa's initial survival in politics was due to her sage advice.

Another prominent queen was Kalhaṇikā, wife of Jayasimha of the Lohara dynasty (AD1128-49), who dispelled a rebel threat by her mediation. Having become the chief-queen with public approval, Kalhaṇikā underscored her importance through her influential role as mediator, successfully effecting a reconciliation between Jayasimha and his rebel cousin, Bhoja, and preventing an incipient *ḍāmara* rebellion.²⁵ Raḍḍādevī, Jayasimha's other wife, played an equally pivotal role in independently devising politically strategic marriages for her daughters. Other powerful queens included Śrīlekhā, Ananta's mother, who made an abortive bid for the throne; Śāradā, wife of Sussala, who legitimized a rebel scheme; and Sugalā, wife of Harṣa, who failed to kill him but later boldly staked her claim as chief-queen.

The vigorous participation of non-royal women in court politics was another striking feature of early medieval Kashmir. The diverse origin of queens was a clear indication that political power was a legitimate quest for non-royal women as well. In this context, the influence of courtesans and prostitutes on the throne was particularly noteworthy. For instance, Jayamatī, a temple dancer's ward 'of unknown origin' (VII.1460-...*kvāpi jātām*) and the chief queen of Uccala of the Lohara dynasty (AD1101-11), deliberately flouted his orders to kill Bhikṣācara, a future contender to the throne. She masterminded Bhikṣācara's escape and was, therefore, instrumental in enabling his accession to the throne at a later stage. Sāmbavatī, a courtesan and skillful mediator between political groups, and Kamalā, a temple-dancer who was indirectly instrumental in the exiled Jayāpīḍa's resumption of power, were other stellar examples. So, too, was Jayādevī, a vintner's daughter, whose hold over Lalitāpīḍa was used by her brothers to seize power, crown a series of puppet-kings and eventually establish their own dynasty. There were numerous courtesans who appeared in the roles of dynasty makers/ destroyers, power aspirants,

court participants and builders. Clearly, low origin was no barrier to their exercise of power in the public domain.

The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* provides other examples of prominent non-royal women in early medieval Kashmir. The role of the powerful *ḍāmara*-woman, Chuḍḍā, in charting political equations, challenging the reigning king, Sussala's might, and consolidating her son's power by becoming his guardian and protecting his interests, was particularly noteworthy. So, too, was the role of Āsamatī, a relative of the Śāhī princesses, who changed the course of royal politics by thwarting Uccala's murderous designs, actively aiding Jayamatī in Bhikśācara's escape and, at points, seeming to be the more conniving of the two. In addition, one can consider Nonā, the rebel Bhoja's nurse, who played an important part in the reconciliation procedure between him and Jayasimha by initially broaching the issue to the king. Sahajā, who mediated between Jayasimha and her rebel son, Mallārjuna's forces, and Sillā, who commanded her son's troops in his absence, were other illustrative cases. Obviously, therefore, non-royal widows were not relegated to passive roles in the contemporary socio-political scenario, thereby indicating an important point of convergence with some of their royal counterparts.

Nevertheless, the familiar bias against women figures in secondary sources is once more in evidence. This finds expression in, for instance, attempts to conventionalize Sūryamatī's figure, grudging mentions of Kalhaṇikā's role and summary dismissals of the intervention of royal and non-royal women in politics in general.²⁶ Corroborative details of Sūryamatī's power in Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacaritam* (twelfth century AD) have been generally ignored, with the possible exception of the translators of the text who note that she was conversant with state policy.²⁷ Any attempt at a gender analysis or an acknowledgement of the light thrown on the contemporary socio-political scene is predictably missing.

WOMEN AS BUILDERS/ DONORS

The building activities of men and women — as revealed by the *Rājataranṅiṇī* — have important implications on a gender analysis of the politics and society of early medieval Kashmir. Royal and non-royal women are shown to parallel their male counterparts in this regard, indulging in building and donations not just for piety but for other impelling motives as well. The power of women was made obvious in the physical landscape itself — in terms of the various towns, shrines and buildings that usually bore their names (as, for instance, Kalyāṇadevī's Kalyāṇapura town and Diddā's Diddāsvāmin temple), and would have served as reminders to the people about their role and agency in a qualitatively visible sense. Although there is a clear linkage of power with the buildings of kings, this seemed to have been a driving factor for women, too. The buildings of Sugandhā, Diddā, Sūryamatī and other powerful queens like Ratnādevī (such as towns, *maṭhas*, temples and *vihāras*), are a case in point. Prominent non-royal women builders included Sussalā, the minister Rilhaṇa's wife; Valgā, Diddā's porter-woman; and the politically powerful courtesan, Sāmbavatī.

Thus, there were interesting variations in the social identities of builders and donors. Equally, there were disparate motives of donation. On the one hand, there were instances of women perpetuating their name through their towns/ buildings, as in Diddā's Diddāpura town. On the other hand, there were women like Śrīlekhā, an eager aspirant for the throne, who built *maṭhas* in honour of her husband and son against whom she was, simultaneously, plotting treason. Predictably, however, this well-documented sphere of female agency is either ignored or misconstrued by most writers on Kashmir. M.L. Kapur's attempt to associate piety and grief with the buildings of Sugandhā is a case in point.²⁸ The buildings of Diddā, the most prolific woman builder (the Diddāsvāmin temple, Diddāpura town and *maṭha*, the Simhasvāmin shrine and her *vihāra* for foreigners being notable examples, in this regard), are summarily dismissed. So, too, are the *gokula*, *maṭha* and town built by Ratnādevī,

Jayasimha's wife, which outranked others of the same type in size and splendour.

Female donation is closely linked with the control and extent of resources. Women donors in Kashmir were clearly not constrained by the norms of *Dharmaśāstra* texts in which their limited property rights and dependant religious identity precluded the possibility of their extensive/ independent gift-giving. The Kashmir queens obviously had access to large amounts of money/ resources that enabled them to finance constructions and make monetary donations towards buildings. Likewise, the possession of resources by non-royal women argues some amount of access and control in economic affairs.

Once again, one can draw attention to Talbot's study of thirteenth century Andhra inscriptions wherein she concludes that royal women indulged in donations as this was the only socially-sanctioned public activity and prestige-enhancing opportunity open to them.²⁹ This view is largely untenable in the case of women in early medieval Kashmir who had manifold opportunities for public and political activity, and did not need building/ donative activities to register their presence. Their involvement in it was, in fact, a mere affirmation of their status.

The immense potential of the *Rājataranṅiṇī* for a gender analysis of early medieval Kashmir is, therefore, obvious. On the one hand, Kalhaṇa conveys a sense of the interaction and tension between male rulers and female consorts, ruling queens and male advisors, and other protagonists in the royal court culture. On the other hand, one also gets a sense of the potentials and pressures in the world of non-royal women as they sought to negotiate for their sons and husbands in the political arena, as also an idea of the common social ground occupied by royal and non-royal women. An appreciation of the text's gendered potential is vital owing to the fact that it is used almost exclusively as a source for this period in Kashmir.

II. KṢEMENDRA'S *SAMAYAMĀTRKĀ*³⁰

Although the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* provides significant examples of the role of prostitutes in early medieval Kashmir, it is Kṣemendra's *Samayamātrkā* (eleventh century AD), a *kāvya* of 635 *ślokas* which can be specifically related to Kashmir, that foregrounds their position and influence in a very effective manner. While its central idea of stressing the rapacity of the prostitute is reminiscent of Dāmodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanīmatam* (eighth century AD), its intrinsic potential for a gender analysis is greater — both in terms of the development of the story and in its overall characterization. The *Samayamātrkā* essentially deals with a prostitute, Kaṅkālī's ingenious means of survival and her timely adoption as a mother by a young prostitute, Kalāvati, whom she was instrumental in making wealthy by her judicious schemes. The numerous references to places in Kashmir as a part of Kaṅkālī's travels indicate a familiarity with its landscape and impart a tone of authenticity to the text.

The text traces the intelligent and resourceful Kaṅkālī's bid to survive by changing names, locales and occupations, and simultaneously duping and controlling men with consummate ease. Sold at a tender age by her mother, Kaṅkālī (initially named Gargatikā) embarked on a trail littered with assumed names and pretended professions involving, among other things, fomenting trouble in a rich man's household to get rid of him and acquire his wealth, seizing the business of a horseowner, bribing magistrates to fraudulently acquire property, cutting a jailor's tongue to escape imprisonment, pretending to be a businesswoman, a chief minister's daughter and a spiritual adviser in turn, bearing a son and abandoning him after appropriating his jewels, assuming the identity of an ace gambler and astrologer, and duping and robbing kings, ministers and fellow travellers. Her final successful endeavour was in helping Kalāvati to ensnare a rich client, Śaṅkha, with clockwork precision, thereby justifying her selection as Kalāvati's 'timely mother' (*samayamātrkā*).

As Kṣemendra's purpose was clearly to expose the cold-

blooded aspects of prostitution, his stress is not so much on Kaṅkāli's resourcefulness and grit as on her deviousness and unscrupulousness. This translates into his harsh and, often, exaggerated portrayal of her character that is stripped of any redeeming feature. Her complete repudiation of motherhood underscores this. This makes an immediate point of contrast with the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* where the destructive potential of prostitutes is evoked along with their role as saviours and protectors in a largely impartial manner.

Yet, ironically, Kṣemendra's stress on Kaṅkāli's rapacity actually underlines her strength, showing her to be a completely pragmatic survivor, and also indicating the possibilities and options open to a woman who was compelled by circumstances to live by her wits alone. Kaṅkāli's fluid adoption of various professions — most of which appear to be male prerogatives — further underscores the choices open to women who desired to lead unconventional lifestyles. Thus, she was alternately a businesswoman, manager of horses, astrologer, gambler, and maker of metal. The fact that people accepted her in these roles is an important comment on the contemporary social scene and corroborates Kalhaṇa's evidence on the public presence of women in early Kashmir. One might argue that prostitutes usually command a greater degree of freedom/ license than other women. However, Kaṅkāli always managed to conceal her actual trade from most of her associates. To them, she was only an ordinary woman endeavouring to make a living.

Interestingly, Kṣemendra offers two varied motives for writing the *Samayamātrkā*. He states, at the outset, that the text was intended to teach prostitutes the secret of their trade — a sarcastically worded intention, as his aim was clearly to teach the people about the threat posed by prostitutes.³¹ The second motive, contained in the epilogue, was to provide the newly-crowned Ananta with ideas on the deployment of women in the enemy camp to effect the latter's downfall.³² This is strongly reminiscent of Kalhaṇa's evidence on the destructive power of women and their potential to effect changes in rulership, as,

for instance, Cakravarman being murdered for his involvement with low-caste women, and Harṣa whose Śāhī wives egg him on to a self-destructive path. Ironically, while Kṣemendra strove to educate Ananta on the value of women as a political weapon, Ananta himself needed to be educated on political and other matters by his wife, Sūryamatī, who took over the reins of administration from him.

Most secondary sources, once again, fail to exploit the *Samayamātrkā's* potential in revealing the specifics of a prostitute's status, and in indicating interesting points of convergence and divergence with Kalhaṇa's work among other things.³³ The bitterness of Kṣemendra's tone, viewed in conjunction with his intimate knowledge of prostitution, leads one to speculate whether it stemmed from some kind of personal experience and whether Kaṅkālī, one of the strongest female protagonists of contemporary literature, was based on an actual prostitute of his acquaintance. A more definite assessment cannot be made due to the lack of corroborative evidence. Nevertheless, the importance of prostitutes and their power, as attested by both the *Samayamātrkā* and the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, was a pivotal ingredient of the social and political history of early medieval Kashmir and, therefore, of a gender analysis of the time.

III. THE *NĪLAMATAPURĀṆA*

The *Nīlamatapurāṇa* (seventh/eighth century AD), a *purāṇa* of unknown authorship that provides information on the legendary lore, topography and customs of Kashmir, is another important source for this period and is the earliest indigenous text for the history of Kashmir. It provides the 'social background' to Kalhaṇa's 'dynastic and political history', and also corroborates the *Samayamātrkā* in certain aspects.³⁴ Written in the purāṇic style of interwoven dialogues, it is the only source that provides an account of Kashmir's formation, the details of which Kalhaṇa borrowed in his work. It also talks of the identification of the land of Kashmir and its sovereign with

Goddess Parvati (Uma), as part of Lord Krishna's justification for crowning its first woman ruler, Yaśovatī.

The importance of this text lies in the fact that it corroborates, on a social level, Kalhaṇa's indications of the power wielded by non-royal women in the political sphere. Of particular note was the participatory nature of their involvement in socio-political functions. Ranging from the king's coronation ceremonies to pilgrimages to annual festivals marking the land's birth, the participation of men and women on a more or less equal plane is implied. Furthermore, there are interesting indications of the intermingling of both sexes at various levels. Women are enjoined to accept gifts from their husbands' friends, and wine and dine with them, as part of the ritual worship of certain deities. This argues a degree of freedom and liberality in society at obvious divergence from prescribed norms that dictated regulation of contact between the sexes.

Not only are women shown as enjoying themselves in a relatively uninhibited manner in indoor and outdoor festivals with men, as in the worship of Goddess Śyāmā that involved a festival of singing and dancing, but they also participated in and performed certain rites along with them, as in the worship of Goddess Kaśmīrā. There are several other indications of their status as, for instance, the stress laid on honouring maternal relatives and those by marriage. Of equal weight is the specific prescription of *śrāddha* (death ceremony) days for women along with men, an indication of the importance accorded to each sex.³⁵ Likewise, there are repeated references to 'happy women — well-fed, well-dressed, well-scented, well-anointed and decorated with ornaments', to be 'pleased' on particular days and 'honoured', as on the day of the first snow.³⁶ The significance of these injunctions lies in the fact that they form a part of the 'good customs' laid down by Nīla, the patron snake deity of Kashmir, for the acquisition of prosperity and peace by the people.³⁷ Hence, the enjoining of respect towards women and their participation in contemporary affairs in this list is noteworthy.

Significantly, the *Nilamataapurāṇa* corroborates Kalhaṇa's picture of the power wielded by courtesans. They are equated with prominent citizens and are enjoined to play important roles in royal ceremonies as well as ordinary festivals. Interestingly, if the text apparently reflects the attempt to combat Buddhism and restore brahmanical practices in Kashmir,³⁸ then this raises the question of how to reconcile the space accorded to prostitutes who are otherwise condemned in brahmanical prescriptive works.

At the same time, the *Nilamataapurāṇa* indicates that the position of women may not have been so remarkably exalted. The worship of (married) women on various occasions — as in the Irāmañjarī festival or on the full-moon night of *mārgaśīrṣa* — which is a notable refrain of the text, and its eventual linkage with fertility, is a case in point. Such a stipulation does not necessarily imply that women had a powerful position but often the reverse. Moreover, the preconditions for this worship indicate that widows and single women are proscribed categories. Clearly, ambiguous signals of the agency of non-royal women can be recovered from the *Nilamataapurāṇa*. And yet, the perception of women as a relevant and participatory category stresses their role in the contemporary socio-political milieu. Questions can be raised on the authorial stance, on whether this was a reflection of reality and, if so, then whether this could have laid the ground for the assumption of power by various categories of women in subsequent ages and the general acceptance thereof. There are no clear answers but the mere fact that such questions can be raised exemplifies the potential of these sources for constructing a gender-sensitive history of Kashmir.

Yet the *Nilamataapurāṇa's* potential in this regard has not been fully appreciated. The views of Ved Kumari, the principal translator of the text, are an illustrative example. For instance, although she acknowledges the 'somewhat different and unconventional picture' of female life in this text, Kumari completely trivializes Yaśovatī's rule, of which the text gives

important evidence. The queen is mentioned in passing at the end of a discussion on 'Women in the Family' as a part of the 'Position of Women'.³⁹ Yaśovatī does not even find a place in Kumari's discussion of the 'King and his functions', despite being the first woman ruler of Kashmir and enabling the comprehensive definition of rulership in the kingdom. The potential of the text for a gender study is thereby effectively minimized.

Thus, that the same set of sources can be critically analysed to reveal a gendered perspective of early medieval Kashmir is undeniable. They reveal that royal and non-royal women of Kashmir seem to have wrested a distinct space for themselves within the contemporary society and polity. Their ability to subsume the patriarchal edifice in certain contexts and situations necessitates a rethinking of the negotiation of female identities within a patriarchal set-up.

As Roy notes, the rulers of Kashmir were evidently located within a social context that was less closely structured in hierarchical terms than the śāstric ideal. Affinal kinsfolk could intervene to support/ oppose rulers just as effectively as members of the patrilineage — and this was open to even relatively lower social categories like the *ḍombas* and *cānḍālas*. In such a situation, Roy opines that the rulers' conformity to śāstric ideals would be superficial and their household would have contrasted with śāstric norms at several levels. Domestic relations among non-royal groups would have been similarly loosely structured and divergent from the patrilineal model, thereby pointing to alternative forms of household organization in this region.

Women in Kashmir, therefore, clearly enjoyed a more equal status vis-à-vis men than those elsewhere and the assertion of their power seems to have been a fairly constant factor. One can contrast this with other parts of contemporary north India as, for instance, the kingdoms of Kanauj and Bengal-Bihar where explorations of a similar nature reveal an intermittent

expression of the role and influence of women over this time-span.⁴⁰ The question of woman's power is, consequently, a contextual one, calling for a careful analysis of available sources to glean pertinent information. The apparent irrelevance of women to the political and social order needs to be questioned and analysed, for this is often merely an erroneous projection by historical scholarship. In addition, it is necessary to explore the agency of different classes of women in any analysis rather than treating them as one amorphous whole. Thus, this article has hopefully demonstrated the centrality of gender and its related explorations of female agency in any investigation of the society and polity of early medieval Kashmir.

References

¹ M.A. Stein, (trans.), *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Vols. I, II, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 3rd rpt.1989; M.A. Stein, (ed.), *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Vol. III, Bombay: Motilal Banarsidass, rpt.1988.

² For more information on this theme, Devika Rangachari, *Invisible Women, Visible Histories: Gender, Society and Polity in North India (Seventh to Twelfth Century AD)*, Delhi: Manohar, 2009. See also Devika Rangachari, 'Women and Power in Early Medieval Kashmir', in *Rethinking Early Medieval India*, ed. Upinder Singh, Delhi: OUP, 2011, pp.189-208, and 'Gender Relations in Early Medieval Kashmir', in *Ancient India: New Research*, ed. Upinder Singh and Nayanjot Lahiri, Delhi: OUP, 2009, pp.282-304.

³ Ved Kumari (trans.), *The Nīlamata Purāṇa*, Vol. II, Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1973, verse 246. Kalhana does not provide dates for this period of Kashmir's history but Gonanda III can be presumed to have ruled around 1182 BC. The Gonandas were apparently the first dynasty to rule Kashmir.

⁴ Bhīma Śāhī is mentioned in Alberuni's list of Hindu Shahiyas of Kabul as the successor of Kamalu. He is also known from his coins.

⁵ Stein, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Vol. I, VI.177. Also A. Cunningham, *Coins of Medieval India*, Varanasi: Oriental Books, 1967, p.45 for details.

⁶ B.K. Kaul Deambi, *Corpus of Śāradā Inscriptions of Kashmir*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982, pp.97-8, K.N. Sastri, 'Srinagar Inscription of Queen Diddā', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.XXVII, rpt.1985, pp.153-55. The first inscription records the consecration of a bronze statuette

of the bodhisattva Padmapāṇi by Rājānaka Bhīmaṭa, a Buddhist devotee and son of Cāvata, and by the four brothers of Gaṅgā Devī. The second one mentions a certain Dharmāṅika honouring his mother by dedicating some religious institution or charitable work in her name.

⁷ Stein, *Kalhaṇa's Rājataranṅiṇī*, Vol. I, VI.366. Kalhaṇa's words are: *strī-sambandhena bhūpāla-vaṁśyānām bhuvanādbhutaha, tritīya parivartoyam vartate-mutra maṇḍale*.

⁸ M.L. Kapur, *Eminent Rulers of Ancient Kashmir*, Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1975; M.L. Kapur, *The History and Culture of Kashmir*, 2nd edn, Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1992.

⁹ Kapur, *History and Culture of Kashmir*, p.45.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.50, 53, 59-60. Also Kapur, *Eminent Rulers*, p.68.

¹¹ S.C. Banerji, *Cultural Heritage of Kashmir*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1965, p.51; U.N. Ghoshal, 'The Dynastic Chronicles of Kashmir', *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, 1985 (rpt.), p.323; P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. III, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946, p.40.

¹² Stein, *Kalhaṇa's Rājataranṅiṇī*, Vol. I, 'Introduction', Appendix II, pp.139-44. Note that R.S. Pandit's translation of the *Rājataranṅiṇī* is very literal and has an abundance of French terms. Moreover, his analysis of the text is sketchy, unlike Stein's well-structured and comprehensive one. See R.S. Pandit (trans.), *Rājataranṅiṇī*, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1935.

¹³ For instance, a seminal work on numismatics like P.L. Gupta's *Coins*, New Delhi, 1969 has a pronounced male bias and only fleetingly mentions associations of women with coins in early Indian history. For more information on the queens' coins, Cunningham, *Coins of Medieval India*, p.45; Devika Rangachari, 'Coinage and Gender—Early Medieval Kashmir', in *Coins in India—Power and Communication*, H.P. Ray (ed.), Mumbai: MARG, 2006, pp.46-55.

¹⁴ For a critique of this, Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, 'In Search of Our Past — A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 30, 1988, p.2. See also Kumkum Roy, 'Introduction', in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Kumkum Roy (ed.), New Delhi: Manohar, 1999, p.4 and B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'General Editor's Preface', p.ix.

¹⁵ M.K. Dhar, *Royal Life in Ancient India*, Delhi: Durga Publications, 1991, pp.9, 44-5, 58-9.

¹⁶ Saroj Gulati, *Women and Society — Northern India in the 11th and*

12th Centuries, Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985, p.28 where she mentions the women rulers in one line. Also pp.3, 39, 42.

¹⁷ B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1973, p.9.

¹⁸ Vina Mathur, *The Role and Position of Women in the Social, Cultural and Political Life of Kashmir — 7th century-16th century A.D.*, Jammu: Doron Publications, 1985.

¹⁹ For more information on the consistent attempt to 'invisibilize' women in history, Chakravarti and Roy, 'In Search of Our Past', *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp.2-10.

²⁰ Kumkum Roy, 'Defining the Household: Some Aspects of Prescription and Practice in Early India', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, Nos.1-2, Jan.-Feb, 1994, pp.3-18.

²¹ Ashvini Agrawal, 'Women in the Political Life of Kashmir (c.A.D650-1150)', in *Dimensions of Indian Womanhood*, C.M. Agrawal (ed.), Vol. I, Almora: Shri Almora Book Depot, 1993, pp.87-8.

²² For instance, while the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Jātakas* stress the complete unsuitability of a woman for rulership and administration, the *Śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata* authorizes the coronation of a vanquished ruler's daughter in the absence of suitable male candidates. See A.S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India*, 3rd edn, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958, p.87; A.K. Majumdar, *Concise History of Ancient India*, 2, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980, p.55; Beni Prasad and R.C. Majumdar, 'Political Theory and Administrative System', in *The Age of Imperial Unity*, R.C. Majumdar (ed.), 4th edn, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1968, p.303.

²³ Cynthia Talbot, 'Rudrama-devī, the Female King: Gender and Political Authority in Medieval India', in *Syllables of Sky—Studies in South Indian Civilization in Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, David Shulman (ed.), Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp.391-430.

²⁴ For instance, Stein, *Kalhana's Rājataranginī*, Vol. I, III.530.

²⁵ *Ḍāmaras* were a class of feudal landholders that played an important part in the politics of Kashmir.

²⁶ For instance, Ghoshal, 'Dynastic Chronicles of Kashmir', *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, pp.325-26 and Beni Prasad, *The State in Ancient India*, Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1974, pp.327-28 for an inadequate, cursory treatment of Sūryamatī's role. Also B.P. Mazumdar, 'Role of the *Ḍāmaras* in Medieval Kashmir', in *Essays in Indian Art, Religion and Society*, K.M. Shrimali (ed.), New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987, pp.27-36 where there is no mention of Chuddā and her role in the discussion on the *Ḍāmaras*.

- ²⁷ S.C. Banerji and A.K. Gupta (trans.), *Bilhaṇa's Vikramāṅkadevacaritam*, Calcutta: Sambodhi Publications, 1965, p.11.
- ²⁸ Kapur, *History and Culture of Kashmir*, p.43.
- ²⁹ Cynthia Talbot, 'Temples, Donors, and Gifts: Patterns of Patronage in Thirteenth-century South India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 50, 2 May, 1991, p.328.
- ³⁰ R.S. Tripathi (ed. and trans.), *Samayamātrkā of Mahākavi Kṣemendra*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhavan, 1967. Note that Kṣemendra's father was from a well-connected family in Kashmir and that his grandfather, Narendra, was a minister.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, I.3.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³³ For instance, Sukumari Bhattacharji, 'Prostitution in Ancient India', in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Roy (ed.), pp.211-12 where she points to Kaṅkālī's 'lack of proficiency' in any other profession (a statement that is directly contradicted by the text) and ignores the indications of her grit and intelligence.
- ³⁴ Ved Kumari, *The Nīlamata Purāṇa*, Vol. I, Srinagar-Jammu: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1968, p.v.
- ³⁵ Kumari, *Nīlamata Purāṇa*, Vol. II, verses 485-6.
- ³⁶ For instance, *ibid.*, verses 548, 557, 483-4.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, verses 225, 900-1.
- ³⁸ Deambi, *Corpus of Śārada Inscriptions*, p.263.
- ³⁹ Kumari, *Nīlamata Purāṇa*, Vol. I, pp.94-5, 131-34.
- ⁴⁰ For more information on gender in early medieval north India, particularly in the kingdoms of Kanauj and those across Bengal and Bihar, see Rangachari, *Invisible Women, Visible Histories*.

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