

Kalhana' Rajatarangini - History of Kashmir, - Historical Analysis

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Abstract: *The Kalhana's Rajtrangani, the waves of the river is an epic poem (Mahakavya) in Sanskrit running into about eight thousands verses spread over eight books or sections, having been composed in Kashmir itself during the period 1148-1150 A.D. Kalhana happened to be a member of the ancient Indian learned class of Brahmins, apart from a son of a high dignitary of royal court, therefore said Rajtrangani exposes an account of numerous royal dynasties, which ruled the ancient kingdom of Kashmir, though claimed to be from mythical origin down till arrival of Kalhana's own time. It gained the iconic stature ever since 19th and 20th centuries' scholars by labelling it as the first work of history considering it to have gathered from the entire corpus of Sanskrit literature. The reason behind this perception was that the scholars observed much more because of the prime reason that the deference of the text focussing on the chronological record to historical causation alleged to be with objectivity.*

However this objectivist interpretation of the text bracketed out and rejected other aspects of the text that did not fit their empiricist idea of what history should be. This included all aspects of figuration, such as myth, rhetoric and didacticism, that were a major part of the Rajatragani and typical of a traditional poetic discourse. Correcting this lopsided assessment of the seminal Indic text, recent approaches have attempted to rehabilitate the Rajatragani in its parent genre, kavya, and the literary culture it spawned. Adopting this prospective, it emerges that the historicity of the Rajatraganimay lie in the poetic structure and narrativity rather than merely in its factuality. Furthermore, viewing the text and its literary strategies like myth, rhetoric and didactic as a unity a deeply ethical understanding of history is revealed which defines, in a culturally specific yet potentially universal manner, what " True" knowledge of time and the human action may be..

Keywords: South Asia, India, Kashmir, 12th century, Rajatragani, Kalhana, Kavya, Sanskrit, Poetic, narrativity, epistemic, didactic, ethics, power, temporality

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rajtrangani (literally connotes, the river of kings) an epic poem (Mahakavya/ prabandha) composed in the classical language, Sanskrit, by a Kashmiri Pandit son of Campaka a former Minister in the court of Kashmiri king Harsha, being a family hailing from a learned class who composed this epic in 1148-1150 A. D. In Kashmir.

The Himalayan region of Kashmir an intermontane valley formed by the holy river Vitasta, a tributary of mighty river Sindh, is a region of it's first history of it's kind in the form of Rajtrangani running into 8000 verses which are unequally distributed into eight books or sections by laying an account of royal dynasties which ruled the kingdom of Kashmir from the claimed putative to the Kalhana's own time e. g. It narrates nearly two millennia of the ancient to the early medieval history of the valley.

Rajatragini, a self-reflexive epic, begins with a prolegomena explicitly disclosing the purpose (prayojana) , it's methods and it's vision or philosophy of history. It itself is based on consultations and emendation of at least eleven similar Sanskrit texts composed before itself.. Though one of these older texts (Nilamata Purana, 8th century) has survived and only the author of another (Kshemendra 11th century) is historically well known, which indicartes that a long and well established premodern tradition of witing history.

Rajtrangani in shaping it's contents and messages also draws extensively on the other, pan India Sanskrit literature like Shastra (prospective treatises on statecraft and law), niti (political and moral parables) , and Itihasa (narratives on the past), even as the basic fact of chronicling dynasties king by kings in the vanshawali (genealogy) tradition. Indeed the

Rajtrangani may be seen to migrate among these genres and kavya (highly aesthetic poetry and prose) making it a composite text. All of this suggests a strong intertextuality at work in this Kashmiri epic which seems to have brought together a number of Sanskrit literary and philosophical traditions rather than departed from them.

Kalhana claims to have consulted rock and copperplate inscriptions (shasana), that recorded royal land grants and had evidently survived from ancient times. This is an interesting palimpsest of sources, giving insight into the materials that went into the making of the text that is today itself considered a source of material history. Kalhana used these epigraphs to record large number of donations made by the kings , queens, ministers, generals to the religious institutions of different affiliations, like Buddha, Shaiva (worshippers of Lord Shiva) , Vaishnava (worshippers of Lord Vishno), and Saura (Solar worship). Significantly, the Rajtrangani gives a continuous chronology for the region, using traditional Indian calendars or era, such as Kaliyuga and Shaka and Samvat, to assign dates to the ascension and end of the reign of every king or queen of every dynasty that ruled Kashmir. These dynasties included the Gonandiyas (5th-6th century) , the Karkotas, (7th-9th century) , the Utpalas (9th century), and the Loharas 10th century - 12 th century). Some of the important rulers of Kashmir whom we know about because of the Rajtrangani are the Mouryan king Ashoka, (4th century) , who also presided over the empire that spanned nearly entire Indian subcontinent, the Kushana king Kanishka(2nd century) and the Huna Kings Toramana and Mihirakula (6 th century) all of whom also ruled over and integrated Kashmir into, transregional Indian kingdoms. Hordes of gold, silver, copper, and alloyed coins found in the valley do attest to the presence of these rulers in Kashmir.

This Rajtrangani epic also documents some more local but nonetheless powerful Kashmiri kings chief among whom was Lalitaditya Muktapida (8th century) , who reportedly undertook extensive conquests and raids, reaching into eastern India on the one hand, and central and western Asia (Sinkiang, Iran) on the other. Again also finds place about King Avantivarman (9th century) famous for undertaking effective measures to control floods in the valley and. Didda (10th century) one of the few strong female rulers we get the ancient world.

The Rajtrangani also recounts in detail a host of primarily political events that occurred during these regimes, and the politics, deeds and struggles of the successive rulers and courtiers. It also seeks to explore the general and individual causes thereof and provide a range of plausible historical explanations for these.

In contrary to his stated dispassion, Kalhana's style indicates a deep personal involvement when narrating good or evil deeds of Kashmiri kings and queens. The Rajtarangani is a highly judgemental piece of work and constantly moralizes the events and actions it describes. This takes the form of praise and adulation for righteousness and denunciation and contempt for wrongdoing, the latter expressed even in obscene Or scatological terms at places, some thing that is highly unusual in Sanskrit poetry. Espousing ethics was clearly a defining part of the Rajatarangani's textual and historical agenda.

The Rajtrangani is not a tale of only the elites, it however also dwells centrally on the condition of the subjects under just and benevolent as well as tyrannical and exploitative kings, who alternated in Kashmir's long history. Indeed in this work people's welfare (prajanupalanam) is a frequent refrain and an important crucible for evaluating the rule of any king.

The European Orientalist Scholars who studied the text from the early 19th century onwards called the Rajatarangini the first and only work of history proper to emerge from ancient India. They believed that this late work was a unique exception in the three thousand years of Sanskrit literary culture, which they accused of otherwise completely lacking a sense of history even as it abounded in scripture and mythology. The scholars who arrived at this characterization of the Rajatarangani as the first work of history in India included Harold Wilson (1825) , George Buhler and Marcus Aurelius Stein (1892, 1900) , the last mentioned bringing out the critical edition of the Rajatarangani and its full translation which is read to this day.

Their flawed assessment of the uniqueness and historical character of the text was embraced and echoed throughout the 20th century by Indologists like Authur Lewellyn Basham (1961) and Indian historians of different ideological persuasions, like the National Scholar Romesh Chandra Majumdar (1961) and the marxist historian Romila Thapar (1983) . In a scramble for corvality with western disciplinary parameters, they issued laudatory statements such as the following, which became canonical for generations of later historians studying or teaching the Rajtarangani “ Even a modern. historian should have little hesitation in ranking Kalhana as a great historian for his correct appreciation of the true ideals and methods of history”.(Majumdar, 1961, Page 14-25)

In so valorizing the empiricist qualities of empiricist 150 years of influential scholarship on the Rajatrangani essentially applied lost Enlightenment Rankean positivism to a 12th century traditional Sanskrit poem. In the process, they bracketed out and downed as “ Failures” And “imperfections” Such aspects of the text that did not fit their idea of what history should be. This included all aspects of figuration, like myths, rhetoric and didacticism, that were proper to be poetic discourse and so prominent in the Rajatrangani's own scheme of things ad Mahakavya.

Marcus Aurel Stein (1900 A. D.) Though the rhetoric and didactic parts of the Rajatrangani that were in Kavya style were simply unconnected with the narrative proper, which was historical, but Buhler indicted the resort to legend and myth as rendering the chronological as a. Large part of text “ Valueless” and it's author suspect. Following suit, despite christening Kalhana “ a great historian” ,Ramesh Chanta Majumdar(1961, 22-24) spoke of this “ Very defective” method consisting in the inclusion of mythical or legendary kings, a blind faith in the epics and Puranas (ancient Indian genres narrating the past), a belief in watchcraft and magic, explanation of events as due to the influence of fate” rather than to any rational cause”, a general didactic tendency inspired by Hindu views of Karma, and “ mere display of poetical and rhetorical skill”. Romila Thapar also dismissed Kalhana's moralism and didacticism

Being accepted as history, Rajatrangani had ceased to be a traditional Sanskrit poetry. Though entirely inspired from the modern objectivist notions of history in the West rather than from any indigenous or ancient approaches to treating the past, the underlying belief in the opposition of the “factual” (true) history and “fictive” (false) literature was new even to the nineteenth century Europe, and belied the practice in classical (let alone Indian) antiquity where the history was considered but a form of fine literature with no prejudice to it's truth. Value. The Rankean turn in European historiography imprinted itself in world historians , additionally through the agency of imperialists like James Mili who as early as 1817 A. D. launched a scathing attack on Indian literay and historical traditions for not measuring up to their Judeo- Christian counterparts. positivism mingled with imperialism to end up downgrading and delegitimizing indigenous Indian narratives of the past. Ironically, being isolated as flawed exception in all Sanskrit literature, the Rajatarangini as history was both the creation and victim of an intellectual approach that sought to simultaneously appropriate and undermine a traditional Sanskrit text.

Recent Approaches

In the last couple of decades a new line of thinking has sought to rehabilitate the Rajatrangani in its literature culture and thereafter investigate it as a work of history. In the process , there has been a move away from an empiricist undertaking of the discipline of history towards it's literary qualities and to the alternative historical modes that may spring from texts and genres of premodern India.

An historical maker, Sanskritist Whitney Cox (2013) has recently argued that the occurrence of Sanskrit verses in a “ terse, tense” Register in the later sections of Rajatrangani “ Is able to capture the ebb and flow of the word's congenital instability by rendering itself dense and rich enough to capture something of it”. This suggests a formal mimesis as the substance of Kalhana's engagement with history.

Other Sanskritists like Walter Slaje (2008) and Lawrence Mc Crea (2013) have turned to indigenous Sanskrit categories of Generic analysis, like rasa - kavya, to gauge the nature and purpose of the Rajatarangani. Rasa refers to thr nine aesthetic flavors or essences, like the heroic, theberotic Or compassionatw, with at least one of which every work of Sanskrit poetic composition was required to be suffused.

Walter Slaje, in his analysis of the preamble/prolegomena of the poem, has argued for the Rajatrangani's pursuit of aesthetic and ultimately soteriological rather than historical, ends. He points to the evocation of the Shanta Rada Or state of equipoise that Kalahana claims to have infusef his poem with, and which in turn would facilitate the attainment of Moksha or liberation by the reader. He says this was the Kalhana's main endeavor by means of narration of lives of Kashmir kings past. In other words the Rajatrngani's appeal yo historical reality was a necessary means - but merely a means - to enhance , as only an appeal to verity can, the aesthetic effect.

A comprehensive reinterpretation of the Rajatarangani by historian Shonaleeka Koul (2014, 2017 A. D) demonstrates that a clear theoretical enunciation of poetry (Kavya) as history is to be found in Sanskrit poetics, which needs to be taken on board when considering the range of historical modes that flourished in the premodern world. Futher the practice of this theory may have consisted in developing an ethico- political discursivity that frames the understanding

of historical knowledge and defines, in a culturally specific yet potentially universal manner, what is true knowledge of time and human action may be.

Koul points to kavya's long standing and cherished tradition according to which the poet (Kavi) was a Seer (Rishi), who possessed spiritual omniscience and divine sight (Divyadrishti). With these powers which rose from the poetic intuition (Pratibha), he could gauge the real nature of things and even apprehend the different dimensions of time "The things that no one before had seen." This claim to epistemic authority, however conventional, qualified the Poet to speak on matters gone by and, as one of Kalhana's successors put it rendered kavya as "a lamp that illuminates past realities" (kavya dipam bhutavastuprakasakam).

Echoing this self understanding of the genre, Kalhana writes that the world would be in darkness without the illuminating work of the good poet (Satkavikrityam andham jagattvam vina) (Rajatarangini Trang 1, verse 47) particularly the deeds of the king s would be lost for ever were, it not for the poet who resurrects, vivifies, and embodies their glory. Kalhana writes;

Renowned (and mighty) kings would not even be remembered without a favour of the poet's work, which is sublime and to which we offer solutions. (Rajatarangini Trang 1, verse 46). Kalhana calls him kavi-vedhas, that is poet creator (Rajtangani Trang 1, verse 4). He writes "Who else is capable of making visible (pratyakshatham) by gone times except the poet creator who can. Make delightful productions (ramyanirmana).

The Observations At Glance on Rajatarangani.

Politically it embraces the history of Kashmir from the first Hindu King Gonada to the year 1149 A. D. And 22nd year of the reign of the last illustrious king Jaya Simha. It contains the genealogies and chronology of kings of various dynasties having ruled Kashmir during the before mentioned period with the achievements of all considered important kings and related events.

Book I and II (trang one and two) of the Rajatrangani goes to suggest that there were 52 kings, who are said to have ruled Kashmir in the early phase but whereas the author Kalhana very laboriously could produce the names of only 17 kings, which include Gonanda I and his successors and the names of some other kings have been laid down in the Book I (Gonanda dynasty).

Kalhana thus failed to find out the names of 35 kings and their records are lost by creating a vacuum in the historical chronology. The same book contains the list of 21 kings who succeeded Gonanda III.

It also contains the list of six princes from Pratapaditya to Aryaraja who belonged to Aditya dynasty.

From Book III it appears that there was a restoration of Gonanda dynasty and the princes of this dynasty from Maghavahana to Baladitya reign in Kashmir.

These three books contain more or less a traditional history from the time of the great battle of Kurukshetra Or the beginning of Kaliyuga to the end of sixth century A.D. which is based on Itihasa - Purana tradition.

Some of the kings are of course mythical but there are some kings like Ashoka, and others whose historicity is well established their activities are also well recorded in Kalhana's work.

However there is an anachronism in the genealogical list furnished in Book I. And the chronology of some of the kings mentioned in the said three books are not reliable.

Books IV to VIII

The information provided by Kalhana in Books IV to VIII covering the period from early 7th century A. D. to about the middle of the 12th century A. D. are more trustworthy, than what we find in the earlier three books from both historical and chronological points of view.

Book IV

It contains the history of 17 kings from Durlabh Vardhana to Utpalapida who belonged to the Karkota dynasty. It was Durlabhavardhana the descendent of Naga Karkota who founded this ruling dynasty. He appeared to have ruled from 598 A. D. to 634 A. D. The most powerful ruler of the line was Lalitaditya (724- 760 A. D.), the third son of Durlabhaka alias Pratapaditya. Lalitaditya has been described as an efficient administrator, valiant warrior, great conqueror and patron of arts and culture.

The author of the work has given a faithful account of his digvijaya (conquest)

Book V

The narrative of fifteen princes from. Avantiverman to Suraverman and thereafter upto Suraverman II, belonging to Utpals Or Varman dynasty, has been provided in Book V

Book VI

In Book VI the author had provided the history of ten kings in the lines of Yasakara and Parva Gupta. It is mentioned that after Suraverman II, Yasakara (son of Gopalavarman's Minister Prabhakara Deva) was elected by the Brahmanas as king.

During his benevolent reign of nine years (939 A. D. to 948 A. D.) a new era of peace, progress and prosperity commenced in Kashmir.

His son and successor Samgrama was killed in 949 A. D. by the Minister Parvagupta who usurped the throne himself. The most prominent and powerful ruler in this line was Didda, the granddaughter of Bhimasahi and daughter of Simharaja, a Chief of Lohara (in the then Poonch state). It is said that she was an ambitious and energetic woman, and for nearly half a century- first as queen consort of king Ksemagupta (950A.D. to 958 A. D.) , then as regent, and lastly as a ruler (980A.D.- 1003 A. D) - she was the dominant personality in the politics of Kashmir.

Didda of Kashmir

The history of Kashmir also reveals a tradition of powerful queen. The Rajtrangani's description of the 12th century history of Kashmir mentions three women rulers, Yashovati of Gonanda dynasty, Sugandha of Utpala dynasty and Didda of the Yashakara dynasty.

Of them Didda (Didda is respectful term for an elder sister, still used in Kashmiri Pandits) had the longest and most eventful stint, exercising political power for about 50 years. This included;

The period of her husband - Ksemagupta's region,

The time when she was regent for her minor son Abhimanyu; and

The years she ruled Kashmir in her own right after ascending the throne in 980-981 A. D.

Didda 's career is described in the sixth tranga of the Rajatrangani.

Kalhana describes how this queen aided in her rise to power by a Minister, the loyal Naravahna, who made her comparable to Indra. Kalhana described how she managed to create a right in the rank of his enemies.

He described how she ruthlessly killed her son and her three grandsons before ascending the throne.

Didda had an affair with a courtier and herdsman named Tunga, who soon became her trusted confidence. The queen chose her nephew Sangaramaraja as her successor, thereby diverting the succession to her maternal family from. Lohara (Poonch)

Kalhana refers to Didda founding towns, temples, and monasteries. These included the;

Town of Diddapur and Kankanapura and

Temple called Diddasvamin temple

Then this queen also is credited with the repairing a number of temples dedicated to God's.

Kalhana disapproved of her ;

He describes her as deficient in moral character, merciless by nature, and as one who was easily influenced by others For Kalhana her personality reflected the defects of womankind.

Inspire of her prejudices, Kalhana portrays both royal and nonroyal woman as historically relevant figures;

In the realm of political power woman appears as sovereign ruler as well as powers behind the throne.

The Tajtrangani also reflects the direct and indirect political influence of courtesans and woman of " Low" birth in the harem.

In Kashmir, as elsewhere, within the constraints of the prevailing patriarchal power structure, male control over the political power was occasionally breached.

Book VII

The history of six princes from Samgramaraja the nephew of Didda and brother of the Lohara prince Vipraharaja, ascended the throne in A. D. 1003, and continued his rule till 1028 A. D.

Samgramaraja proved to be a weak king during the earlier part of his reign Tunga was virtually the ruler of the state.

Book VIII

The last Book VIII contains the history of seven kings from Uchala (1101 A.D. to 1111 A. D.) To Jayasimha (1127-1159 A. D.) the last illustrious sovereign.

The author has provided an eyewitness account of the events which took place about middle of the 12th century.

Misrule in Kashmir

Kalhana describes in details the misrule that was prevailing in Kashmir.

Local feudal elements (Damras) have become very strong and trying to destabilize the throne.

According to him a king should be strong and must ensure that there is no concentration of wealth even in the villages, lest they challenge the Royal authority.

Administration

He has severely criticized the bureaucracy most of whom were Kayastha and alleges that they were behind most of the conspiracies against the king.

Social

Kalhana describes the social life of Kashmir.

Rajatrangani says that rich drank perfumed wines and ate meat, while poor surviving on wild vegetables

Kalhana says Harsha introduced a general dress of long coat in Kashmir.

Economic

Kalhana also gives useful information about economic life of Kashmir. He described agriculture and water works such as dams to prevent landslides which were supervised by the Minister of Avantivarman

This led to subsequent economic prosperity of Kashmir and it led to withdrawal of Kashmir from the plains politics, since the need to mine there was lessened.

The themes of mortality and evanescence of human life and action can be seen as the Rajatrangani's deposition on temporality itself and its ever attendant quality, change. A recognition of this fundamentality historical character of time frames the text in that it begins, too, with describing itself as a balancing remedy, an antidote as it were, for kings who may be seized by change- prosperity or decline - across space and time (nirpanam ullase hrase va deshakalayoh) (Rajatrangani trans 1, 21). A certain universality and inevitability, then, attach to march of history in this vision.