



History as Dharma: Reimagining Kashmir's Past through Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī

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Abstract: *The Rājatarāṅgiṇī (12th century CE) by Kalhaṇa is one of the earliest sophisticated historical chronicles in Sanskrit literature. It gives an account of a sweeping political, cultural, and religious evolution of Kashmir, far beyond a mere record of rulers and events. Kalhaṇa weaves a cyclical vision in which kingship is judged through ethical lenses, and the dynasties that he records rise and fall according to their observance of dharma. This paper traces the history of Kashmir as reflected in the Rājatarāṅgiṇī, mythic origins, and all. It examines what Kalhaṇa tells about recorded history, periods of prosperity and decline, external forces impacting the sovereign and subjugated, and his own philosophy of time and power. Reconstructing the Rājatarāṅgiṇī serves double duty: as both a method of writing history with moral reflection and as a way of understanding human ambition in Kashmir.*

Key Words: Kalhaṇa, Rājatarāṅgiṇī, Kashmir History, Indian Historiography, Dharmic Kingship, Political Ethics, Sanskrit Literature, Myth and History, Cyclical Time.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī clutches a unique position in Indian historiography. Composed in 1148–1149 CE (Pandit xxix), it is not simply a chronicle but a sophisticated meditation on kingship, ethics, and the impermanence of worldly power. Set in the politically contested and culturally rich valley of Kashmir, Kalhaṇa's work engages myth, memory, and record to create a coherent historical vision. This paper reconstructs the historical journey that the Rājatarāṅgiṇī outlines for Kashmir and interprets Kalhaṇa's underlying ethical vision. According to R.C. Mazumdar:

This is the only work in ancient Indian literature that may be regarded as a historical text in the true sense of the word. The author has not only taken great pains to collect his material from existing chronicles and other sources, but at the beginning of his work, he has set down a few general principles of writing history which are remarkably far in advance of his age. Indeed, these may be regarded as anticipating, to a large extent, the critical method of historical research, which was not fully developed till the 19th century. (Mazumdar and Pusalker 49)

“Rajatarangini, which consists of 7,826 verses, is divided into eight books” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). It is written in the Sanskrit poetic form by the Kashmiri Brahmin Kalhana. The work provides a comprehensive account of the Kashmir region from ancient times to when the work was composed. The first two sections focus on the mythical beginnings of Kashmir and its first rulers. The subsequent volumes shift attention to a wide range of kings who misruled, governed, or intermittently conquered Kashmir, their notable deeds, and the strange social and political circumstances that made them and our descent into their eras possible. This series by Kalhana stands out for its seamless blend of historical fact, mythical folklore, and incredible narratives that detail governance, culture, and significant events in Kashmir:

As he gradually comes nearer his own age, the history becomes fuller and more and more replete with interesting accounts of men and things. It ceases to be merely a chronicle of dry details and faithfully presents the ebb and flow of national life, the periods of glory and misery, and the greatness and weakness of men and rulers—in short, all those minute details which make history a record of intense human interest, faithfully portraying the march of events through which a people works out its own destiny. (Mazumdar and Pusalker 50)

2. Mythical Beginnings — The Sacred Geography of Kashmir

Kalhana's history begins not with verifiable dates, but with a mythical geography where Kashmir is imagined as a blessed land. Of all the realms, the one most enchanting is the land of Kashmir, which he describes as a fitting playground for the gods. In these early Tarangas (waves), rulers like Gonanda I are depicted as contemporaries of the Mahābhārata war, which lines up Kashmir's origins with the grand epic tradition of India. The early kings fought wars against demons, founded cities, and received divine blessings, prolonging a stretch of sacred history. Kashmir rose as a physical terrain and as a cosmic center where human and divine histories entwine. R. S. Pandit translates from the first Taranga thus:

Such is Kasmir, the country which may be conquered by the force of spiritual merit but not by armed force, where the inhabitants, in consequence, fear more the next world. Where there are hot baths in winter, comfortable landing places on the river-banks, where the rivers being free from aquatic animals are without peril; where, realizing that the land created by his father is unable to bear heat, the hot rayed sun honours it by bearing himself with softness even in summer. Learning, high dwelling houses, saffron, iced water, grapes, and the like — what is a commonplace there, is difficult to secure in paradise. (12)

3. Formation of Historical Kingship

Gradually, Kalhana moved from telling mainly mythical tales to more developed political accounts. In this context, kingship became distinctly human, incorporating governance, justice, and moral responsibility. He praised the kings of old, claiming that they ruled in virtue, with paternal care, and without oppression. This phase signifies the establishment of not only dynasties but also urban centers like Pravarapura (the early Srinagar), a shift towards a more organized society, with political and ethical principles as its foundation.

4. Dynasties of Prosperity and Expansion

Kashmir's political magnificence reached this height under the Karkota dynasty, especially under the rule of King Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa. Kashmir's power extended far beyond the Himalayas into Central Asia. The arts flourished. Muktāpīḍa held, without a doubt, an eminent place in Kashmir's history, a history that blossomed under his dynasty, painted in shades of gold, and held a vibrant place in the memory of its people.

When Pandit Kalhana wrote *Rajatarangini* in 1148-49 CE, it had been almost 300 years since the rule of the Karkotas had ended in Kashmir, so he had to depend on oral traditions passed down across generations. As a result, part of the chronicle reads like a historic account and part like the script of a potboiler. Despite its shortcomings, *Rajatarangini* gives a comprehensive sense of those times. (Chavan)

Under King Lalitāditya, the earth became gilded. All parts of the empire were made to serve the shining grandeur of his reign. In simpler terms, this was a time of massive temple building. This was a time of both diplomacy and military might. This was probably a time when both Hinduism and Buddhism were well represented in Kashmir. The temples (gorgeous and otherwise), the army (which was stunning in presence and might), and the power of both sects apparently made Kashmir a picture of a glorious past:

Lalitāditya died in 760-761 CE and was succeeded by a series of weak and ineffectual kings, Kuvalayapida, Vajraditya, and Prithivyapida. This was the period of decline of the Karkota kingdom, and a series of revolts broke out in many places. (Chavan)

5. Cycles of Decline and Civil War

In Kalhana's moral universe, prosperity is not permanent. After the Karkota dynasty, internal strife, weak rulership, and moral corruption eroded state stability in Kashmir:

After several years of political turbulence and chaos, a local Governor named Avantivarman became the King of Kashmir in 855 CE, establishing the Utpala dynasty. The Utpala kings were the last Hindu dynasty of Kashmir before the advent of Islam. (Chavan)

The Utpala dynasty that followed restored some order under such rulers as Avantivarman, but decline returned soon enough. King Harsha's rule represents this downturn. Kalhana disillusionedly observed that when greed and cruelty rule, the state is like a tree whose roots are eaten away by snakes. Temple lootings, oppressive taxes, and rebellions punctuated Harsha's rule and brought a disastrous end to his reign, symbolizing the decay that follows adharma.

6. External Forces and Cultural Shifts

Kalhana also records how Kashmir faced challenges from external forces — the Dards, Huns, and other frontier tribes. The border-tribes, like restless winds, broke upon the frontier lands and troubled the peace of the valley. Although Kashmir flourished to retain its core identity, these incursions foreshadow the increasing political fragmentation and the eventual opening to Islamic influence (which Kalhana only hints at cautiously, as it had not fully unfolded in his time). However, Stein states, “When the great task of consolidating the Mughal empire in Northern India had at last been accomplished, Akhbar's forces crossed the mountains and finally incorporated Kashmir in the Mughal dominion (A.D. 1586)” (131).

7. Kalhana's Philosophy of History

Apart from just recounting events, Kalhana formulates a deep theory of history that is governed by Indian cosmology. He envisions time not as a linear progression but as a cyclical flux, with human virtue and vice determining its flow. He states, time itself plays with kings, raising one and throwing down another, like a boy at play with balls. Thus, history serves as a sort of mirror reflecting the lapse between dharma and adharma, the two sides of the eternal dance that is the essence of life. Why do kings rise and fall? Kalhana would say that it is not by chance but because they comply with or infringe the laws of moral historiography.

8. Conclusion

The Rājatarāṅgiṇī is significant today for an array of reasons concerning the historical, literary, cultural, and philosophical aspects of Kashmir. It is one of the earliest historical chronicles in Sanskrit literature, providing a nearly all-encompassing account of the kings of Kashmir from ancient times leading up to Kalhana's own period. It is distinct, especially for employing a critical historiographical approach, referencing a variety of different sources, both earlier and contemporary, and maintaining a clear chronological structure. Also, it is methodologically significant for using nearly a proto-modern approach to history: Kalhana distinguishes between myth and verifiable history, expressing scepticism when necessary and evaluating the rulers he describes based on a combination of moral and administrative criteria.

Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī provides more than just the history of the land; it is interwoven with myth, memory, and morality. The narrative it presents, which Kashmiri culture remembers and valorizes, is at once a divine and human history of Kashmir. It recounts the evolution of Kashmir from a divine cradle to a battleground of competing ambitions. Yet what sustains the narrative is the broader Indian conception of time and order. And so, the evolution of Kashmir — as depicted in Rājatarāṅgiṇī and remembered in Kashmiri culture — is not merely a tale of one enclave gone through hard times and good; it reflects the ongoing human story writ large across the Indian subcontinent.

For Hindus, the Rājatarāṅgiṇī holds monumental significance as it purports to set forth a dharmic interpretation of history, kingship, and the cosmic order. Written in the twelfth century by the historian Kalhana, the text is steeped in the principles of Rājdharma (राजधर्म), which set forth the moral and ethical responsibilities of a ruler. Kalhana does not assess the kings he writes about in terms of their political successes alone but judges them by their good governance, their commitment to protecting their subjects, and their adherence to dharma.

Rājatarāṅgiṇī embodies sacred notions, both literally and metaphorically. The text embodies a tone of sāttvika disposition characterized by balance, truthfulness, and discernment. Kalhana often maintains a distance from bias or flattery, showing a commitment to *satya* (truth) and *viveka* (critical discernment), which are fundamental values in Hindu epistemology. The text also preserves and reflects teachings from the Dharmaśāstra and Nītiśāstra, drawing from the ethical and political philosophies of figures like Kauṭilya and Kāmandaka. Consequently, the Rājatarāṅgiṇī transcends being merely a political history; it emerges as a civilizational document that encapsulates Hindu perspectives on time, power, ethics, and sacred duty. It stands as a distinctive indigenous model of historiography that resonates with the spiritual and moral consciousness inherent in the Indian knowledge tradition.

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