



# Unveiling the Image of Women from the Waves of the “Rivers of Kings”

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## Abstract

As much as to the importance of men recounted in the historical narratives, the significance of women cannot be ignored. This is vividly reflected in one of India's well known historical text of Kashmir called Kalhana's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* or the “Rivers of Kings”. Despite the fact that the text allocate marginal space to women and suggest their peripheral existence; what is interesting is the recognition of women as a ruler and important agents in the decision making process of the realm. Moreover, apart from being a male oriented account, the important role of women could also be seen in terms of social and cultural activities. This in a way suggests that besides men, women in ancient Kashmir also took active part in shaping the affairs of the state. Therefore, focussing on the representation of women both royal and non-royal in Kalhana's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, this paper attempts to unfold as to how women were represented in the early Indian textual traditions.

**Keywords:** Women, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* or the “Rivers of Kings”, socio-political activities, royal, non-royal women.

## Introduction

As generally known, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* or the “Rivers of Kings” is the only work of the early history of Kashmir that has often been regarded as a historical text. Written by Kalhana in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* provides us a fairly accurate account of the early kings of Kashmir. That the ‘*Rājatarāṅgiṇī*’ is one work that could be identified as a history is suggested by its relatively unproblematic use for the reconstruction of the regional history of Kashmir in general and of the early medieval period in particular<sup>1</sup>. Besides, Kalhana's text also highlights the power and agency of women in royal court culture as sovereign rulers in their own right and as powers behind the throne<sup>2</sup>. In the true sense of the word, Kalhana's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is a storehouse of information. It not only provides us valuable information about the ancient kings of Kashmir and their way of governance and social relations; it also gives us a meaningful insight in defining about the position and status of Kashmiri women.

**Objective:** The main objective of this paper is to explore the role and contribution of women in the early history of Kashmir. Besides, it will also examine Kalhana's mode of representing women in his text i.e *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.

## Methodology

Appropriate historical method based on primary source was adopted in this concerned paper.

**Literature Review:** As far as the literary wealth regarding the representation of Kashmiri women is concerned, very few had written about them. One of the earliest writings that reflect the importance of Kashmiri women is Prem Nath Bazaz's book *Daughter's of Vitasta*. In this book, the author describes the

position of Kashmiri women from different periods of history but the book did a selective study by focussing the importance only on the royal women. Therefore, it is incomplete in its information regarding the representation of women in the early history of Kashmir. But in spite of these drawbacks, Prem Nath Bazaz was probably one of the very few historians who attempted to include the importance of Kashmiri women in the political history of ancient Kashmir.

**The Role of Kashmiri Women in kalhaṇa's *Rajatarangini*:** By and large, it is the king in particular and men in general that figures centrally in the narrative of Kalhana's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Nonetheless, if one painstakingly delves into the account, it provides a space where the hidden images of women can be reveal from the overshadowing images of men. Therefore, regardless of the fact that the account deals primarily with the kings, what is interesting is the important role played by the women, particularly the queens. As such, we see among other things, women figuring as a ruler since the very early period. The earliest instance to queen having enjoyed the power like king is Yaśovātī. We are told that when king Dāmodara I died in a battle against the Yādavas, his widow queen Yaśovātī was put to the throne of Kashmir by Kṛṣṇa<sup>3</sup>. Even though Kalhana acknowledges queen Yaśovātī as the ruler of Kashmir, no significant title to designate her as a ruler or a precise description about her reign is given. This is indicated by the very limited information given about the queen and other women in comparison to that of men. Also, queens are seldom mentioned as active participants in the politics of the realm. They are depicted more as the wives and companions of the kings rather than having any command or authority over the kingdom. So, they are described by using the title like patnī, devī, bhūpriya and mahādevī.

In contrast to how women are depicted in the text, Kalhaṇa attempted to represent an ideal image of the ancient kings of Kashmir. As a result, he ascribed them with various titles like bhūpati, pāṛthivapati, kaśmīrendra and cakravartin etc to indicate the significance of their reign. While the titles like rājā and nṛpa suggest the commonly used epithet for kings the other titles such as bhūpati, cakravartin and kaśmīrendra carry greater significance. On the one hand, the use of the title like cakravartin or the universal ruler suggests that the greatness of the king was recognised by the entire world. On the other hand, the status of the king as equal to the gods is symbolised by the titles like kaśmīrendra. This is indicated by the affix of the word 'indra' or the king of gods at the end of this title. Such a representation on the one hand shows the unequal attitude of Kalhaṇa towards women. Perhaps, on the other hand it indirectly reflects the motives of patriarchal mode of society where the authority of men had a superior image than that of women.

Moreover, Kalhaṇa never tried to directly recognize the queen as a competent ruler, for, in both the cases of queen Sugandhā and Diddā, they came into the picture as rulers to fill the gap and look after the administration when their husbands met with untimely deaths. Moreover, the queens as rulers were inexorably pictured as depending on men for power. But such an approach of Kalhaṇa is problematic if we examine the instances of how queen Diddā and Sugandhā functioned as rulers in the text. Not denying Kalhaṇa's claim that the minor son of Sugandhā was actually the king, but the ability of Sugandhā to borne the whole task of administration with no political and administrative experience in reality suggests that it was she who had the supreme authority<sup>4</sup>. So, the issue of both the queens had entered into relationships with their ministers who in turn gave them wealth and territory could also be assumed as a strategy employed by the queens to legitimize their power and by the ministers to gain important positions in the kingdom.

Further, even if Kalhaṇa accept women as rulers, he somehow fails to appreciate the power and authority of women on equal terms with that of men. More often than not, queens who are mentioned as exercising their power as rulers are either overlooked or limited in their roles. To take an example, we see that though queen Sugandhā and Diddā were mentioned as rulers, in none of the references Kalhaṇa used a suitable title to highlight them as rulers. Instead, a much generalized title such as Patnī, Devī, and Bhūpriyā etc were used which referred to them simply as wife or the companion of the king.

The reference which states Diddā's<sup>3</sup> ability to handle and suppress the two rebellions which broke out during her reign indeed shows Diddā as a capable ruler. In spite of the fact that Kalhaṇa accused Diddā of establishing her undisputed rule in the land by killing her son and grandsons, Diddā represents female power at its peak in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* by overcoming constant obstacles from rebel forces by her tenacious rule. So, the shrewdness and iniquitous activities of Diddā was obviously

an alternative scheme for safeguarding her power<sup>5</sup>. What's more, even before Diddā ascended the throne, her skill of influencing and controlling people outshone her husband Kṣemagupta, so that Kṣemagupta was recognized with the title of 'Diddāksema'<sup>3</sup>. This is the reason why Kalhaṇa makes the sweeping observation that women though born in high families become the enjoyment of the vulgar has acknowledge that Diddā was brave, pious and capable<sup>6</sup>. Most importantly, Diddā is one among many queens who brought changes in the rulership of Kashmir by passing the throne into the hands of her nephew rather than securing it for her husband's lineage. This made Diddā establish an undisputed rule of her maternal side i.e the Lohara dynasty holding its sway until and beyond the date of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*'s completion which Kalhaṇa lauds as a change brought by association with women<sup>2</sup>. Hence, for the first time Diddā represents the queen wielding absolute power like the king.

Yet in recognizing women as an able ruler, Kalhaṇa is imbued with his patriarchal mindset and depicts powerful women as manipulators and hungry for power. For instance, in spite of the admiration Kalhaṇa shows for Sūryamatī for preserving the kingdom from the verge of its destruction, he later on blames her as responsible for the death of her husband Ananta. He alleged that the unwise suggestion of Sūryamatī to hand over the throne to his son Kalaśa at an inappropriate time caused the death of Ananta<sup>3</sup>. But if we examine the overall phenomenon, women alone cannot be held accountable for the occurrence of such mistakes, the average number of the kings who met an untimely death occurred in most cases because of their envious sons or treacherous ministers who desired the throne. In a related sense, not denying Sūryamatī as a manipulative queen, she can also be accepted as an efficient ruler who had the ability to manage the affair of the administration even though queens are not mentioned as having training or knowledge about politics/administration.

Although Kalhaṇa neglects to recognise the queen as an important functionary of the kingdom, the illustration of the queen goes further than his description. It seems appropriate to state here that apart from viewing the queens as devoted wives and companions of the kings they also figure as important agents of cultural exchange. We can infer this from the point that in associating the queens with the building activities, most of them are mentioned as making their contributions to the brahmanical shrines and temples except for a queen named Amṛtaprabhā whom Kalhaṇa identified as a princess from Prāgjyotiṣa, the present day Assam. When all the other queens were engaged in construction of Viṣṇu and Śaiva shrines, Amṛtaprabhā is credited with the building of a vihāra for the Buddhist monks<sup>3</sup>. So it will not be improper to say that she built the vihāra so as to introduce the popular Buddhist tradition of Assam to Kashmir as the existence of Buddhism in Kashmir was visible from the time of Aśoka i.e prior to Amṛtaprabhā's coming to Kashmir.

An interesting thing that surfaces within this description of royal women as important agents is the indication that directs one to question about the absence or participation of non-royal women in the affair of the state. It is in this context that we find courtesans and concubines emerging as important figures in the realm by marrying or associating with kings. Interestingly, we see the Dombas who are equated by Kalhana with the dog cooker caste holding important positions and cluttering up the affairs of the realm by using the beauty of their women<sup>3</sup>. For instance, lured by the love and charm of Hamsī, the daughter of the Domba singer, not only made Cakravarman raise her to the position of the chief queen but also open the doors for the Domba caste to hold important position in the realm. An almost similar instance is that of the courtesan name Lallā who completely influenced Yaśaskara by her love. Being the most beloved one among the wives of Yaśaskara, Yaśaskara accepted the disloyalty of Lallā who kept a relationship with a caṇḍāla watchman which later on accounted for the death of Yaśaskara<sup>3</sup>. However, to assume or treat the common women as a whole in like manners as described above seem to be rather inappropriate than accepting it as an established tradition. Irrespective of the occasional references, attribution of women as mother or nurturer of life is evident here. One such instance can be found from the story of the potter's wife who brought up king Pravarasena II. As narrated in the text, when Pravarsasena II was inside the womb of his mother Añjanā, his father Toramāna was imprisoned by his uncle Hiranya for striking coins without his uncle's knowledge. This made the pregnant Añjanā take shelter in the hut of a potter where she gave birth to Pravarasena II. Añjanā however, placed her son in the hands of the potter's wife; the latter accepted and brought him up as her own son concealing the identity of the child<sup>4</sup>.

Given this wide range of information, the attempt to portrayed women with peripheral existence in a way shows the gender biased mindset of Kalhana to delimit the role of women. If at all administrative and political role represent women's power, their contribution to social activities could be understood as defining their position. In fact the equal status of women with that of men in the early history of Kashmir is justified from their activity in the religious sphere. Thus we see women are being given the liberty to participate in religious activities as much as men are accounted for promoting the existing socio-religious beliefs in the text. They performed these by erecting religious memorials and temples. This involves the contribution made by both royal and non-royal women. Thus, as an instance we have the five queens (Amṛtaprabhā, Yūkadevī, Indradevī, Khādanā and Sammā) of Meghavāhana, building Buddhist monasteries of which some bear their own names. This trend of involving women in activities of religious significance is also seen in the case of constructing Śaiva temples. Here, it was attributed to a wife of Raṇāditya named Amṛtaprabhā who erected a temple of Śiva under her name<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, 'the involvement of women in such activity as their own volition, under their own names, and in the same profusion as men is an affirmation of their status'<sup>5</sup>. To an extent, the construction and building of these religious sanctuaries could in some form indicate

the dominant existing religious beliefs. But as it is given that the religious shrines and memorials were built for the welfare and protection of their supporters, it can also be accepted that such religious practices were carried out as an attempt to legitimize their particular faith. At the same time it also indicates the index of power of the person who builds the particular shrines or temples.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can suggest that Kalhana highlighted or overemphasized the role of the kings but briefly enumerated the major role played by queens and other women folk. As such, the layers of waves of the "Rivers of Kings" or the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* faintly revealed the powerful image of women by making limited mention of them in the politics and state affairs. Nonetheless, accepting the rare cases where queens had to take the reign in their hands in the absence of the kings unfolds the important contribution made by women and their involvement in the decision making process. It also opens up a new arena to treat non-royal women like courtesans and concubines as important figures. Though Kalhana disapproved of them, he accepts them for their contribution in changing the image of royalty. Thus, even as Kalhana treats their contribution as any other mundane description, he appreciates them for their significant role. Also, while we can critique Kalhana's representation of queens, he was not simply a protagonist of male rulers. This could be noticed from his acceptance of Kalhanikā as a righteous queen who did not indulge in manipulating her husband but was able to settle a tough situation peacefully by her wisdom. Another instance is the adoration of queen Raḍḍādevī, the wife of Jayasiṃha for her virtuous activities where Kalhana says she outshone Diddā by her sanity. In spite of everything, the least importance Kalhana showed in describing about the role of women could be simply because his account is primarily concerned with the kings. After all, one should be lenient enough to consider that at the end what one can understand from the account of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is the different waves of the "River of kings" of Kashmir.

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