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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### BEYOND THEIR DOMESTIC CHORES: ADVENTURES OF WOMEN IN THE POLITY OF KASHMIR

\*Mehraj Ud Din and Tawseef Mushatq

Ph.D Scholar, Department of History, University of Kashmir, India

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#### ABSTRACT

The society of Kashmir during ancient period was patriarchal in nature. In this social setup, men and women were situated not only differently but also unequally. Specifically, women got less of the material resources, social status, power and opportunities for self-actualization than do men who shared their location- be it a location based on class, race, religion, etc. One of the major causes that resulted in such inequality between men and women was the organization of society based on the sexual division of labor designed by the male patriarchs that linked women to the functions of wife, mother and house hold worker: to the private sphere of home and family: and thus to a long series of events and experiences very different from those of men, who were exclusively linked with the public domain. Such was a cherished male ideal social setup and every effort was made to preserve it. But in spite of all this, there were many adventurous women who took a keen interest in the polity of the state and even sometimes became its rulers, and thus carved a niche for themselves. This paper attempts at, looking into the place the women were accorded in the social setup of the period, the challenges which they faced, and the strategies and diplomatic tactics which they adopted to face those challenges, and how they ruled during the period of our study.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The historical writings on the position of woman in the valley of Kashmir, as elsewhere in India<sup>1</sup>, have mostly remained confined to the perspective of setting woman within the context of family and household. The issues mostly discussed in these writings are marriages, sati, widow re-marriage, the institution of *niyog*, the right to property for women, the right of the childless widow to adopt, *purdah* system, women's religious rights, their educational rights and so on and so forth. Moreover, these studies view woman as, to use the phrase of Kumkum Roy, 'passive receptacles'<sup>2</sup>, with their status or position changing to reflect the state of the world around them. This paper seeks to analyze the position which was accorded to women in the traditional Brahmanical social setup and their status in actual practice by highlighting the role they played in the political system, and the glory which they achieved by their own efforts in the valley of Kashmir during ancient period. It seeks to expose the myth which the Brahmanical normative literature and the histories based on them would make us to believe that the womankind was, "a fixed, sensual lustful domain of sin and pleasure, devoted to the comfort of

men in which women were like the wine –unfeeling, unthinking and entirely material". For the analysis of the role of women in polity, this paper will use Rajtarangni as its chief source. Since Rajtarangni deals with history of Kashmir from earliest times up to 1149-50 AD, when it was composed, this can also be taken as the time span of this paper.

#### POSITION OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ORDER

The social milieu of Kashmir during the early period of its history, as elsewhere in India was patriarchal<sup>3</sup>. Women's location in this social setup was not only different from but also less privileged than or unequal to that of men. In the Hindu literature of the period, as Uma Chakravarti has pointed out, *Strisvabhava* or women's nature was regarded as inherently problematic and untamable<sup>4</sup>. To Manu, 'women is false, a misfortune, mere passion like wine or chess'<sup>5</sup>. Even the woman endowed with every quality was regarded as inferior to a worthless man<sup>6</sup>. According to *Manu* and *Parashar*, a woman whatever her age was considered a minor in law<sup>7</sup>. In the same vein, the rights accorded to women by the Hindu law givers in matters such as family and household, religion and economy were negligible as compared to those of men<sup>8</sup>. Not only this, the Hindu law givers also accorded subordinate position to women vis-a-vis to men. Manu says, 'Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons

\*Corresponding author: Mehraj Ud Din,  
Ph.D Scholar, Department of History, University of Kashmir.

protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence<sup>9</sup>. He also reiterates that if there are no family members to protect her, she should be kept under the surveillance of man<sup>10</sup>. However, this is not to suggest that the position of women was static and had always been so pathetic during the period of our study. Indeed, the position of women in ancient India varied from that of a considerable authority and freedom to one of equally considerable subservience<sup>11</sup>. But at no point of time woman was considered equal to that of man. Thus even in the Rig-Vedic period, the so called golden age for Indian women<sup>12</sup>, they could not participate in the two political assemblies - the *Sabha* and *Samity*<sup>13</sup>.

This cherished male ideal was reinforced by sexist patterning of division of labor. The sexual division of labor linked woman to the functions of wife, mother and household worker; to the private spheres of home and family, while generally affording much greater of power and resources to men<sup>14</sup>. The Brahmanical law books set down norms which women were expected to follow and women were expected in the family to function mainly as an ideal wife and ideal mother<sup>15</sup>. The *Stridharma* or duty of the ideal wife was to be totally devoted and subservient to her husband<sup>16</sup>. If she refused to oblige the husband sexually, he was empowered to use force as a last resort to bring her into submission<sup>17</sup>. She was also expected to give birth to sons and nurture them<sup>18</sup>. But here too the rights of mothers to the sons were subordinated to those of fathers<sup>19</sup>. This was justified by symbolizing man as the seed giver, the woman as the field<sup>20</sup>. The produce belongs to one who owns the seed; the field also must belong to him<sup>21</sup>. The sexual division of labor was, thus, not between equals but between superiors and inferiors. This relation was imposed on women by social pressure<sup>22</sup>. Buddhism during the period of its ascendancy in Kashmir is said to have moderated the rigidities of Brahmanical patriarchy in Kashmir<sup>23</sup>, but here too the activities of 'women were confined within certain spheres-principally the domestic, social and religious.'<sup>24</sup> This was the cherished male ideal and every effort was made to preserve it.

## WOMEN IN POLITY

In the social setup depicted above, it is safe to argue that the participation of women in political affairs would be an unwelcome quest. Not surprisingly, the political thinkers did not approve of women coming to the throne<sup>25</sup>. But the more ambitious women did not care for the norms set down for them by the law givers, and went beyond the functions of sex to participate in the world of politics. Although in *Rajtarangni*, which is our main source for this part of the paper, women are extolled for their beauty, modesty and chastity, aspects which characterize traditional role perception of women, there are a lot of references in it which clearly suggest the emergence of women from the "domestic into the political stage"<sup>26</sup>. We find women acting as sovereigns of the state in their own right, as queens-consort, as guardians and regents of minor princes, and even as fighting at the head of their troops.

## WOMEN AS ADMINISTRATORS

The princess of the royal house-hold held important administrative posts, especially in the department of revenue<sup>27</sup>. They functioned in some cases as the governors of important districts<sup>28</sup>. They made land grants on their own authority and functioned as governors of important fiscal units<sup>29</sup>. The

*Kathasaritsagara* of *Somadeva* shows that princess and queens possibly received considerable administrative and military training for various functions<sup>30</sup>. Further, the queens had separate funds, their own separate treasures<sup>31</sup> and councilors to help and advise them on affairs of state<sup>32</sup>. Like the kings they used to hold their own open levees and receive the homage of the feudatory chiefs, prominent nobles and higher officials<sup>33</sup>. *Rajtarangni* is replete with examples of several queens ruling jointly along with their husbands<sup>34</sup>. King *Jalauka*, who ruled Kashmir long before the beginning of Christian era, stands out in Kashmir history for having introduced important administrative and constitutional reforms to bring the state in line with advanced regions of India<sup>35</sup>. He is believed to have been inspired and influenced by his talented queen, *Ishana Devi*<sup>36</sup>. She is also reported to have founded *Matri Chakras* (circles of mothers) and numerous *Shaivite* temples<sup>37</sup>. *Tunjina*, who was the king of Kashmir at the close of second century A.D., is reported to have jointly ruled with his virtuous queen, *Vakpushta*<sup>38</sup>. In the founding of *Karkota* dynasty, which gave to Kashmir some of the best rulers, *Ananglekha*, the daughter of *Baladitya* and the queen of *Durlabhavardhana* is reported to have played no less important role<sup>39</sup>. *Srilekha*, the queen of king *Sangramaraja* (1003-1028 AD) was also actively involved in the administration of the state. As a queen consort she became all in all in the government<sup>40</sup>. After the death of her husband in 1028 A.D., she virtually ruled the country independently in the capacity of the regent of the infant kings, first of *Hariraja*, and later of *Ananta* until he attained maturity. Another notable lady who played an important role in the administration of the state was *Suryamati* consort of king *Ananta* (1028-1063 A.D.).

She controlled the machinery of the government and appointed the *Sarvadhikara* (prime minister) of her own choice<sup>41</sup>. Her efficient handling of the administration pushed the king *Ananta* into background. Writes Kalhana, 'it was the queen who applied to the affairs of state while the king..... was content to carry on what had to be done'<sup>42</sup>. The queen also saved the kingdom from the rebellious *Damaras*, who were about to depose the weak king<sup>43</sup>. When the king grew old, weak in body and feeble in mind, he was forced by the queen to renounce his claims in favor of her unworthy son *Kalasha*<sup>44</sup>. *Jayamati*, spouse of king *Uchchala* (1101-1111 A.D.)<sup>45</sup>, and *Raddadevi* and *Kalhanika*<sup>46</sup>, the queens of king *Jayasimha* (1127-1154 A.D.), the contemporary of the great historian Kalhana, were the other notable personalities among women who figure prominently in *Rajtarangni* actively participating in the administration of the state. Another unusual feature of the polity of Kashmir was the role of women in royal succession. Queen *Suganda* lost her life in her bid to support *Nirjitavarman*, a grandson of *Suravarnman* and son of *Sukhavarman*, through the *Tantrins* who were the chief supporters of her enemies<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, as we have seen above that king *Ananta* was forced by her queen *Suryamati* to abdicate his throne in favor of her son *Kalasha*.

## WOMEN AS WARRORS

Though we do not find any reference in *Rajtarangni* showing the recruitment of women as soldiers or lower rank officers in the armed forces of the state, but it leaves no doubt that they have acted as captains of forces, fought on battle fields at the head of troops, won battles or suffered defeats<sup>48</sup>. Queen *Didida* who stands out as the most powerful woman ruler of Kashmir, took upon herself the responsibility of operations against the

rebellious *Damaras* (feudal barons) when she acted as a guardian of a boy - king *Abhimanyu*<sup>49</sup>. The another woman who attained fame as a commander of the armed forces was *Silla*<sup>50</sup>. *Silla* lived during the reign of king *Sussala* (1112-1120 A.D.). The reign of *Sussala* was fraught with a civil war for the throne between the king on one hand and *Bhikshachara* on the other. The advances made by *Bhikshachara* and his armed forces alarmed the king *Sussala*, who was forced to retreat leaving behind the forces leaderless.

This created panic among his forces. It was in this alarming situation that *Silla* took over the command of the armed forces and gave a tough fight to the enemy forces but at last she fell in the battlefield<sup>51</sup>. With her death, the royal armies left the field and fled in several directions and the throne of Kashmir was ascended by *Bhikshachara*. But the civil war continued and in May 1121 AD. *Sussala* was able to regain the throne. In the meantime, *Yasoraja* joined the royal forces and this turned the scales in favor of the king. While on the one side the king *Sussala* was busy in defending the city, he sent the contingent of his forces under the command of the brave and bold lady *Chudda*<sup>52</sup> to stop *Mallakoshta*, the leader of the *Damaras* on the side of *Bhikshacharya*. *Chudda* gave a tough fight to *Mallakoshta* and defeated him<sup>53</sup>. In this way the rebellion was quelled and the situation brought under control. One day while she was walking on the road, *Tikka*, "the matricide" made a surprise attack on her and killed her.<sup>54</sup> Kalhana writes, "She had triumphed over the malcontents with her own and the royal forces; *Tikka* having made a surprise attack on her killed her in battle."<sup>55</sup>

## WOMEN AS RULERS

As I have shown elsewhere in the paper that the *Brahmanical* law -givers restricted women to what the modern feminists would dub as the functions of sex. Still the women from royal families actively participated in the administration of the country in the capacity of officials on higher administrative posts, governors of important districts, queen- consort and regents of minor kings. While this was not seriously questioned, but the accession of women to the throne was damned and strongly disapproved by the men in politics.<sup>56</sup> But despite this disapprobation, we have the record of at least three adventurous women in the *Rajtarangni* of *Kalhana* who ascended the throne and ruled in their own right as sovereigns of the state during the period under study.

The first woman we come across in *Rajtarangni* to ascend the throne of Kashmir was *Yashowati*<sup>57</sup>. She was the wife of king *Damodra* who was killed in an expedition led by him against *Lord Krishna*. His wife *Yashowati*, however, was enceinte. After the death of her husband, *Yashowati* herself ascended the throne of Kashmir in the face of stiff opposition from nobles and advisors who "viewed womankind with scant courtesy considering it as one of the objects of their pleasure"<sup>58</sup> and did not want to be ruled by a woman. But she made it. However, her rule as a sovereign did not continue for long as soon after her accession to the throne, she gave birth to a son, named *Gonanda II*, who was immediately crowned as king.<sup>59</sup> But *Yashowati* continued to rule as a regent till the infant king attained maturity.

*Yashowati's* rule both in the capacity of a sovereign queen or a regent proved so successful that she came to be looked as, 'the

mother of her subjects'<sup>60</sup>, and a, 'goddess'<sup>61</sup>. The second woman we find in *Rajtarangni* who ruled as a sovereign of the state was *Sugandha*, the widow of *Samakaravarman* (883-902 A.D.).<sup>62</sup> *Samakaravarman* was succeeded by his infant son *Gopalavarman*(902-904 A.D) under the guardianship of his mother.<sup>63</sup> *Gopalavarman's* rule did not continue for long for he was assassinated by *Ramadeva* after a rule of just two years. He was succeeded by his younger brother, *Samkata* who died after only 10 days of rule. After his death there remained no male survivor of the family. During the period of her guardianship, *Sugandha* had become so popular that she was requested by the people to ascend the throne after the death of *Samkata*.<sup>64</sup> The rule of *Sugandha* lasted only for two years and finally she lost her life in her bid to support *Nirjitavarman*, 'born of a lady of her own family',<sup>65</sup> through the *Tantrins* who were the chief supporters of her adversaries.<sup>66</sup> During this brief interval (904-906A.D.) she is reported to have built two towns and a magnificent temple.<sup>67</sup>

The most notable woman who ruled Kashmir as an independent ruler during ancient period was the queen *Didda*. She was the wife of King *Kshemagupta* (950-958 A.D.). She was an exceptional woman, who for nearly half a century directed and controlled the affairs of the kingdom, first as the queen of *Kshemagupta*, then as guardian of her son, later as regent of her grandsons, and finally as an independent ruler. The king *Kshemagupta* was so enamored of his wife, *Didda* that he came to be known among the people by the epithet of, '*Didda-Kshema*'.<sup>68</sup> The control of administration during his reign gradually slipped into the hands of *Didda*. Though *Kshemagupta* continued to be on the throne till his death in 958 A.D, it was *Didda* who ran the government. As a matter of fact she had become a real power behind the throne.<sup>69</sup> This is also corroborated by the coins of *Kshemagupta* which show that he ruled jointly with his chief queen, *Didda*.<sup>70</sup>

After the death of *Kshemagupta* in 958 A.D, kings up to 981 A.D, when *Didda* directly took over the reigns of administration, four kings succeeded to the throne of Kashmir who were the son and grandsons of *Didda*. But they were nominal rulers and the real power was in the hands of *Didda* who acted as a guardian of her son *Abhimanyu* and a regent of her three grandsons *Nandigupta*, *Tribuvana* and *Bhimagupta*, during this period.<sup>71</sup> During this period *Didda's* lust for power increased enormously. She actually got her three grandsons killed to clear her way to the throne.<sup>72</sup> After the death of her third and last grandson, *Didda* herself ascended the throne and ruled the state up to her death in 1003 A.D.<sup>73</sup> Both during the period of her regency and when she ruled as an independent ruler, *Didda* faced several problems from the rebellious ministers and feudal barons but she prevailed upon the situation and restored peace and consolidated her position both through diplomacy and military tactics.<sup>74</sup>

Queen *Didda* had statesman like sagacity, political wisdom and administrative ability.<sup>75</sup> She ranks among the most remarkable personalities not only of the valley, "but also of the entire Indian sub-continent".<sup>76</sup> Writes *PN Bazaz*, 'she undoubtedly stands head and shoulder above other rulers of valley after *Awantivarman* till the Hindu rule came to a close'.<sup>77</sup> But the historians both contemporary and modern have accused her for her alleged misdeeds.<sup>78</sup> But probably, "the truth is that *Didda* has been falsely blamed for the

imaginary evil deeds".<sup>79</sup> Her people loved her and desired to see her on the throne.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

From the above detailed analysis based on evidence about the position of woman in society and her role in polity in ancient Kashmir we can draw certain broad conclusions. The society of Kashmir from the earliest times of its history was patriarchal. In this patriarchal social setup she was considered not only different from but also unequal to that of man. The man functions assigned to her were providing sexual pleasure and bearing sons. She was damned if she went beyond these functions of sex. The man was enjoined to keep her always under his surveillance. But despite this, the women of the valley have great achievements to their credit. They set aside the norms designed for them by the male patriarchs, went beyond the functions of sex, and actively participated in the polity of the state. They reached to the 'pinnacles of glory' by distinguishing themselves as sovereigns of the state in their own right, as regents of minor kings, as successful administrators and military commanders by dint of their own capacities and capabilities.

However, the evidence presented so far definitely indicates that it was women from royal families rather than common women who were co-sharers with men in political affairs. But there is sufficient evidence in the Rajtarangni which shows that women from 'low-castes' could also become part of royal household.<sup>81</sup> There are many references in Rajtarangni which show that kings of Kashmir married with the women of low-caste.<sup>82</sup> King *Chakravarman* (923-933 A.D.) is reported to have married an untouchable girl, *Hamsi*, and made 'her the premier queen'.<sup>83</sup> Not only her orders but also the instructions of her *Domba* kith and kin were obeyed like royal commands and were not transgressed by anyone.<sup>84</sup> *Jayamati* the queen consort of king *Uchchala* (1101 to 1111 A.D) was also a low-caste woman.<sup>85</sup> But the association of kings with the untouchables was looked with horror by our historian, *Kalhana*.

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72. Ibid, 311s, 312s, 332s. . P N Bazaz, however, points out that there were rebel elements who were conspiring for the downfall of Didda and were making attempts to use these unfortunate princes to further their nefarious designs. So Didda was forced, however, against her will to put an end to their lives.
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