



The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rajatarangini

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Article History

Received: 20.12.2022

Accepted: 25.12.2022

Published:30.12.2022

Citation

Bashir, I. (2022). The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rajatarangini. *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature*, 3(12), 1-12.

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THE MAKING OF EARLY KASHMIR: LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY IN THE RAJATARANGINI

The book *Making of Early Kashmir* deals with the cultural history of Kashmir; it's a venture to look at the Rajatarangini critically. It follows a revisionist approach for having a proper understanding of Kashmir's cultural past. Shonaleeka Kaul asserted that with the help of *Rajatarangini*, through its textual representations, she identified and interpreted the values associated with the region (Kashmir) from its origin till the 12th century. The book is, in a way, a critique of history writing mostly based on the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana. Kaul demonstrated that the region of Kashmir in erstwhile writings is being depicted as the separate region from the Indic mainland (supra region), the earliest exposition to this being the Kalhana's narrative. This articulation on the region has brought a distinct way of looking at the established norms of writing on ancient and early medieval Kashmir. Her variance with the former historiography of the region is due to the glorification of the region as separate from the mainland. She tried to disprove the claims made by some scholars that Kashmir being in isolation due to its topography and situated at the periphery from the mainland of the subcontinent, subsequently developed a unique entity.

The book is divided into three chapters with an introduction and conclusion. It is based on a study of temporality, spatiality and identity in early Kashmir. It is an effort to understand the wide range of discursive and material processes through which Kashmir emerged as a historical region. Primitively, she comes up with the general view of how *Rajatarangini* is being designated as the only historical work of the subcontinent by the scholarship, which Kaul described as the deprecation of the whole civilisation. She claimed the Kalhana's work which is being ascribed the merit of assigning chronological dates to the dynasties ruled over Kashmir, is not unprecedented rather, we have the abundant number of treatises which were written on such themes, *Vamshavallis* and other *Puranas*, which are genealogical accounts of various dynasties that ruled over the subcontinent. Besides the inclusion of various types of myths in the *Rajatarangini* from the epics, local Puranas or the local legends serve the didactic purpose. She explicitly propounds how the work which comprises of rhetoric didactic aspects assumed the status of being history. A generation of historians assumed it to be history rather than *kavya* poetry. While making various assertions, she wished to reinstate it to the genre of *kavya*. Kaul asserted that Kalhana was not only the creator of the past but the creator of the region. He is being described as the one with having a preconceived mission to instruct the present with the help of various moral lessons. Thus, she thought that the tendency to moralise was the leading thrust of *Rajatarangini*.

Shonaleeka Kaul argued that in *Rajatarangini*, Kalhana fabricated the region of Kashmir from abstract space to specific space through a range of cultural constructions like myths and memories. These mythical stories revolve around the natural forces and natural features that generate a sense of the region. The intertwining of geographical, mythical and other discursive practices smoothed the process. She argued that this whole process is done by Kalhana not through any vernacular expression but through a cosmopolitan Sanskrit. By this paradigm, Kaul questioned the thesis of Sheldon Pollock. Moreover, Kalhana employed certain practices with which he elaborated a region as homeland. Among these

indexes, mention could be made of Kalhana's portrayal of tangible features of Kashmir and narrativise the geography, which in turn develop belongingness in the land through a literary expression.

Kaul argued that her approach to Kashmir is not linear. She pleaded for the textual reinterpretation of *Rajatarangini*. Kalhana created a region of Kashmir through his narrative, and all regions are relational to supric regions. The need for understanding this relational location is important due to the impression left by the valley upon the other scholarly imagination of being in isolation due to its topography that further led to insularity and, subsequently, to uniqueness. Which subsequently supplemented the concept of centrality and peripherality of the region in the text. Kaul questioned the peripherality of the region. She tried to highlight certain cultural markers depicting Kashmir as part of the Indic mainland. To substantiate her claim, she pleaded that connected histories need to be followed as the regions do not come into existence in isolation but with interactions with the surrounding areas. The political aggrandisement between the rulers of Kashmir and the Indic rulers were highlighted. Various important cultural markers of identity were discussed like the. The assemblage of archaeological culture, Art, Script, and language from ancient Kashmir.

The making of early Kashmir landscape and identity in the Rajatarangini is an important book written on ancient Kashmir. The book pleaded a revisionist approach by questioning the existing historical trend that is mostly based on the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana. The book has certain imperfections which need to be revisited. She is more concerned with locating the identity of Kashmir with the Indic region; while doing so, she described her approach as a connected approach. However, while taking recourse to this, she ignored the regions surrounding the valley and mainly highlighted the interaction between Kashmir and the Indic mainland.

Kaul asserted that Kashmir is being described as unique due to its insularity and isolation. She invalidates the claim of Kashmir being unique due to its peripherality and tried to put forward some noticeable linkages and integrations between the region and supra region. In this context, Kashmir is being mentioned as part of the Mauryan empire. The ruler mentioned in *Rajatarangini* as Ashoka, seems to be a local ruler rather than a famous Mauryan emperor. Besides, Ashoka Maurya is credited with sending missions to spread Buddhism to all neighbouring countries. In this regard, Mauryan Ashoka sent *Mahjantika* to the kingdom of Kashmir, which is inconclusive to the claim of Kashmir being a part of the Mauryan empire.¹ As it seems implausible for a ruler to send a mission to propagate the same religion that he himself was following in the territory that, according to her, constitutes his own realm. Although the provenance of many luxury goods generally associated with the Mauryan empire discovered at Semthan indicate interlinkages, we should not disregard the potential of trade relations between the two regions. Secondly, the territorial expansion of Mukhtapida with the Indic rulers is emphasised for correspondence purposes. Moreover, *Rajatarangini* describes how he waged extensive wars with all the rulers in every direction and had much closer ties with the Tang, as attested by numerous itinerants in their accounts. Despite this, there is no denying that the people of ancient Kashmir considered the Indic subcontinent to be their sacred territory due to their shared religious beliefs. However, it is incorrect to argue that Kashmir just has cultural ties to the Indian subcontinent; there are evidences suggesting that Kashmir also has cross-cultural ties with other neighbouring countries. The book takes a corroborative approach to the ancient history of Kashmir by combining archaeological and literary sources. However, at several instances, it looks Kaul has made some dubious claims.

¹ Geiger, Wilhelm, ed. *Mahavamsa: Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. Vol. 63. (London: Oxford University press, 1912). Pp. 82-84.