



A Study Of Kalhana & History: Historical Issues To His 'Rajatarangini'

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Abstract

It had been said by colonial scholars and historians that India possessed no history by pointing out that ancient India had a rich heritage of religious texts and literature. Still, it lacks historical works as compared to the scholars of Greece and Rome of those times who had systematically documented their period. It was only at the beginning of the medieval period that Muslim scholars started writing histories to document the triumph of Islam. But if we study the great literary works of Sanskrit literature in ancient India i.e. 'itihās-purān tradition', itivṛtta, akhyayika, vansabali, carita, and chronicle of kings, then we find that they forms some types of historical sense. In this paper, I will point out the ideas of historical sense in the Sanskrit literature in India with special reference to Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini'. I will mostly focus on the translation which had been carried out by various historians through the 16th, 17th, 18th 19th, and 20th centuries, historical debates on the nature of Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' and its values, his themes and contents, etc. There have been a lot of ongoing arguments related to 'Rajatarangini' to define it as a literary work or a historical work. My work will try to show that it should be seen as the historical or the great literary texts written by a great man of Kashmir in the 12th century AD.

Keywords: Rajatarangini, Kalhana, Heritage, Chronology, Historical Issues

Introduction

The 'Rajatarangini' is a long narrative poem of eight thousand metrical verses of Sanskrit literature divided into eight cantons, recognized as a comprehensive and continuous history of the kings of Kashmir from mythical times to the date of its composition (AD1148-49) which covered approximately 3600 years. It is based on traditions, legends, written records, and inscriptions. It was written by Kalhana as a 'Kavya' and aimed at a synthesis of aesthetic historical truth.¹ This narrative is composed during a period when dynastic revolutions and the emergence of new social classes threatened the established social and political order.² It is primarily concerned with the succession of kings and queens who ruled Kashmir during this period and

highlights a rich narrative of social, political, and cultural history. The purpose of Kalhana in writing this historical text was to connect the narratives of various dynasties that ruled over Kashmir from the earliest time to his period.

The early 20th century produced the European Indologist and Indian nationalist translation work of Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' in which the translation of M.A. Stein (1900) and R.S. Pandit (1935) is important. The practice of translation and readings of 'Rajatarangini' in both Sanskrit and Persian literature had been continued from the 12th to 20th century. In Persian literature, it was first carried out by Mulla Ahmed, the court historian of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (r.1423 – 74). Abul Fazl noted in his Ain-i-Akbari that when Mughal emperor Akbar entered Kashmir after conquering it in 1586, then he was offered various works and 'Rajatarangini' authored by Pandit Ratnagiri, Padma Mehr, Kshemendra, and Kalhana and other Sanskrit and Persian writers. Haider Malik Chadurah, governor of Kashmir appointed by Jahangir, in his Tarikh noted that Mughal emperor Jahangir commissioned Muhammad Hussain to translate the 'Rajatarangini', and then deputed him (Chadurah) to utilize it to investigate the lives of his ancestors by composing a narrative of Kashmir's past. The texts of various 'Rajatarangini' i.e. Baharistan-i-Shahi (1614), Tarikh-i-Kashmir (1618 – 21), Waqiat-i-Kashmir (1747), and Tarikh-i-Hasan (1885) have been survived through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in other histories of Kashmir.

The earliest European to record an encounter with 'Rajatarangini' was the Frenchman François Bernier, who traveled through Mughal India, including Kashmir, in the seventeenth century and noted in his travelogue that he was engaged in translating "the histories of the ancient Kings of Kachemire" into French.³ In 1825, H. H. Wilson published it in the Asiatic Society's journal Asiatic Researches, in which he introduced the idea that Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' was perhaps "the only Sanskrit composition yet discovered, to which the title of History, can with any propriety be applied". The first complete English translation of Kalhana's text in prose form was carried out by J. C. Dutt in three volumes, published in 1879, 1887, and 1898. In this Dutt described 'Rajatarangini' as "an account of a people who lived from the earliest period in a corner of India". His translation was an attempt to present 'Rajatarangini' as a "sober history" that fit European standards of history writing.⁴ Whereas George Buhler indicted Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' that possessed legend and myth as rendering the chronology of a large part of the text "valueless" and its author suspect.⁵

The full version of the English translation of 'Rajatarangini' appeared in two volumes by M.A. Stein in 1900 which is the most widely read and cited translation and shows 'Rajatarangini' as the history because of its chronological narratives, sources, and objectivity, but he refrained from describing it as history in his introduction and defined it as the 'medieval chronicle'.⁶ Stein's research attempted to establish Kashmir as a unique and separate region within the Indian Subcontinent and the history produced by its historian is the history of Kashmir.

The Translation of 'Rajatarangani' which came out in 1935 and presented the nationalist perspectives to highlight this text of Sanskrit literature was done by R.S. Pandit who had personal and political motivations for translating it into English by criticizing M.A. Stein's translation of 'Rajatarangini'. He described it as a historical 'Kavya' that highlighted the literary heritage of the Indian nation and its people. He regarded it as much as other Sanskrit classics which had more historical truth and embodied more universal, even eternal truths. Pandit pointed out that Kalhana has formed history as "humanistic studies and toward art rather than towards economic life" and for him "history was not something to learn, but something to make people live and understand life".⁷ He says that Kalhana's work was inlaid with all eight emotions, merriment, pathos, wrath, courage, terror, repulsion, and marvel which were designed "to teach the art of life".⁸ He analyzed Kalhana's work as not the narrative of the Kashmir region but as the national narrative of Indian history.

The translation of Stein presented 'Rajatarangini' as a Sanskrit historical 'Kavya', which drew a picture of Kashmir's unique geographical and historical identity. While Pandit's translation was carried out specifically as a counterpoint to Stein's and dismissed the value of 'Rajatarangini' as a regional Kashmiri historical text, offering it instead to a national audience as a Sanskrit text that embodied India's literary heritage and the essential and best qualities of the Indian nation.

Historian's views on 'Rajatarangini'

R.C. Mazumdar, in his 'Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature', has pointed out the quantity of historical sense in the scholars of Sanskrit literature. For him, there were the traditions to collect the events and write them which can be seen in 'Itihas-puran' tradition and 'chronicles of kings' which were not more developed to arrange them systematically, but their purposes and contents show them as historical. He said that the historical sense of Sanskrit literature is widely found in the Kashmir Chronicle which was written by Kalhana. For him, "Kalahan's 'Rajatarangini' shows the high-water mark of historical knowledge reached by the ancient Hindu."⁹ But he points out some characteristics of Kalhana that did not fit him historically is the use of contents in his early cantons such as the presence of mythical or legendary kings, "a blind faith in the Epics and Puranas," a belief in witchcraft 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."¹⁰ Nevertheless based on the later parts of cantons Mazumdar points out that Kalhana has supreme merit of possessing a critical mind and spirit of skepticism which is the first virtues of a historian and he questioned the veracity of past historians, and examined their statements in the light of available evidence culled from the various sources.¹¹

A.L. Basham has roughly divided it into three sections, first; chapters i-iii, in which Kalhan appears to have based his statements almost entirely on traditions, second; iv-vi, covering the Karkota and Utpala Dynasties, in which the chronology being made or nearly events are described and lastly; vii-viii, covering the two Lohara Dynasties, in which Kalhan used the eyewitness accounts and personal knowledge towards society. For him, how Kalhana used the sources, the purposes he chose to write, and his understanding of history's work, are historical which qualifies Kalhana as a historian and Basham concludes that "Kalhana's attitude to history would have been shared by most educated men in medieval Hindu India."¹²

Romila Thapar has described Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' as the narrative 'kavya' which deals with the history of Kashmir from the earliest time to his own time. But following

Mazumdar and Basham have distinguished the early cantons of 'Rajatarangini' in which supernatural causes are given importance and later parts where Kalhana's historical thinking is presented. Historical events are now discussed from many points of view. She then says "Kalhan was not a man with a closed mind, and this, after all, is an essential qualification for a good historian."¹³

But the writers of 'Textures of Time' Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam highlight Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' in a different manner and saw it as the 'weak historiography' by defining it as the 'hyper-real' and distinguished it from a historical novel through pointing out that "realism by itself is no guarantee of historicity." They also charged it that it displays little understanding of causality.¹⁴ But when they talk about the south Indian text Karanam, they did not attention to the concept of hyper-real in that text.

Chitralekha Zutshi, in her "Translating the Past", has recently talked about the translation of Stein (1900) and Pandit (1935) in which Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' has been defined as the regional or vernacular and at the same time as the national and universal by other authors.¹⁵ She has tried to link the statement as to why Stein and Pandit gave their opinion to identify the nature and concept of 'Rajatarangini' which creates a difference in this work of Sanskrit literature. Another important argument on Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' which shows a very different opinion to place it into a historical category is recently given by Shonaleeka Kaul. She has pointed out that Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' is not a simple text, but as composite as the "kavya" in form and spirit, but draws heavily in content, slant, and ever form on several other textual traditions.¹⁶ For her, 'Rajatarangini' gives a philosophical corrective to the understanding of Kashmir. As pointed out by Kaul, "Kalhana does not merely recount the past of a regional kingdom; at multiple levels, he constructs a space called Kashmir which is a politico-geographical space on the ground, but also an ideological space open to the author to organize around moral principles that bring the past and present into a complementary relationship."¹⁷

Sources & Chronology of 'Rajatarangini'

Kalhana's ideas to arrange works with systemic sources defined his works as historical. The value of historical impartiality can easily be traced in his works. He narrated the affairs of Kashmir without any intention, but just for the knowledge of Kashmir to their people. He says about the poet which makes them great, "worthy of praise whose word, like that of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in relating the facts of the past."¹⁸ The credit that has been given to Kalhana's work was for the materials which he had used in his work. He has used eleven works of former scholars which Nilmatpuran, Kshemendra's 'List of Kings', and chronicles of Padmamihira and Chavillakar, etc. He said that he had taken eight royal names beginning with Lawa from Padmamihira's work. Kshemendra's works were famous in ancient India, but due to its nature, Kalhana acknowledges it to be "the work of a poet", but charges it with showing mistakes in every single part, "due to a certain want of care."¹⁹ Apart from literary works Kalhana also used the inscription regarding the consecration of temples and grants by former kings which were at the laudatory inscriptions (prasasti) and in written texts. His antiquarian interests which he used in his texts as the sources made his works prosperous. He also referred to coins, monuments, and buildings to find the details. Another important source that he used in the later cantons of his texts is the personal knowledge and contemporary eyewitness. His accurate and vivid account of the political affairs of Kashmir is probably based on the communication of his father, who was the royal chief of the King Harsh of Kashmir.²⁰ Thus, Kalhana not only made a thorough study of all previous writers on the history of Kashmir but also constructed the sources.²¹

The chronology of the 'Rajatarangini' distinguished its cantons into two parts; the first from chapters i-iii in which the chronology had not been mentioned systematically and persons and events whose figures are mentioned in them, can but rarely be traced in other sources, while the second parts from iv-viii which extends from the beginning of Karkota dynasty to his own time, are easily be traced in the Indian and foreign accounts.²² His chapter from i-iii talks about the chronology of Gonanda I who, according to Kalhana, was in Kali year 653 and the accession of Gonanda III about 1919 Kali year or 1182 BC.²³ Kalhan has also described this Kaliyear 653 as the period when Yudhishtir, elder brother of Pandavs were presented and Kali Year 1919 or 1182 BC as the age of Asoka of Mauryan Empire. However, the current archaeological evidence tells the age of Asoka in the 3rd century BC, as he was a great patron of Buddhism. Even Buddhist writings also talk about his reign and it is well known that Buddhism was started by Lord Buddha in the 6th century BC. That is why some scholars distinguished the early parts of 'Rajatarangini' from its later parts because it arranged the chronology.

He said that the names of 52 kings were left by the earlier writers between Gonanda I and Gonanda III, so he tried to arrange those names. Chapter iii gives the date of Vikramaditya, who started Saka era in 78 AD, about the 4th century BC. If we follow the dates given by Kalhana, then the age of Vikramaditya will be 500 years back.²⁴ Kalhana started systematically giving dates from Laukika year 3889 which began on 7th March, 813

AD to the Laukika year 4225 i.e. 1149-50AD which are available in his book v-viii and can be traced by other sources.²⁵

Historical Sense in Kalhana

Kalhana, who wrote 'Rajatarangini', was the son of Lord Champak who was a chief official of King Harsh (A.D. 1089-1101). His works highlight that he was touched by the royal families of Kashmir and whatever he wrote in his later chapters was based on eyewitness accounts. His father was more touched with the political affairs of Kashmir who must have guided Kalhana to provide details of Kashmir.²⁶ Kanak was his uncle who had also a great connection with the royal families. It is noted that Kalhana was Brahmin by caste and Tantrikworship was known to him, but he also kept an interest in Buddhism.²⁷

His literary training helped him to write this kind of texts which highlight the long history of Kashmir. He was well-known in Indian rhetoric, Alamkarasastra, and Sanskrit grammaticallore. He studied vansavali, epics, Vikramankdevcarita, Harsacarita, and Mankha's Srikanthacarita.²⁸ Mankha was a well-known poet of Kalhan's times in Kashmir who arranged an Alankar Sabha and listed most of the participants in that Sabha. His Srikanthacarita presented a person known as Kalyan, who must be Kalhana.²⁹

The main aspects that make Kalhana's work historical is the concept of his task and what he understands to write in great detail about Kashmir from ancient times. His ideas of work as the 'kavi' and mention of the sources in his works distinguished him from the early writers of the chronicles. Kalhana described his work whose purposes were "to give a connected account where the narrative of past events has become fragmentary in many respects."³⁰ The rule of Alankarasastra and didactic features used by him brought his work to be true and proved to be historical.³¹

But supernatural things and mistakes in chronology were done by Kalhana in the earlier chapters of the 'Rajatarangini' which covered up to the 8th century. The critiques of his texts mark a question regarding the nature of 'Rajatarangini' as to define it as a historical or literary work. But again other styles, purposes, and contents of his work can prove his work is the historical one. Honesty and impartiality are the great aspects that he used in his work. He does not hide the errors and weaknesses of the king under whom he wrote. As pointed out by him Banbhatand Bilhana, were too treats of historical facts, yet their "heroes are painted all white and their enemies all black".³² Certainly he praises some of the king's enemies for their courage. The conventions of Sanskrit literature required a happy ending, and Kalhana was first and foremost a poet who could have concluded his work with a description of tyranny and oppression without any tasteful events.³³ Another important element that Kalhana used in his chronicle was the rhetorical ornaments in which metaphors, similes, puns, and the endless varieties of poetic figures which are the tests of the Kavi skills.³⁴

He was aware of the functions of historical writings and declared that he wrote his chronicle for various purposes i.e. to establish the chronology truly, to write a readable narrative of the past, and in last, he mentioned his philosophy of history.³⁵ Kalhana's ideas on the writing of history were directly influenced by

two main streams of the Indian traditions which were concerned with recording the past: the Brahmanical and the Buddhist. There is some evidence of this period of the history of Kashmir available in the Annals of the Tang Dynasty of China. If communication with China was so close at this time, then perhaps some trickle of the Chinese emphasis on keeping records and dynastic chronicles may have found its way into the historical traditions of Kashmir.³⁶ Finally, Kalhana believed that history taught lessons more practical than mere resignation, by studying the history of earlier reigns. He is inspired by a deep feeling of regional patriotism.³⁷³⁷

Themes of 'Rajatarangini'

To define the nature of Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini' I would like to highlight a few socio-political and geographical aspects of Kashmir as narrated by Kalhana which will help us to go to conclusion. Kalhana in his 'Rajatarangini' has described the origin of Kashmir in his own time. To understand his historical qualities, Kalhana's descriptive qualities can be seen through his analysis of the geographical, social, and political systems of Kashmir.

The history of the geography of Kashmir, as pointed out by Kalhan, starts from the age when it was a lake. By refereeing Nilmat Puran he pointed out that Kashmir was a lake named Satisar in which Jaldevta lived. Kashyap Rishi and Bhrama Dev with other gods killed Jaldevta and created gardens and mountains, and then Kashmir came into existence. Kashmir was divided into two parts i.e. 'Madawrajya' & 'Kramrajya'. Kalhana's knowledge of topography also helped him to write the exact locations of places mentioned in his works. He showed Kashmir not as a small hill station, but a great and mighty land, whose kings in former days conquered the whole of India and even Ceylon. For him, Kashmir between 800-1200 CE occupied a distinctive position in Sanskrit cosmologies and was perceived as a major cultural center even by outsiders. In the case of society, he talked about the castes of Gandhar Pradesh from Yamuna and the border of Kashmir. He also pointed out the areas where the particular communities lived. For example, he talks about Guhak, Yaksh, and Darad who used to live in the north of the Kashmir region, and Gandhar, Khash, and Dev who lived in the south of the Kashmir region. He has also talked about the 'Jangali' people. His writings highlight that the people of Kashmir, who credited the foundation of Buddhist Stupas and Viharas, were also attached to Saiv Cults, therefore, they were in touch both with Buddhism and Brahmanism, and Buddhist, Brahman, and Jain cults were equal to the courts of Kashmir. He talks about the cities i.e. Narpur, Puradhistsans, & Skandpur his descriptions of famine, food prices, taxation, currency, etc. do not fail to give a picture of the economic life of his times.

Kalhan has narrated the politics of Kashmir from early times but in case of his own time in great detail. He says that Karkot, Utpal, Lohar, and Lohar-II were the main dynasties of ancient Kashmir. His attention to the political affairs of the 12th century can be seen as a descriptive analysis of Kashmir. As M.A. Stein has written the commencement of the twelfth century is marked in the history of Kashmir by an

important dynastic revolution that brought about material changes in the political state of the country. The Reign of King Harsha (A.D. 1089-1101) seems at first to have secured to Kashmir a period of consolidation and prosperous peace. But after his death Kashmir was divided into two parts under Uccala and Sussala where Damaras of Kashmir Gargachandra played a diplomatic role in the king-maker.⁴⁰

Conclusion

As it has been seen, whatever I tried to narrate the historical issues to Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' in this paper, most scholars and historians are engaged to define this text of Kashmir as the historical one by pointing out its methods of sources, contents and the views on the value of its writings and the nature of a historian. But they define it to be historical only of the later cantons of the '*Rajatarangini*', and defined earlier one to be full of the sources used of myths and legends, not to be historical. To define the whole text to be historical, I would like to highlight the concept and consciousness of time or ages in the eyes of ancient Indian Hindu people which calibrated the entire spectrum from cosmic to anthropic time in a pattern of four recurring mega-periods (*kṛta*, *trētā*, *dvāpara*, and *kali yugas*) signifying ascent and decline. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, composed from circa the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE belong to that genre of Sanskrit literature known as *Itihāsa* which is generally understood to stand for "history." As such, the *yuga* s may well be regarded as an old and culturally popular choice of mode for rendering time. It can be noted here that Kalhana himself uses the *kaliyuga* as the basis of the dates he ascribes to the early kings of Kashmir. Whatever Kalhana has written in his '*Rajatarangini*' based on the sources that he found, understood by him as historical sources to make a corrective analysis.

He has used the concept of age (*Kaliyuga*) to give the chronology of the kings of Kashmir based on his sources, yet his arguments are not being accepted by the historians by pointing out Kalhana's "blind faith in Epics and *Puranas*," and of its reliance on "legendary and fictive events."⁴¹ As the historians pointed out earlier cantons were based on sources that were full of legends and myths, but I asked them by saying that myths also present the ideas of truths. As wisely observed by Paul Veyne, "myth is not about the real as truth, but about what was noble as truth."⁴²

Thus, Kalahana's epic survey of Kashmir cannot be seen simply as a departure from literary norms of the '*Mahakavyas*', but as an assessment of literature, kingship, reign dynasties, etc. His description of incidents in recent history appears to achieve a high standard of accuracy and is filled with the use of required sources, which are eminent features of a historian. Thus, after a deep narration of the sources that were used, the styles and contents in which he wrote, the themes that he mentioned, and his purposes for giving a corrective history from the creation of Kashmir to his own time, it can finally be said that he has the historical sense from which he completed the narration of Kashmir: '*Rajatarangini*' which keeps the historical qualities in itself.

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