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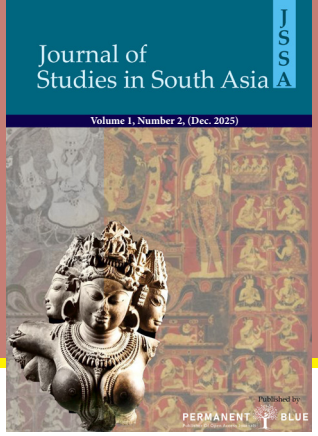

Position of Women in Ancient Kashmir: Historical Perspectives and Social Realities

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Abstract: This paper delves into the multifaceted position of women in ancient Kashmiri society, drawing upon historical, cultural and religious perspectives. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it examines various factors shaping women's roles, including socio-religious influences, as well as societal structures and legal frameworks. Utilizing textual sources, artistic depictions and archaeological evidence, the study sheds light on the complexities of women's lives, exploring both the freedoms and constraints they experienced. By unravelling the intricate tapestry of ancient Kashmiri society, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of women's status in the region, offering insights into their roles, agency and contributions to cultural and social dynamics.
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In a society which was economically and socially stratified it would be rash to make a generalization about the position of women. As it is true of male population, the position of women also varied from class to class and group to group. Like their male counterparts, the upper class women enjoyed almost all privileges; there is however reason to believe that women of lower castes did not enjoy these privileges. Upper class women received education which included Botany, needlework, wood work, clay modelling, cookery and sexology. They got practical training in music, singing, dancing and painting.[1] They performed their talent in music and dance in company with the male courtiers in the court of Harsha. Perhaps the ladies of the royal families were given a bit of administrative training. Some of these women acquired prominent positions in the state and some acted as rulers as we find in the case of queen Suganda, Queen Didda, Suryamati, Srilekha and Queen Kota Rani. They took active part in the politics of the country.[2]

They were imparted education in diplomacy and statecraft. They spoke fluent Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. Women also acted as war fighters. M.L.Kapur mentions that Vijayamalla was actively assisted by his wife, who sat along with Vijayamalla on the horse back against Harsha.[3]

Veil was not in vogue during this time. Women were seated along with other officials and ministers in the court of Harsha. Kalhana stated that the women of that period enjoyed equal rights with men, when Sugala claimed her position as the chief queen when Harsha was crowned. According to Bamzai, these queens dominated their husbands and the kingdom as well.[4]

Women also had the right to own property during ancient times which was evident from the references that we have about this period. Kalhana make a mention of private property of women while describing Bhoja's rebellion against Jayasimha, a Damra lady held a fief in her own right.[5]

Regarding the age of marriage, there is no proper evidence to us. *Rajatarangini* makes no reference but Goetz believes that child marriage did not prevail during this time. Inter caste marriage was prevalent in this age. There are references to Damra, Garagachandra marrying his daughter to Sussala and Jayasimha and Chakravarman marrying a Domba girl and elevating her to the position of chief queen.[6]

As the joint family system was a universal feature of Hindu society, it often placed daughters-in-law under the strict authority of their mothers-in-law. A striking example is found in Queen Suryamati, who dealt sternly with the wives of her son Kalasha, even compelling them to clean the palace with their own hands.[7]

Polyandry was uncommon and largely unknown, except among certain indigenous hill tribes. Polygamy, on the other hand, was fairly widespread, particularly among wealthy families. The royal harems were filled with queens and concubines drawn from various castes, and this practice was imitated by courtiers and aristocrats. Kalhana records that King Kalasa maintained 72 women in his harem, while King Harsha gathered as many as 360 concubines.[8]

Widows were expected to lead a life of purity and simplicity. They were prohibited from wearing ornaments, fine garments, or indulging in any form of luxury.[9] However, widow remarriage was not entirely disallowed. For instance, after the death of Rinchana, his widow Kota Rani married Udyanadeva.

The practice of *sati* was prevalent in Kashmir from early times, and the *Rajatarangini* provides numerous examples of it. The Shahi princess Bhima, for instance, immolated herself on the funeral pyre following the death of her husband, the son of Tunga. Similarly, Queen Suryamati joined her husband in death by self-immolation. King Kalasha was accompanied in death by Mammanika and six other queens, while Kumudalikha also performed *sati* upon the demise of her husband, Malla.[10]

After the death of a husband, it was customary for a widow to immolate herself on his funeral pyre. In some cases, separate pyres were prepared, and the act was performed even days later, as seen in the case of Queen Jayamati, wife of Ucchala, who mounted a pyre some days after her husband's demise. The practice was so prevalent that not only widows but also courtiers would sometimes join their masters in the flames. On occasion, mothers, sisters, and other relatives also chose to perish alongside their loved ones. Yet, it was not a universal obligation, as evidenced by the widows of Damra, who did not resort to Sati. This custom persisted until the reign of the Sultans, when Sultan Sikandar ultimately prohibited it.[11] Alongside this, the practice of prostitution was also present in society. Both Kshemandra and Kalhana provide references to its existence. King Harsha is even credited with formalizing the profession. Kalhana further highlights the moral decline and loose conduct, particularly among the women of the royal court, with Queen Didda's lifestyle serving as a prominent example.[12]

The concept of Devdasi or dedication of girls to the temple deities existed in early Kashmir. These Devdasis could not marry and were expected to spend their whole life in the service of gods.[13] They were known as Devdasis because, through their art and skill of dancing and singing they served the god or Deva. Even kings dedicated women of their seraglio to these temples because it was considered a pious deed.[14] But with the passage of time, however, these Devdasis became corrupt and immoral and not only the temple priests but the kings, their nobles and other men of means also began to use them for their personal enjoyment. Thus, it is seen that Sahaja, a dancing girl attached to a temple, was taken by prince Utkarsha as a concubine into the royal harem.[15] So it can be said that this institution existed in Kashmir from early times. King Kalasa himself married a dancing girl Kayya by name, who was attached to a temple. Kalhana himself was an eyewitness of superannuated dancing women in the temples of valley.[16] The evil practices of Devdasis however seems to have remained the same.

From the earliest times up to the thirteenth century A.D., women in Kashmir enjoyed considerable freedom, authority, and social responsibility, which placed them in a position of dignity and influence. Both men and women shared the experiences of life together, in happiness as well as in hardship. However, Kashmiri women were not entirely immune to the restrictive norms prescribed by ancient Hindu lawgivers such as Manu and Parashar. According to these codes, a woman was regarded as legally dependent throughout her life—subject to the guardianship of her parents during childhood, her husband in adulthood, and her sons in widowhood.[17] Her social worth was not held in high esteem, and in some legal texts, women were placed on the same footing as Shudras, regardless of their actual caste. While most legal traditions did grant her rights over certain personal belongings, known as *Stridhana*—typically ornaments and clothing—this was modest in comparison to full property rights. Thus, despite being venerated symbolically as a goddess or saint, in practical terms a woman's position in ancient Hindu society remained little more than subordinate.[18]

In Kashmir, the position of women was considerably higher than in many other parts of India. They were provided with opportunities to excel in diverse spheres of social and public life. Kalhana, in his renowned chronicle *Rajatarangini*, observes that Kashmiri women stepped beyond the confines of domesticity and actively participated in politics, owned land and immovable property, managed estates, and even led armies as commanders on the battlefield. Several women thus played a crucial role in shaping the political history of the Valley.[19] Among them were Sugandha,[20] Didda, Srilekha, Suryamati, Jayamati, and Kalhanika, who not only contributed to politics but also demonstrated administrative acumen. Some queens were deeply involved in social welfare. Queen Sugandha, for instance, found satisfaction both in the performance of state responsibilities and in personal pleasures. Queen Didda,[21] whether as the wife of Ksemagupta, guardian of Abhimanyu, or regent for her three grandsons, effectively ruled Kashmir for more than a century.[22] Similarly, Nona distinguished herself as a skilled diplomat, while Silla and Chudda displayed remarkable courage as military leaders ,proving their worth during moments of crisis. Suryamati, the consort of King Ananta, offered valuable support to her husband in overcoming the challenges of governance. Queen Kalhanika was entrusted with a sensitive diplomatic mission aimed at reconciling Jayasimha with Bhoja.[23] Thus, Kashmiri queens not only played decisive roles in warfare but also accompanied their husbands on hunts, symbolizing their active presence in both political and social spheres.

One of the most striking aspects of early Kashmiri society was the widespread access of women to liberal and quality education. Their curriculum was diverse and comprehensive, including not only the study of texts such as the works on sex science by Vatsyayana, Dattaka, Vitaputra, and Rajaputra, but also Bharata's *Natyashastra*, Visakhila's writings on art, and Dantila's treatise on music. Women were trained in *Vrksayurveda* (the science of plants), painting, embroidery, woodwork, metalwork, clay modelling, cookery, as well as in performing arts like instrumental music, singing, and dancing.[24] Bilhana, the celebrated poet, praises Kashmiri women for their eloquence in both Sanskrit and Prakrit.[25] This intellectual and cultural vibrancy is further corroborated by references in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*, Damodaragupta's *Kuttanimata Kavya*, and several other contemporary works.

However women in the society during that time did not wear veils and were able to move freely like the flowing waters of a spring[26]. Women were seen sitting alongside officials and ministers, even participating in battles on foot and on horseback during the time of King Harsha. In one account, Vijayamalla's wife actively assisted him during a failed coup by riding with him on horseback to fend off pursuers. Veils were not common among working women in villages and cities, as noted in accounts by Ksemendra and Damandrogupta.

There is no definitive evidence available regarding the appropriate age for a woman to marry. Marriages were arranged by the parents, but they did not play any role in the matters of remarriage.[27] A perusal of the *Rajatarangini* generally leaves the impression that pre-puberty marriage probably was not in vogue in ancient Kashmir.[28] It can safely be assumed from the circumstantial evidence of Damodragupta, Ksemendra, Kalhana and Jonaraja that she was not married before attaining 13-14 years of age.[29] The marriages were contracted between girls and boys of equal age or between a grown-up girl and an older male. Sometimes, a wealthy male of advanced age married a girl much younger than him in age. Obviously, such marriages between the partners of unequal age were not happy ones and the other brought public disapproval. Ksemendra narrates in his characteristic satirical way the wretched married life of an old man.[30] The youthful wives in such marriages had to live a life of shame and frustration. They used to quarrel with their husbands and taunt them.[31]

Hindu law had already made provision for polygamy. It is therefore no surprise if we notice men having more than one living life. Polygamy was allowed in Kashmir and carried the stamp of social approval usually the ruling princes and the men of the upper classes had plurality of wives.[32] Polygamy was quite common especially in rich families in which men had two or even three wives.[33] The poor or ordinary man took a second or third wife while one or more wives living only in special circumstances. Naturally polygamy created problems for co-wives and also for husband. Damodragupta presents a graphic picture of a man having many wives. Polyandry was rare and unfamiliar, except for some indigenous hill-tribes. At one place Kalhana says, "The women whom Kalhana enjoyed today, Losthana enjoyed the next day." We think this practice speaks of moral degradation and not of the existence of polyandry.[34] There were practically no restrictions on the liberty of man in this behalf. Often, most of these unfortunate ladies survived the death of their husbands. They were not allowed to have another partner in life as remarriage of windows was forbidden.[35]

In almost all religious traditions marriage is one of the most sacred institutions. A women's devotion to her husband is seen as essential and very important to the marriage itself. They are

expected to have this devotion not only when they are alive, but even after death. This could be proved through a ritual called sati where a widow was to be burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband so that she would be able to follow him even after his death.[36] The custom of burning of sati was in vogue in Kashmir from an early time. Amongst various states of India except Bengal, Kashmir perhaps provides the maximum number of sati cases in her history. Here we find cases where not only wives but even relatives of a deceased person immolated themselves.[37] The *Kathasaritsagara*, composed in Kashmir during the 11th century A.D., indicates that the practice of *sati* was fairly widespread in the Valley. Damodaragupta even described it as the "duty of a woman" (*Stridharma*). The custom was not limited to the royal household alone; it extended to other sections of society as well. For instance, Malla, the wife of Bhogaseva—the chief justice under King Uccala—followed her husband in death. Kalhana records that the wife of Damara Kosthaka immolated herself upon hearing of her husband's imprisonment, thus embracing the status of a *sati*. In some cases, even courtesans chose to enter the funeral pyre of their patrons,[38] as seen in the examples of Jayamati, a courtesan of King Kalasha, and Sahaja, the concubine of King Utkarsa. Damodaragupta further notes instances where prostitutes also performed *sati*. The custom became so deeply rooted in Kashmiri society that not only wives, but also mothers, sisters, and other close relatives sometimes burnt themselves with their loved ones. Gajja, for example, immolated herself with her son Ananda; Vallabha with her brother-in-law Malla; and the sister of Dilhabhattaraka with her brother. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* abounds with such accounts. Typically, if the husband's body was available, the wife would join him on the pyre; if not, she might build a separate pyre, sometimes several days after his death.[39] Yet, despite the prevalence of this harsh custom and the prohibition of widow remarriage, Kashmiri women were not entirely deprived of agency. The institution of *Swayamvara* (self-choice marriage) was recognized, as in the rest of India, particularly among the upper castes, wealthy families, and Rajputs. Love marriages are frequently mentioned in literary and historical works. Moreover, women possessed the right to separation: if dissatisfied with their marriage on reasonable grounds, they could, through mutual consent, obtain a divorce. This practice carried no social stigma. Even kings are recorded to have married divorced women, and the children born of such unions later ascended the throne as legitimate rulers.[40]

Prostitutes have been in existed from the dawn of history in all countries and in the absence of statistics, it is difficult to say whether the institution flourished more in one country than in another or whether it existed to a greater or lesser extent in ancient days as compared with modern India.[41] They are known for their exploitative character. But in spite of this, they had a recognized social status in ancient India and were not treated as outcastes. Indian literature, whether it is Sanskrit, Buddhist or Jain, provides glimpses of their life. The smrtis and puranas laid down rules of conduct for prostitutes. The Arthashathra suggests regulations for them and speaks of control over them by the king. Prostitutes are called Ganika, Vesya, Kuttani, Rupajiva and Abhisarika in ancient Indian sources.[42] These terms are, however, indicative of their different categories. Courtesans were recognized as a separate and special class in society as early the Vedic period. Kashmir was no exception to this institution.

Kuttanimatam gives a vivid description of the life of Ganika during the period. The institution of prostitutes was well established by the state. Courtesans not only made the city attractive but also

adorned the royal courts by their presence.[43] Before actually starting the profession the virginity of a girl was broken by the person who paid the demanded amount by her mother. Soon as the practice was started, these courtesans were given proper training by an old and experienced Kuttni about the way and methods of obtaining success in the profession.[44] She has been spoken of as always exhibiting artificial love and by, vile and mischief ensnaring the foolish and lewd people. She has been compared to restless dancing mechanical wooden puppets fitted with strings.[45] To a greater degree, senior bureaucrats, businessman, their adult sons and the king himself patronized prostitutes. Naturally, many of them were rich, beautiful and highly sophisticated. Haralata is perhaps one such prostitute who commits even sati on the death of her patron. But the socio-economic condition of every prostitute was not always happy, enviable and respectable; they were poor, petty and wretched in their living as is abundantly clear from Ksemandra's narrative.[46]

The study of proprietary rights of women is a very fascinating subject. It has a vital importance for understanding the position of women in a particular period. It has been seen that proprietary rights of women were hardly recognized in any early civilization in a methodical manner. They themselves were the items of movable property of the patriach. But it was not so in India.[47]

The *Rajatarangini* records an interesting instance where an only daughter was treated as a substitute for a son, with her name even changed to a masculine form. Dr. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, citing sacred texts, draws attention to the prevalence of this unusual custom in Kashmir up to the 9th century A.D. Professor Jolly, as quoted by Dr. Shastri, recalls that while studying the *Rajatarangini* with a Kashmiri scholar in Srinagar, he observed that the scholar himself had changed the name of his only daughter into a male form so as to secure for her the same religious privileges that would have been accorded to a son. A similar historical example is narrated in the *Rajatarangini*, which mentions Princess Kalyanadevi of Ganda, whose father altered her name to the masculine form "Kalyanamalla." These accounts confirm that in certain regions of India, a distinctive legal and social convention existed—where, in the absence of male heirs, daughters could symbolically assume the role of sons to fulfill religious and familial obligations.[48]

Whatever may be the view of the Dharmasastra and the smritis on the law of inheritance for women, we find a good number of cases in Kashmir of women inheriting property, either through succession or through a deed. From the *Rajatarangini* we find that women had the right to private property and they also inherited their dead husband's property. Ksemendra also speaks of a widow (though only fiction), inheriting the property of her late husband with the order from the King.[49] Dr. S.C. Ray highlights an important aspect regarding the position of women in Kashmir. He notes that women likely enjoyed certain proprietary rights and an independent legal status. Evidence from the *Rajatarangini* suggests that, upon the death of her husband, it was often the widow—rather than the sons—who inherited his immovable property. Another reference further indicates that women could themselves be owners of landed estates.[50]

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