

## **Women in Polity and Political institutions in Early Medieval Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

The Indian society during early medieval period went through significant changes in almost every sphere of society. As a result of the decline of the classical political system and the emergence of several factors such as feudal states, the patriarchal concept of hereditary kingship, and foreign invasions deteriorated the status of women in all aspects of the society. Despite this, the land of Kashmir presented a vibrant example of female participation in a male dominated political arena. Thus, the present paper sheds welcome light on the role of women in administration of Kashmir region during early medieval period and attempts to emphasise their political contribution in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Purdāh, Regent, Guardianship, Plenipotentiary, Prudent, Chamberlain

The term 'Early Medieval' represents roughly a span of about 600 years which lasted between the sixth century A.D. and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This period comprises the events that occurred from the fall of the Gupta Empire till the establishment of Turkish sultanate in Delhi. During this period Indian society witnessed considerable changes in almost all institutions political, socio-economic, and cultural as well. Politically, this period is characterized by the decline of centralized monarchical

system and the rise of the independent or semi-independent feudatory states, and these feudal lords juxtaposed with each other to grab power.

During this period political structure of the state was based upon the concept of patriarchal and hereditary kingship. On the other hand, conferring of land grants whether religious or secular along with fiscal and judicial rights with least central disturbances became very popular and continuous streak of foreign invasions adversely affected the traditional political structure. Under such circumstances, lackness of paramountcy and rise in the number of petty landed feudal states became the political order of early medieval India. This led to a male-dominated patriarchal society wherein the idea to confine women within the four walls of the house, originated and grew stronger. The right of participation of females in mainstream activities political, social, and religious as well was curtailed and the environment became more sterile for women to enjoy equal status to their male counterparts. As a result of these instabilities, several compellabilities like *satī*, early age marriage, *purdāh* system, and polygamy grew stronger which narrowed down the opportunities for women to pursue education. Consequently, females could not contribute to the society, according to their potential.

Despite the above, whenever women got any chance, they did not back out rather showed their mettle in every aspect of society. Several archaeological and literary sources provide information about several female characters who played a vital role in the development of society, especially in the male-dominated areas of state politics. They served the state in various roles like queens, regents, queen-consorts, and held many other important administrative positions. In such

circumstances, when it comes to the participation of females in political activities, Kashmir has a glorious past. Before the advent of Muslim rulers in the thirteenth century, Kashmiri women enjoyed remarkable freedom and exercised a fair amount of socio-political rights. Thus, she wielded considerable power, and attained a much more respectable position in the society than women in the rest of northern India.

## **Historical background of Kashmir**

Geographically, Kashmir lies in the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent. It is surrounded by snow-capped peaks and lush green valleys of Himalayan ranges. The land of Kashmir has been an ideal place for the emergence and flourishing of several cultures from ancient times. Kashmir has a rich historical lineage of celebrated historians like Kalhaṇa, Jonarāja, Śrīvara, Prājyabhaṭṭa, and Śuka. Kashmir has an uninterrupted recorded history.<sup>1</sup> Though the information provided by such sources cannot be considered highly credible yet it enlightens us about the various aspects of Kashmir's historical chronology through the ages. Historical sources mention several female characters that played an important role in the political sphere of Kashmir. Due to chaotic political conditions in the early medieval period, there are many occasions when women got an opportunity to serve the kingdom and successfully led the state through the grim phases. Kashmir has a long list of capable females who played a massive role in such situations and have made significant contributions in the male-dominated fields of political administration and military ventures. Thus, the present paper highlights the administrative and political capabilities of women in Kashmir during the early

medieval period and attempts to demonstrate their contribution to the political sphere.

### **Important Female political characters of Kashmir during Early Medieval period**

From ancient times, women in Kashmir have actively participated in political activities. Ishānadevī and Vākpuṣṭā were two notable female characters who made a significant contribution to state administration. Ishānadevī was the queen of Jalauka. She assisted her husband in important state matters. She also commissioned several buildings, which attests her dominance in state administration.<sup>2</sup> Before the beginning of Christian Era, Kashmir was ruled by the king Tuṅjīna. His wife queen Vākpuṣṭā was a remarkable female character in political history of Kashmir. During the reign of king Tuṅjīna, Kashmir witnessed a severe famine. Kalhaṇa mentions that due to famine, no food was left over and people begin to die like flies.<sup>3</sup> During this calamity, queen Vākpuṣṭā stood shoulder to shoulder along with the king. She visited all parts of the state and even opened her private treasury for the purchasing of food for the famishing people. When all the efforts proved inadequate, king Tuṅjīna lost hope and contemplated committing suicide. In such an adverse situation, queen Vākpuṣṭā did not give up the patience. She mildly rebuked her husband and inspired him to perform his duties firmly. She kept her efforts going till the end of famine and thus her dignified calm and endurance helped the state to overcome an unpleasant phase.<sup>4</sup>

During the first half of 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Anaṅgalekhā was also an important character in the political history of Kashmir. She was the only surviving child of king Bālāditya after the premature death of her brother. She was married to

Durlabhavardhana, a petty official of the state. After the death of her father, her husband Durlabhavardhana was supposed to ascend the throne of Kashmir, but he had to face the strong opposition from powerful ministers and high nobles. In this crisis, Anaṅgalekhā came forward to support the claim of her husband and successfully handled the internal politics of royal court and secured the crown for Durlabhavardhana. Apart from that, she also acted as queen consort. She helped the king in administrative matters and also wielded enormous influence in the royal court.<sup>5</sup>

Kalhaṇa mentions Śaṃkaravarmana (883-902 A.D.) of the Gonanda dynasty. His wife queen Sugandhā accompanied him during a military expedition near the Indus region. After the unprecedented death of king Śaṃkaravarmana, she easily managed the parallax situation and successfully brought the army back to the capital. Later on, she installed her minor son on the throne and took over the administrative charge due to tender age of her son Gopālavarmana. She successfully run the state and proved herself as an able administrator. She also suppressed the rebellion of feudatory chief of Udabhāṇḍapura. After the demise of her sons Gopālavarman and Saṃkaṭa, she was unanimously selected as an administrator in a public gathering. It shows her enormous influence as a queen. Though, after successfully running the state for a couple of years, she faced a tragic end. She was defeated by Tāntrins, who were against the queen on the issue of installing Nirjītavarmana on the throne.<sup>6</sup>

Queen Diddā is also considered among the most influential female characters in the politics of Kashmir during the early medieval period. She was the daughter of king Siṃharāja of the Lohara dynasty and married king Kṣemagupta (950-58

A.D.) of the Utpala dynasty.<sup>7</sup> After the death of her husband, she became in charge of state administration, as she was encouraged by a prudent minister of the state named, Naravāhana, who dissuaded her from getting *satī*. Diddā served as a regent to her infant prince Abhimanyu.<sup>8</sup> During her period of incumbency, she not only successfully performed the administrative duties but also proved herself a shrewd diplomat. She wisely fizzled out the rebellion of prince Mahiman and Pātala, sons of Parvagupta, who conspired against her by taking along with some influential persons from royal court. She even restrained the growing threats posed by the prime minister *Sarvādhikāriṇ* Phalguṇa, commander-in-chief Yashodhara and the powerful group of Dāmaras.<sup>9</sup> In 972 A.D., Diddā lost her only son Abhimanyu. Thereafter, her grandsons Nandigupta (972-73 A.D.), Tribhuvana (973-75 A.D.), and Bhīmagupta (975-981 A.D.) were placed on the throne under the guardianship of Diddā.<sup>10</sup> In 981 A.D., the ambitious queen ascended to the throne by murdering her own grandson, Bhīmagupta, and established herself as the sovereign queen of the realm. She ruled the state undisputedly till her death in 1003 A.D.<sup>11</sup>

After Diddā, there was no compatible heir to the throne was left, so keeping the situation in view, she wisely selected her brother's son, Saṅgrāmarāja of Lohara, as her heir.<sup>12</sup> King Saṅgrāmarāja (1003-1028 A.D.) successfully ruled Kashmir for twenty-five years. Thus, Diddā's wise political move provided political solidarity to the state. After Saṅgrāmarāja, his eldest son Harirāja (1028 A.D.) ascended to the throne, but he passed away in less than a month. Under such circumstances, Ananta (1028-1063 A.D.), minor son of king Harirāja was installed on the throne and the wife of Harirāja, queen Śrīlekhā began to serve as regent of the minor king. In such a chaotic situation, Śrīlekhā not only successfully performed the administrative duties but also protected the minor prince from every possible threat.

She suppressed the rebellion of Vigharāja, brother of Saṅgrāmarāja and looked after the king till he gained maturity.<sup>13</sup> She also built two *vihāras* in the name of her husband and son. After Śrīlekhā, queen Sūryamatī, wife of king Ananta played a significant role in Kashmir's politics. She actively participated in all state affairs. She can be seen appointing new ministers, attending public courts and providing judicial consultancy to the king. She also commissioned a number of *maṭhas*, *vihāras* and temples. Apart from that, she also organized a huge army and tried to conquer some foreign regions, which proved her capabilities in all political spheres.<sup>14</sup> She wielded considerable influence on the royal court and by using it, she successfully secured the throne in favour of her son Kalaśa (1063-76 A.D.).

After the death of king Sussala (1112-1120 A.D.) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lohara dynasty, Jayasimha was supposed to set upon the throne but his rivals conspired to appoint Loṭana, stepbrother of king Sussala as the king. In this conspiracy, the wife of king Sussala, queen Shārdā was a key character. She took away the treasury and tried to fulfill the plan. Though the plan couldn't be executed successfully, but this incident gives us a glimpse of political and financial rights of women during early medieval Kashmir.<sup>15</sup>

Queen Sūryamatī, wife of king Ananta (1028-1063 A.D.) was a remarkable female character in Kashmir's politics. She helped the king in state matters with her wise advice and she also put the rest of possibility on an unpleasant situation when king Ananta was offended by the irresponsible behaviour of prince Kalaśa and gathered an army to teach his son a lesson.<sup>16</sup> The queen Bhuvanmatī, wife of king Kalaśa also mediated between Kalaśa (1063-1076 A.D.) and his son Harṣa (1089-1101 A.D.), when relations between father and son got strained.<sup>17</sup> Queen Jayamatī



has also played a notable role in the history of Kashmir. She was just a dancing girl, born in an unknown family. Due to her qualities, she acquired a much higher place in Kashmir's political history. She got married to king Uchchhala (1101-1111 A.D.), founder of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lohara dynasty.<sup>18</sup> She wisely acquitted the king and played a key role in the political activities of royal court.<sup>19</sup> During the reign of king Jayasimha (1127-1154 A.D.), his two queens named Kalhanikā and Raḍḍādevī played a significant role in contemporary politics. Queen Kalhanikā served as the councillor to the king. When the king came to know that his cousin prince Bhoja is planning to rebel against the throne, at that time, the king could know the abilities of his queen Kalhanikā. He appointed the queen as his plenipotentiary and sent her to Taramulka along with a contingent of ministers. Queen successfully negotiated with Bhoja and restored the state of peace in the kingdom.<sup>20</sup> His second queen Raḍḍādevī served as regent to the minor prince Gulhaṇa, after the death of king Jayasimha.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from being in such roles like queens, consorts or queen regents, there are several examples in the history of Kashmir, where women can be seen in very important roles and affected the politics of certain dynasties or regions. A woman named Kamalā, who was just a dancing girl in a temple, played an important role in recapturing the throne of Kārkoṭa for the king Jayāpīḍa (770-800 A.D.).<sup>22</sup> Kalyāṇadevī, chamberlain in the court of king Jayāpīḍa, was also an influential female character. She has been conferred the office of high status.<sup>23</sup> Jayādevī was a daughter of a spirit-distiller, born in a *Ḍomba* caste of *Chāṇḍālas*. As his spouse, she wielded considerable influence on king Lalitāpīḍa (813 A.D.). By taking benefit of this influence, her brothers successfully captured the throne of Kashmir.<sup>24</sup> Śīllā and Chuḍḍā are two other luminous names in the history of Kashmir, who displayed an illustrious example of women's compatibilities. They gallantly went to the



battlefield, led the troops and defeated the enemies. It proved that warfare was no longer a field concerned with males only.

Śīllā was a royal cadet in the army of king Sussala (1112-1120 A.D.) and she was also a fief holder. Two high officials of the royal court, named Mallakoṣṭha and Prithvīhara joined the rebel Bhikṣāchara and launched the attack against the king Sussala. The royal army was in a tough situation as the royal commander-in-chief Suji got defeated by the rebels. At such a tough time Śīllā went to the battlefield along with king Sussala. While the army was crossing the river Gambhira, bridge over the river broke off and only half of the army was left on the other side with the king. In the meantime, rebels attacked the royal army. In such a worst situation, Śīllā took the charge of the royal army and gave a fierce battle to enemies and didn't let them budge an inch. She valiantly fought and sacrificed herself but assured the security of the state.<sup>25</sup> In the same event, another woman named Chuḍḍā also played a vital role. When Mallakoṣṭha was approaching the capital, king Sussala ordered Chuḍḍā to led the troops. She along with her son Pānchandra fought bravely and compelled the rebels to fall back and assured the victory for king Sussala. For this courageous effort, Chuḍḍā and her son were honoured with the joint governorship of Lohara.<sup>26</sup> Nonā was also an another remarkable woman in Kashmir's history. When there was a tense situation between prince Bhoja and king Jayasimha, Bhoja appointed Nonā, a nurse, as her representative. Her wise talks borne fruit and got an agreement settled.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, on the basis of above discussion, we may conclude that even in the war grim and politically unstable conditions during the early medieval period, women of Kashmir actively participated in political activities. Whenever they got opportunity,

they not only acted like shrewd administrators but also bore the political titles like their male counterparts, issued land grants, commissioned the construction of monuments and played a significant role in the smooth functioning of the state.

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