



Empresses and Edifices: The Political Reign and Architectural Endeavours of Women in Medieval Kashmir

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Abstract: *The early medieval period in Kashmir witnessed a paradigm shift in the societal standing of women. In a society where women enjoyed remarkable freedom, exercised responsibility, and held elevated status, the emergence of women from domestic roles to active participation in politics marked a profound transformation. This research focuses on the influential empresses of the time, particularly Didda, Sugandha, and Suryamati, whose narratives are woven into the fabric of both political reigns and architectural patronage. Beyond historical documentation, this study delves into the nuanced agency of these empresses, shedding light on their dynamic roles in governance and their enduring contributions to the cultural heritage of medieval Kashmir. As we traverse through this epoch, the research unfolds the captivating interplay between powerful empresses, their architectural legacies, and the evolving landscape of women's status. It illuminates how these women, while ascending to political prominence, further enriched their societal impact by actively participating in administrative and political spheres, thereby contributing to the dynamic cultural tapestry of early medieval Kashmir.*

Keywords: *Medieval Kashmir, Empresses, Architectural patronage, Socio-cultural transformation, Administrative influence, Cultural heritage.*

In medieval Kashmir, women, particularly queens, defied traditional roles and emerged as influential figures in politics, religion, and society, challenging historical norms. Didda, Sugandha, and Suryamati; alongside lesser-known contributors, played diverse roles in shaping the region's destiny. Beyond politics, their religious contributions are evident in temple constructions, highlighting their impact on the cultural landscape. This exploration unveils the nuanced agency, resilience, and dynamic participation of women in navigating the complex historical context of medieval Kashmir. It showcases their ability to form strategic alliances, overcome societal challenges, and contribute significantly to the vibrant tapestry of Kashmir's history, challenging stereotypes and enriching the narrative with their multifaceted roles.

1. Research Methodology:

The research methodology involves analyzing primary sources, particularly Kalhana's Rajatarangini, to explore the political roles of women in Kashmir, focusing on figures like Didda, Sugandha, and Suryamati. Additionally, the study incorporates insights from secondary sources, such as books, journals, articles and historical analyses, to provide a broader contextual understanding of socio-political dynamics and gender norms. This approach aims to offer a concise yet comprehensive analysis of women's political and architectural endeavors in Kashmir, considering both primary and secondary perspectives.

2. Introduction:

Women held a prominent position in the political history of Kashmir, transitioning from domestic roles to active participation on the political stage. The queens not only provided counsel to the kings in state affairs but also played crucial roles, especially during periods of crisis. Rajatarangini acknowledges the decisive contributions of both royal and non-royal women in politics. Notably, Didda, Sugandha, and Suryamati were active political figures who also assumed the role of the head of state.¹



Yashomati/Jasomati (was the wife of king Damodar, who was the son of king Gonada the first king mentioned in the history of Kashmir by Kalhana), appointed as the first female ruler of Kashmir by the Brahmins.² Ministers objected, citing historical perceptions of women as unfit and incapable of administering the state.³ Another woman ruler, Sugandha, the daughter of Svamiraja, served as the chief queen of King Shamkaravarman in the Utpala dynasty. Despite the lack of evidence in Rajatarangini regarding Sugandha's political interests during King Shamkaravarman's lifetime, she accompanied him on various expeditions.⁴ During one such expedition towards the Indus in the north, an unfortunate incident occurred. While returning home, a svapaka (dog cooker) posted on a hill discharged an arrow that pierced King Shamkaravarman's neck, causing him to lose eyesight. In this critical moment, Sugandha, as mentioned in Kalhana's work, stood by him, crying and embracing his body.⁵ Before his demise, the king entrusted her with the protection of his son Gopalavarman, who was a minor and had no relatives. The text also notes that all wives of King Shamkaravarman performed sati, but Sugandha chose to survive.⁶ She took on the responsibility of administration under the guardianship of her minor son Gopalavarman.⁷

In the administration of the state, Sugandha received assistance from her minister, Prabhakaradeva, who held the position of superintendent of the treasury under King Shamkaravarman. He developed a close bond with the queen, and it is reported that she rewarded him generously with fortune, rank, and love, likening the benefits to three crescents of the diadem. As time passed, Gopalavarman, the son of Sugandha, gained a deeper understanding of state affairs. Although he resolved to end Prabhakaradeva's life, Gopalavarman met an untimely death before fulfilling his intention. Kalhana attributed Gopalavarman's death to Prabhakaradeva and Ramdeva, suggesting the possibility of foul play through witchcraft. Following Gopalavarman's demise, his brother Samkata ascended the throne, ruling for only ten days before his mysterious death.⁸ In 904 A.D., at the behest of her subjects, Sugandha herself ascended the throne.⁹ Despite successfully reigning for two years, she faced challenges in suppressing enemies, as documented in Rajatarangini.

Sugandha's reign was marked by troubles stemming from the rivalries between the Ekangas and Tantrins.¹⁰ While Ekanga supported the queen, Kalhana notes Sugandha's ability to gain the goodwill of the Tantrins. In 906 A.D., a succession dispute arose, leading Sugandha to convene ministers, feudal chiefs, Tantrins, and Ekangas to select a suitable heir. Her preference for Nirjitavarman, the son of Sukhvarman and related to her from the mother's side faced opposition from some ministers. They objected, labeling Nirjitavarman's son, Partha, as unfit due to his indolent habits. Tantrins united, proclaiming Partha as the successor, while insulting ministers, seeking revenge against Sugandha, prompted her to abandon the throne and reside in Hushkapur for eight years. In 914 A.D., the Ekangas persuaded Sugandha to reassume leadership. She marched toward the capital, leading to a fierce battle between her followers and the rival Tantrins at Srinagar. In the ensuing conflict, Sugandha was captured and subsequently executed.¹¹

Kalhana extensively narrates the account of Queen Didda, the third female ruler of Kashmir. She hailed from the Lohara dynasty, being the daughter of King Simharaja and the maternal granddaughter of King Bhima Shahi of Udbhanda.¹² Didda's marriage to Kshemagupta played a crucial role in the ascendancy of the Loharas to rule over Kashmir.¹³ Despite being physically disabled, Didda's intelligence and captivating personality allowed her to wield complete influence over her husband. Kshemagupta became widely known as Diddakshema, a title further corroborated by the presence of copper coins bearing the name Di-Kshema.¹⁴ Following Kshemagupta's death in 958 A.D., Didda took charge of the regency for his minor son, Abhimanyu. Kalhana details the challenges Didda faced from opposition ministers during her regency.¹⁵ As a resourceful queen, she strategically won over ministers through bribes, suppressing any rebellious inclinations. Those who resisted the allure of bribes faced harsh punishment. Abhimanyu's death in 972 A.D. led to Didda disposing of her three grandsons—Nandigupta, Tribhuvana, and Bhimagupta, in quick succession.¹⁶ Didda, keeping regency in her hands, removed obstacles in her path through witchcraft, ensuring the elimination of infant kings who impeded her rule. Bhimagupta, after gaining an understanding of state affairs, faced suspicion from Didda. She imprisoned, tortured, and ultimately executed him. Following the demise of her three grandsons, Didda ascended the throne in 980 A.D., consolidating all powers. She elevated her paramour, Tunga, to the position of prime minister.¹⁷ Tunga, originally a herder of buffaloes from Parnotsa (Poonch),¹⁸ had reached Kashmir with his five brothers. Didda's illicit relations with Tunga resulted in his promotion to prime minister, causing discontent among Brahmanas, former officials, and expelled brothers.¹⁹ This discontent led to a revolt, prompting a council of officials to invite Prince Vigharaja, Didda's brother's son, to assume the throne.²⁰ Vigharaja employed diplomacy and orchestrated a conspiracy against Didda and Tunga, inciting Brahmanas to observe a fast unto death. This initiative gained support from the common people who blamed Tunga for the turmoil. To shield Tunga from public ire, Didda temporarily concealed him. She later won over Brahmanas by lavishly bribing them with gold and cash. Vigharaja's power crumbled and he returned to Lohara. As Tunga solidified his position, he executed all those who had revolted against him and Didda. Despite Vigharaja's attempts to create disturbance through secret agents, Brahmanas again resorted to a hunger strike.²¹



However, Tunga discovered the conspiracy and apprehended all the Brahmanas who had been bribed. Aditya, a favored officer of Vighraharaja, met his demise. Similarly, Sumanomantaka and other Brahmanas, recipients of gold from Didda, were captured and imprisoned.²² In the prevailing political climate, minor rulers sought independence across various regions. Prithvipala of Rajouri declared independence after the death of Phalguna, breaking allegiance to the state. He eliminated several ministers, but Tunga swiftly reversed the situation. Didda's army led by Tunga and his brothers, entered Rajouri burning the entire town. Prithvipala capitulated, paying tribute to Tunga. Acknowledging Tunga's triumph, Didda appointed him commander of the army. The rise of the Damaras posed a challenge to Didda's empire, but Tunga, with valor akin to a lion, subdued them.²³ Following the death of Didda's last grandson, a succession dilemma arose. Didda chose Samgramaraja, her brother Udayaraja's son, after he successfully passed her intelligence test. Didda devised a unique test, where a vast number of apples were to be thrown, and the one with the most apples would be the heir apparent. Samgramaraja not only collected numerous apples but also emerged unscathed, while others sustained injuries in the scramble. When questioned about his success, he revealed, "I got the fruits by making boys fight furiously with each other while I kept apart, and thus I remained successful."²⁴ Ultimately, before her death in 1003 A.D., Didda secured the sovereignty of Kashmir for her relatives from the Lohara dynasty.²⁵

Rajatarangini contains numerous references to women actively participating in the politics of the state. One such notable woman is Queen Suryamati, the daughter of Inducandra, Lord of Jalandhara, and the chief queen of King Ananta from the Lohara dynasty.²⁶ An anecdote recounts King Ananta spending his entire treasury, including the crown and diadem, on the merchant named Padamaraja.²⁷ In response to a financial crisis, Queen Suryamati used her personal savings to assist King Ananta.²⁸ Subsequently, she assumed administrative control, and the king obediently carried out her orders. Suryamati's influence over her husband was profound, and she had a son named Kalasha. Expressing intense love for Kalasha, she persuaded King Ananta to abdicate the kingdom in favor of their son.²⁹ Observing Kalasha's immoral behavior, he clashed with King Ananta, who sought to punish him. Queen Suryamati, however, motivated her husband to leave the capital. Kalasha, resistant to their departure, attacked the holy shrine of Vijayeshvara, burning down the entire palace. In the end, King Ananta committed suicide, and Queen Suryamati performed sati on her husband's funeral pyre.³⁰

The religious convictions and activities of the Kashmir Kings and Queens motivated them to establish numerous religious foundations, including temples, viharas, and mathas. Almost all of them endeavored to contribute to religious merit. In the initial Lohara dynasty, Queen Suryamati took the initiative to establish the Shiva Gaurisvara temple and consecrated the second temple of Sadashiva near the royal palace. Her dedication to Shiva was further demonstrated by the consecration of trisulas, banalingams, and other sacred emblems.³¹ The emergence of Vaishnavism in Kashmir from the 10th century AD onward is evident in Kalhana's Rajatarangini. Towards the conclusion of the third quarter of the 10th century A.D., Queen Didda founded a series of Vishnu shrines, including temples, mathas, viharas, and towns. The most significant among them was the Vishnu temple of Diddasvamin.³² The towns of Diddapura and Kankanapura (possibly modern Kangan village on the right bank of the Sind) and Diddamatha, remembered in the name of Diddamar, now stand as a residential locality in Srinagar on the right bank of the Jhelum. Although she laid sixty-four foundations within stone walls, almost all of the temples surrounding the walls have been destroyed by fire. Similarly, Queen Sugandha also laid the foundation of various temples in the town of Gopalapura, including the Gopal Matha and the Gopala Kesava temple of Vishnu. Another town, Sugandhapura, was established in her name. Her daughter-in-law Nanda contributed by constructing the Nanda Matha and the temple of Nanadikeshava.³³

3. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the historical narrative of Kashmir reveals a significant and evolving role for women in politics and governance. Transitioning from domestic spheres to active participation on the political stage, queens emerged as influential figures, offering counsel to kings and playing pivotal roles during times of crisis. Didda, Sugandha, and Suryamati stand out as exemplary women who not only participated actively in politics but also assumed leadership roles as heads of state. The challenges faced by Yashomati as the first appointed female ruler of Kashmir reflect deeply ingrained historical perceptions of women's perceived incapacity for state administration. Sugandha's narrative, on the other hand, showcases her resilience and capability as she took on the responsibility of governance after the tragic loss of her husband. The complexities of succession and political rivalries further highlight the intricacies of power dynamics in medieval Kashmir. Queen Didda's story, marked by strategic maneuvering and the consolidation of power, exemplifies the intricate political landscape. Her relationships, both political and personal, played a crucial role in shaping the course of Kashmir's history. The narrative surrounding Tunga, Prabhakaradeva, and the revolt against Didda provides a fascinating glimpse into the challenges faced by rulers in maintaining authority.



The historical accounts also shed light on the religious foundations established by these rulers. From Shiva temples by Queen Suryamati to Vishnu shrines founded by Queens Didda and Sugandha, these structures stand as enduring symbols of their religious devotion and contributions to the cultural landscape of Kashmir.

In summary, the women of Kashmir, as portrayed in Rajatarangini, were not only integral to the political affairs of the state but also contributed significantly to its religious and cultural heritage. Their stories challenge stereotypes, emphasize their agency, and enrich the understanding of Kashmir's historical narrative.

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