

Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in Ancient Kashmir

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Abstract: Since time immemorial India has been a cradle of many religions. In Vedic literature, not only hymns in praise of gods were found, but also doubts about the credibility of these gods. The new religion, no doubt creates its rituals, but at the same time incorporated some old practices. Kashmir, especially the valley is generally known as “*pir-vaer*” that is the land of *pirs*. It is unique not only for its natural beauty but for the fact that it had remained the seat of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic culture over the last thirty centuries. Besides three major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, many other cults that worshipped natural forces were also present in Kashmir. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the religious milieu in ancient Kashmir.

Key Words: Aryans, Buddhism, Hinduism, Nagas, Satisar, Saivism

Introduction: As per the traditional belief, Kashmir was a lake called Satisar. A sage known as Kashyapa, drained the water from the lake. It was called Kashyapmar (Kashyapa’s abode) and later on came to be known as Kashmir after his name.¹ In *Nilamatapurana*² and *Rajatarangni* it is mentioned that before the Indo-Aryan immigration, the predominant cult was animism manifested by *Naga* or snake worship. *Nagas* or tutelary deities were supposed to reside in the springs and lakes.³

¹ Kalhana, *Rajatarangni*, Eng. tr. by M. A. Stein, MotiLalBanarsidas, Delhi, 1961, 1979, 1989, book I, p.29; See also PanditAnandKoul, *The Kashmiri Pandit*, 1991, Delhi, p. 2. A demon, namely Jalodhbhava i.e., water-born was living in the lake. After great penance he earned the boon that he would never be defeated as long as he remained in water. The water was drained out and the demon was deprived of his power. S.L Sadhu, *Tales from the Rajatarangini*, Kapoor Brothers, Srinagar, 1967, p.1

² P.N.KBamzai, *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, (3 parts in one),Metropolitian Book Co.Ltd, New Delhi, 1962, p.31. Hereafter *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*.

³ Most of the rites prescribed in the *Nilamatapurana* are concerned with the nature of worship of popular deities. But there are some festivals which are particularly connected with the worship of

Initially the Indo-Aryans resided here during the summer season and returned back to their native places during the winters. Over a period of time, they settled here permanently.⁴

The pre-Aryan tribes that lived in Kashmir before the Brahmans were *Nagas* and *Pisachas*⁵. It was difficult to identify the *Nagas*, as they were behind the veil of myth and legend, peeping out at one time as reptile snakes, and at another as human beings. Different theories have been put forth by different scholars on their identification. However, the view is now veering round to their being a tribe. A list containing six hundred three names of the *Nagas* occurs in *Nilamatapurana*.⁶ They used to go towards Tibet in summer and returned to valley in winter. These indigenous tribes were the worshippers of *Nag* or snake. Thus, snake cult or *Naga* worship was the earliest religion of Kashmir. Later on these indigenous tribes were driven out by the Vedic Aryans towards different directions of the subcontinent. The religious beliefs cherished by these pre-Aryan tribes are non-traceable now.⁷ The erection of temples near famous springs and pilgrimages directed to them had shown the traces of the *Naga* cult. Kalhana in his *Rajatarangni* called Kashmir a land protected by Nila, the lord of *Nagas*.⁸ The present names of places like Verinag, Kokernag and Anantnag also point out to the existence of the *Naga* cult.⁹

When Buddhism flourished in the third century B.C., it dominated the *Naga* cult.¹⁰ Abul Fazl recorded that Serpent worship continued to prevail in the valley not only in ancient Kashmir, but even afterwards. According to him, during the reign of

Nagas. Thus Nila, the lord of the *Nagas*, was worshiped on the festival of the first snow fall, *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, p.198. Regarding the exact date when the snake-cult was prevalent in the land, we do not have any authentic source.

⁴ *The Kashmiri Pandit*, p.2

⁵ The *Nilamatapurana* refers to the Pisacas as inhabitants of Kashmir. The term Pisacas was used for some hostile tribes. Cannibalism and forced marriage were the two characteristics of Pisacas. *Nilamatapurana*, tr. Dr.VedKumari, J and K Academy of Art Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1968, pp.58, 69

⁶ *Nilamatapurana*, pp.46-51.

⁷ *Nilamatapurana*, p.58. According to Goal Cunningham, Serpent-worship was prevailing religion in Kashmir from times immemorial. It is said that DurlabhaVardhana, ruler of the Karkota dynasty was the son of a *Naga* or Dragon. *Ain-i Akbari*, vol.II, Eng.tr. H.S Jarrett, Calcutta, 1891, pp.354-55

⁸ Kalhana, *Rajatarangni*, book I, p.29

⁹ James Ferguson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol. I, London, 1910, p. 272

¹⁰ *Early History and Culture of Kashmir*, p.140

Akbar (1556-1605) carved images of snakes were found at seven hundred places in Kashmir.¹¹

The anonymous author of *Nilamatapurana* provides sufficient information regarding different religious cults that prevailed in ancient Kashmir. Besides the cults associated with two gods, Vishnu and Siva, it mentions other god's and goddesses like Brahma, Ganesa, Surya, Varuna, Agni, Indra, Baladeva Prithvi, Sita, Durga, Lakshmi etc. Some of these cults were Vedic in nature, while others were based on folk deities.¹²

The anonymous author of *Nilamatapurana* discloses the spirit of cooperation and amalgamation in the field of religion, each cult received influence from the others is noticed. Initially, the followers of different religious cults were free to worship their deities and all cults received their due share of devotion from the residents of Kashmir. This freedom to worship provided a platform for the unification of diverse cults.¹³ However, in 515 A.D. Mihirakula, a Huna ruler succeeded his father Toramana as ruler of the wide dominion between the Kabul Valley and Central India. As a zealous Saiva, he uprooted Buddhism¹⁴ and established his own faith. It was later replaced by Vaishnavism during the rule of Karkota dynasty (625-855 A.D)¹⁵.

The anonymous author of *Nilamatapurana* speaks of Vishnu more than of any other deity and describes Vishnu as four-armed, four-faced, lotus-eyed praised even by Brahma as well as Siva. The popularity of Vishnu cult in 8th and 9th centuries is known from the heads of Vishnu recovered from Vijabror (Anantnag), three-faced Vishnu figures carved on the walls of the Martanda temple, four-headed Vishnu images from the surroundings of Avantipura (Pulwama).¹⁶

From the beginning to the end of the Hindu rule in the fourteenth century, several kings and queens found temples and shrines. By the tenth century, due to

¹¹*Ain-i Akbari*(MS),vol.II, f. 564 ; Eng. tr. vol. II, p.354

¹² Images of many of these gods have been found in almost all the old temple ruins in the valley.*Nilamatapurana*, pp.139, 168, 220

¹³ *Ibid*, p.188

¹⁴ *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, pp.107, 72.

¹⁵ Under Karkotas (Lalitaditya and his mother NerendraPrabha) several temples were also built for Siva worship.

¹⁶*Nilamatapurana*, pp.139-141; See also Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir*, Utpal publications, Delhi, 2002, p.162

unstable rule and constant civil war the kingdom was reduced to its lowest ebb. Despite this the building of Vaisnava temples were erected by queen Sugandha (902-904 A.D), King Partha (904-18 A.D), Yasaskar (936-45 A.D), Kshemagupta (948-57 A.D) and Queen Didda (957-71 A.D).¹⁷

The early Saivism in Kashmir was based on several Tantras and preached a dualistic doctrine. However, from the 8th or 9th century A.D., Saivism assumed a new form and began to preach a sort of idealistic monism. This new system took the name of Trika Sastra¹⁸ (the three fold science) and its founder was Vasugupta (860-925 A.D).¹⁹ The two ideologies namely Tantric Saivism²⁰ and Smarta Saivism-Vaisnavism²¹ flourished under Utpala (855-1103A.D) and Lohara dynasty (1003-1171 A.D).²²

State and Religion

The connection between religion and polity in ancient Kashmir was not always cordial. The state constantly justified heavy taxes, inequalities, tribute through the invocation of supernatural or the commitment of good life after death.²³ It seems that the polity of *Nagas* was the earliest political formation in Kashmir. The accumulation of wealth by *Naga* tribes created the dominance of one group over the other, which in turn led to social differences.²⁴

The history of ancient Kashmir begins with the alliance between the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas, who helped each other to achieve common good. On the one hand, the Brahmanical class provided legitimacy to the policies of rulers while on

¹⁷ *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, pp.203-4. The iconoclast Harsa (1089-1101 A.D) destroyed temples of all sects and melted the copper, brass, silver and gold images therein to replenish his empty treasury. After his death, we find that his successor Uccala (1101-1111), restored old and build new Vaishnava temples. *A History of Kashmiri Pundits*, pp.14-15; See also *The Kashmiri Pundits (A Study of Cultural Choice in Northern India)*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988, p.8

¹⁸ *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, pp.271-78

¹⁹ *Early History and Culture of Kashmir*, p.152. Monistic Saivism attained its perfect evolution by the first quarter of the eleventh century, but remained confined to the valley of Kashmir. B.N.Pandit, *History of Kashmir Saivism*, Utpal Publications, Srinagar, 1990, p. xvii

²⁰ Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century*, Srinagar, 2005, p.88. Hereafter *Islam in Kashmir*.

²¹ Smarta Saivism-Vaisnavism was an amalgam of Saiva and Vaisnava cults with a belief in Vedic and Smrti rites.

²² *Islam in Kashmir*, pp.98-99

²³ *The State in Medieval Kashmir*, p.36

²⁴ *Nilamatapurana*, vol. I, p. 251; See also *The State in Medieval Kashmir*, p.33

the other; the ruling class helped them financially in the form of religious endowments.²⁵ In other words, the Brahmans projected ruling class as the people who have divine powers and any sort of revolt against them was considered a sin. A remarkable development came with the dependence of the state on Brahmans as lawmakers, advisors and administrative members.²⁶

Initially, the Brahmans enjoyed secular grants, but later on these were restricted, when the state realized that the demands of the Brahmans were untenable. The aftermath of these tendencies was an everlasting contradiction between the ruling class and Brahmans. In this contradiction Kshatriya class succeeded. The state now relied on the trading class, which developed without the support of state.²⁷

The consequence of this interplay between the two classes ended the monopoly established by the Brahmans earlier. The new economic forces in the form of *damaras* (feudal barons)²⁸ and Tantrians²⁹ came into existence. They attacked both religious and secular institutions to undermine the authority of the Brahmans. A noticeable decline in religious grants was found during the reign of Samkarwarman (883-902 A.D) of Utpala dynasty.³⁰ The emergence of private power was not only threat to state authority, but the Brahmanism developed cracks which became visible only after the thirteenth century.

Buddhism in Kashmir

Kashmir was an important center of Buddhism as mentioned in *Nilamatapurana*³¹ and the *Rajatarangni* of Kalhana. Many arguments have been put forward about the date of its introduction in Kashmir. Thomas Watter argues that, it was introduced after fifty years of Buddha's demise by an *arhat*³² Madhyantika, a

²⁵ Jia La IKilam, *A History of Kashmiri Pundits*, Srinagar, 1955, rep., 2015, p.1

²⁶ *The State in Medieval Kashmir*, pp.26-27, 40

²⁷ Ibid, p.12 ; *A History of Kashmiri Pundits*, p.2

²⁸ The most powerful land-owning tribe of Kashmir, whom Kalhana calls *damaras* for their unruly conduct and their role as king makers and power brokers.

²⁹ The dominant landlord tribes-Tantrians, Lavanyas, Rainas, Magreys, Bhats, Niiyaks etc., whom Kalhana calls by the generic term *damaras*. They were so powerful that no ruler was able to rule without enjoying their support. *Islam In Kashmir*, p.116

³⁰ *The State in Medieval Kashmir*, pp.29-30

³¹ It lists the places of pilgrimage in ancient Kashmir and describes the rites and ceremonies which people observed.

³² An *arhat* is a disciple who works for and attains *nirvana* for himself alone. *Arhat* is essentially a Hinayana concept.

disciple of Ananda.³³ The other argument put forward by Hiuen Tsang is that, it was introduced by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (273-236 B.C.) It is said that Moggliputra Tissa, Ashoka's councillor sent Majhantika (a Buddhist of Varanasi) to spread this faith in Kashmir and he succeeded in this mission.³⁴ The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang or Yuan-Chuang records that Buddhism was prevalent in Kashmir before the reign of Ashoka. He further opines that Ashoka invited Buddhists of Kashmir to attend his Council.³⁵ Kalhana also mentioned King Suredra as a propagator of Buddhism before Ashoka. Narendrabhavana in the city of Sauraka (Suru, beyond the Zoji La) and Saurasa in village Sowur (Soura) on the Shore of Anchar Lake to the north of Srinagar were the two Viharas built by Suredra.³⁶ To disseminate Buddhism, Ashoka built several Stupas³⁷ and Viharas³⁸ in Kashmir.³⁹ Thus, under Ashoka, Buddhism became dominant faith in Kashmir.

Yuan-Chuang, who visited Kashmir in 631 A.D., has described the settlement of five hundred *arhats* in Kashmir, during the reign of Asoka. He mentioned this event after the hundredth year of Buddha's death. He further remarked that Ashoka, for the sake of the *arhats* gave up this country (Kashmir) as a gift to the Buddhist church.⁴⁰ For a couple of years the pilgrim stayed in Kashmir and during this time, he visited many Viharas like Juska Vihara (Uskar) near Baramulla, Jayendra Vihara, studied *sutras*, *shastras* and took copies of many Buddhist scriptures. There is no reference about the existence of these Viharas during the medieval Kashmir.

³³ Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang Travels In India 629-615 A.D.*, ed., T. W. Rhys Davids and S. W. Bushell, Royal Asiatic Society, Albemarle Street London, 1904, p.265; See also *SI-YU-KI (Buddhist Records of The Western World)*, Eng.tr. Samul Beal, vol. I, Trubner & Co, London, 1884, p.149.

³⁴ *SI-YU-KI (Buddhist Records of the Western World)*, p.149

³⁵ *On Yuan Chwang Travels in India 629-615 A.D.*, p.264

³⁶ Kalhana, *Rajatarangni*, Eng. tr. by M. A. Stein, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1961, 1979, 1989, book I, p.17

³⁷ A Stupa is a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics that is used as a place of meditation.

³⁸ Vihara generally refers to a monastery for Buddhist renunciates. In early Sanskrit and Pali texts, it meant any arrangement of space or facilities for dwellings.

³⁹ Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, Smith Elder and Co, London, 1854, p.1; *SI-YU-KI (Buddhist Records Of The Western World)*, p.151.

⁴⁰ *SI-YU-KI (Buddhist Records Of The Western World)*, p. 151; *On Yuan Chwang Travels In India 629-615 A.D.*, p. 267

The Sarvastivads⁴¹, subsect of Theravadins made Gandhara and Kashmir their home. These monks took refuge in Kashmir on account of the hostility of their opponents in Magadha. Earlier Kashmir was a stronghold of the Sarvastivadins. In the post-Kushan period Kashmir continued to be a seat of Buddhist learning of both Mahayana and Hinayana.⁴² It is stated that the Sarvastivads retired to Kashmir with the objective to uphold their views. Its emblems were utpal flower, a jewel, a lotus and a leaf. They adopted Sanskrit language and its Abhidharma text was compiled by *arhat* Katyayaniputra.⁴³

The anonymous author of *Nilamatapurana* records the commemoration of Buddha's birthday as a great festival in the the month of Vaisakha (21 April to 21 May)⁴⁴. It depicts Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu and further states that in holy water, statues of Buddha were bathed and offered scents, flowers and jewels according to the rites of Buddhist ascetics. *Chaityas*⁴⁵ were decorated and the residential places of Sakyas (Buddhists) were white washed. Food, books and clothes were gifted to the Buddhists. For three days, the worship of Buddha continued with different offerings and donations to the poor.⁴⁶ It is a curious fact that Buddha's birth day still retains a place in the Brahman calendars of modern Kashmir.⁴⁷

Kalhana records about the popularity of Buddhism from the reign of Ashoka to Lalitaditya (699-736 A.D). He further gives evidence that around first century A.D., Buddhism entered its golden phase under Kushana King Kanishka (127-150A.D) and his successors Huska and Juska. It is stated that the three Kings constructed many Viharas, Chaityas and Mathas.⁴⁸ Kashmir was a centre of Buddhism obtains further justification from the fact that under the patronage of Kanishka, the fourth Buddhist Council was held in Kashmir. Kalhana records at that time Nagarjuna, a Buddhist teacher was living there.⁴⁹ The Council was held under the

⁴¹ Sarvastivada is derived from the words Sarvam Asti which mean all things exist. *Buddhism in Kashmir and Ladakh*, p.23

⁴² Ibid, pp.64-66

⁴³ *History of Buddhism in Kashmir*, pp.19-20

⁴⁴ Second month in the Nanakshahi calendar(21 April-21 May)

⁴⁵ *Chaitya* is a Buddhist temple.

⁴⁶ *Nilamatapurana*, p.58

⁴⁷ Kalhana, *Rajatarangni*, Introduction , p.9

⁴⁸ *Nilamatapurana*, vol. I, p.179

⁴⁹ Hiuen Tsang informs us that the name of the ruler (Kanishka) was still alive in local traditions during his visit to Kashmir, Kalhana, *Rajatarangni*, Introduction, p.76

supervision of Vasumitra (Mahayanist) and continued for nearly six months. The other eminent scholars like Asvaghosh took part in this Council. It was in this Council that new theories and dictums were upheld, which generated a new spirit among Buddhists of Kashmir to cross borders and propagate Buddhism.⁵⁰ This Council represented the rise of Sanskrit Buddhism, which was a landmark in the history of Buddhism in Kashmir.⁵¹ It is noteworthy to mention that local Hindu rulers of Kashmir also patronized Buddhism.⁵²

The archaeology of Buddhist sites in Kashmir has been evaluated from the dugout settlements at Harwan (Srinagar), Malangpur (Pulwama), Pandrethan (Srinagar), Parihaspora (Baramula) and Ushkara (Baramula). The remains of Viharas, Chaityas and Stupas were found in these sites, but now only remnants are left. The structural remains of the above sites were studied in detail with substantiation from epigraphic and literary references. The earliest remains of the phase first were found at Harwan near Srinagar and Ushkar near Baramulla.

These flourishing centers of Buddhism attracted the attention of scholars to visit the valley and to gain first-hand knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures. The scholars who have travelled to Kashmir in different times include Asanga, Vasubandhu, Kumarajiva, Buddhahadra and Dharmakshema. These scholars not only studied and taught in the valley but also disseminated the faith of Buddhism in Central Asia, Tibet and China.⁵³

Conclusion: To conclude we may say that in ancient Kashmir two faiths were dominant. These were Hinduism and Buddhism-the former dominant and the latter enfeebled. The *Naga* cult and Buddhism remained successively the main faiths of the people in Kashmir before the sixth century A.D. After sixth century Saivism and Vaisnavism dominated the religious scene of Kashmir until Islam earned mass conversion. This change set the trend in society's mental set up, which could accommodate new changes without leaving the old habits. Throughout the centuries, Kashmir had been exposed to many cultures and was a nodal centre of Iran, Central Asia and Arabia for cross fertilization of ideas in religion.

⁵⁰ Sunil Khosa, *Art History of Kashmir and Ladakh*, Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1984, p.21

⁵¹ *Buddhism in Kashmir and Ladakh*, p.61; *History of Buddhism in Kashmir*, p.44

⁵² *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, pp.199-200

⁵³ *Buddhism in Kashmir and Ladakh*, p.78