

DAMARAS IN ANCIENT KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The term Damaras is one of common occurrence in the Chronicle of Kalhana, and it appears that the persons whom it designates play a prominent part in the later portions of the narrative.²²² It is, hence, important to ascertain its significance with as much precision as our materials will permit. But the word Damara, in the sense in which it is used in the *Rajatarangini* and the later chronicles, has not yet been traced outside Kashmir. Neither Kalhana nor his successors have thought it necessary to define or explain the term. It cannot, therefore, surprise us that its true bearing has not been recognized by earlier interpreters. Through this article I will highlight their position in society.

INTRODUCTION

Wilson had formed the opinion that the Damaras were a fierce intractable tribe inhabiting the mountains to the north of Kashmir. He had accordingly treated the subsequent notices of the Damaras as referring to inroads made by that tribe into Kashmir. It may well be doubted whether that distinguished scholar would have expressed this opinion if the last two books had been accessible to him, or if his text for the first six had been less defective. His view, however, has been followed by all subsequent interpreters of the chronicle. The difficulties which it involved had evidently not escaped the authors of the St. Petersburg Dictionary who, with reference to a possible etymology, suggested that the word might have had originally a more general meaning, riotous, rebel.²²³ But the true purport of the term was recognized only in a brief supplementary note of that work which reproduces a suggestion of Professor H. Kern assigning to Damaras the meaning 'Bojar, i.e. feudal land

owner or baron. Stein believes that this interpretation is the right one, is proved beyond all doubt by a careful examination of the numerous passages in which Kalhana has occasion to speak of Damaras. In this respect Kalhana first mentions them during the period of Lalitaditya, where it is said that if they would keep more wealth, they will become strong enough to neglect the commands of the king. Kalhana, amongst other curious maxims of administrative wisdom put into the mouth of Lalitaditya, makes that king warn his successors not to leave with the cultivators of the land more than what is necessary for their bare sustenance and the tillage of their fields. It is clear that the danger, against which the Macchiavellian advice of the king is directed, cannot have been a sudden transformation of his Kashmirian agriculturist subjects into fierce hill men. It is manifestly the growth among the well-to-do land-holding class, capable of forming a powerful rural aristocracy, against which he wishes his successors to guard.

It is unmistakably a representative of this class to whom we are introduced in the curious anecdote related of king Avantivarman's visit to the shrine of Bhūteśvara. The temple-priests, questioned by their royal visitor about the evident destitute condition of the shrine, ascribe it to Dhanva, a powerful Damara of the district (Lahara) who has appropriated the villages forming the temple's endowments. Dhanva who owes his unrestrained local predominance to the patronage of the king's powerful minister Sura, neglects summons after summons. When he ultimately arrives to receive his due punishment, he appears on the scene with a host of armed attendants. Kalhana clearly wants to describe to us here not a marauding hill-chief, but a member of that land-grabbing oligarchy which in his own time was threatening to destroy all remnant of royal power. The process by which the Damaras during a long period of weak reigns and internal troubles gradually became the most powerful element in the state

is fully illustrated by the story of the Damaras Sangrama. When king Cakravarman had been driven a second time (CE 935) from his capital by his mutinous praetorians, the Tantrins, he took refuge with Sangrama, an influential Damara, resident in Maaavarajya. Moor the conclusion of a solemn compact the Damaras rose in support of the deposed king, and with the help of others of his class who joined him, succeeded in reinstating him. The Tantrins were exterminated and the Damaras, who are referred to among the vassals obtained great influence. Subsequently, the ungrateful conduct of Cakravarman led to a conspiracy among the Damaras and to his murder. But there are characteristic indications of their growing influence even during the period of comparative consolidation which followed Yasaskara's accession and queen Didda's advent to power. Both under Unmattavanti and Didda special mention is made of the success of royal commander-in-chiefs in coercive measures against Damaras.

It is, however, in the subsequent period, after the accession of the house of Lohara, there is the fullest development of the Damaras power. During the long succession of weak reigns from Sangramaraja to Utkarsa's death (1003-- 1089 CE), the position of the Damaras as semi-independent feudal lords seems firmly to have established itself. Damaras set up pretenders, and siding either with father or son maintained Anantadeva and Kalasa in their internecine struggle. The commanders of the royal troops are more than once represented as engaged in regular expeditions against these turbulent barons of various districts. In the midst of these troubles Kalhana relates incidentally the personal story of a Damara, which throws an interesting light on the origin and growth of this feudal class. Jayyaka, the clever son of a householder at the village of Selyapura (the present S'ilipor in Dunts), had gradually raised himself to the position of a Damara. By the revenue of his lands and by exporting victuals to distant regions, he accumulated exceptional wealth, which he kept safe by having great quantities of coins buried in the soil. He ultimately found his death in an attempt to seize, by armed force, territory in the

neighbouring district of Bangila. His buried treasures were confiscated by king Kalasa, and were so great as to relieve the latter of all his money-troubles. This story proves clearly that the position of Damaras was not necessarily restricted to a particular tribal division or set of families it also indicates the means by which this status could be attained apart from direct inheritance. Another incidental note referring to the time of Kalasa, shows that sometimes strongholds important for the safety of the whole land were in the power of Damaras. Lakkariacandra, a Damara, had held the castle of Dugdaghata which guarded the old route to the Darad country, corresponding to the present Dudakhut Pass. He had been executed by order of king Ananta.

Subsequently his widow had offered the hill fort to king Kalasa, apparently, as the succeeding narrative shows, with a view to better assuring the safety of the neighbouring tract from inroads of the Darads. King Kalasa refused the offer. The stronghold then fell into the power of the Darad king, from whom Harsa subsequently vainly endeavoured to recover it with the assistance of the neighbouring Damaras. The circumstances here alluded to justify the conclusion that strongholds as well as lands had practically become hereditary possessions in the families of these feudal lords, whenever the central authority in the land was unable or unwilling to assert the right of resumption. An attempt in this latter direction may have been the real reason for the cruel persecution of Damaras of which we read in Harsa's reign. In narrating the war of extermination by which Harsa endeavoured to rid the eastern portion of the valley of the powerful Damaras, Kalhana indiscriminately also uses the term Lavanya to designate them. This becomes quite evident by a comparison of the verses quoted below. The same observation holds good for a series of passages in later portions of the Chronicle. The explanation is not far to seek. Lavanya is a tribal name still surviving to this day in the Kram name Luni, borne by a considerable section of the agriculturist population of Kashmir. From the way in which Kalhana employs the name in the passages referred to, and from numerous others in which the Lavanyas are mentioned, it must be inferred that the mass of the Damaras was recruited from that tribal section. If this was the case the indifferent use of the ethnic and class designations is easily accounted for. It finds its exact parallel in the way in which, e.g. common usage in the western Punjab designates all shopmen as 'Khatris,' or all English-knowing clerks as 'Babus. Examples for the same substitution of terms could no doubt be quoted in hundreds from all parts of India. Harsa's efforts to suppress the Damaras produced the reverse of the object aimed at. The exasperated Damaras conspired with the refugee princes, Uccala and Sussala, and by a successful rising put an end to Harsa's rule and life. The reigns which followed this revolution, represent an almost uninterrupted series of struggles between the central authorities and the Damaras, and between various factions of the latter themselves. The local barons whom Kalhana now often mentions by the characteristic if not very complimentary term of "robbers," seem to have usurped all power in the land except in the immediate vicinity of the capital and the places occupied by the royal troops. The most that the rulers are able to do, is to playoff one of their sections against the other or to secure a footing by the support of one or the other great Damara house. Thus Gargacandra, the chief feudal lord in Lahara (Lar) becomes a true "king-maker." When Sussala ultimately fell out with him, he could secure the Damara's submission only by regular sieges of his strongholds, and the creation of a powerful rival. To similar prominence rose subsequently Prthvihara and his sons, Damaras of S'amala (Hamal), Tikka of Devasarasa (Divasar), Mallalcosuhaka of Lahara, Nāga of Khuyasrama (Khuyahom) and others. Throughout these troubles Kalhana's narrative brings out strongly the local character of the Damaras power. The districts to which they belong are regularly mentioned, and show that their homes were invariably in the fertile cultivated portions of the valley. These alone, in fact, were able to support a large class of territorial barons of this type. Their seats which evidently formed strong places capable of defense are often referred to by Kalhana with the mass of the officials and Brahmans must have cherished bitter feelings against this turbulent class of petty territorial lords,

and does not hide his sentiments. He takes more than once occasion to refer to the Damaras ' boorish habits, and again to their ostentatious extravagance when in power. In a curious sketch of city-life he shows to us also the small fry of the class, "the Damaras from the environs of the city, who are more like cultivators, though they carry arms." In another passage where he praises the wife of the Damaras Kosuhaka, who became a Sati when her husband was mortally wounded, he does not omit to contrast this conduct with that of the ordinary Damara women who did not show much regard for their character as widows. Kalhana plainly attributes the exceptional conduct of Kosuhaka's wife to her noble descent from a family of Rajputs. The mention of this marriage is instructive. Either the Lavanyas originally could not have held a very low position as a caste; or with their rise to wealth and power that gradual elevation in the social scale had already set in, which forms so interesting a feature in the modern history of many an Indian caste. The same conclusion is indicated in a fashion even more marked by the marriages of daughters of Damaras to members of the royal family. From the above sketch it will appear that the materials which Kalhana's chronicle supplies, are sufficient to give us a just idea of the political power and the social position held by the Damaras in his own times. But they leave us in the dark as to the conditions under which their landed property, the basis of their influence, was acquired and held. If we compare the conditions prevailing in other parts of India where a similar class of landed aristocracy is still extant, the view suggests itself that a kind of service-tenure, the grant of land in return for military or other services, may have been the original foundation of the system. Yet even as regards this point the absence of all exact data prevents us from going beyond mere conjecture. Still less can we hope to ascertain the exact relations in which the Damaras may have stood towards their sovereign and towards the cultivators in matters of revenue, administration, etc. The references to Damaras in the later Chronicles are comparatively few and do not furnish additional information. In most cases the term is found as a title applied to local grandees whether Hindu or Muhammadan, without there being any characteristic indication in the narrative as to their positions or functions. As the political conditions of the country do not seem to have undergone any material change previous to the advent of the Mughal power, the class represented by the Damaras probably continued to be an influential element also in the time of the Muhammadan Sultans. But it is difficult to say whether the term *Damara* as used in the narrative of these reigns was more than an archaism. In any case, its real significance must have been understood yet by the Pandits of the sixteenth century. Ksemendra's *Samayamatka* and the *Lokaprakasa* are the only works outside the chronicles in which Stein has been able to trace the word Damaras in the meaning above discussed. Ksemendra describing the adventures of the courtesan Kankali, one of heroines of his curious poem, makes her for a time grace the house of the Damaras Samarasinha, who resides at Pratapapura (the modern Tapar). Brief as the Ksemendra wants to represent to us the Damaras house as a place of comfort and plenty, and the master, himself, as another Bhimasena, full of fighting spirit, quarrelsome, and a lover of good things. Living under Ananta and Kalasa, Ksemendra had, no doubt, plenty of models to draw this figure from. The name he gives to his Damaras, *Samarasinha*, 'Lion of the battle,' is also significant. In the *Lokaprakasa* the term occurs in a mere list containing various official designations without any comment. Thus, we can say that the conception of the population as consisting of four traditional castes was not altogether unknown during the course of our

study. It is true that there was no such caste as Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra in the early Kashmir but we cannot deny this fact that Kalhana in his chronicle has used many terms related to the traditional caste system of India e.g., Brahamana, Rajaputra, Dombas, Canadlas etc. It appears from what has been said above that the Kashmir society became something like a federation of castes and sub-castes, whose members did sometimes intermarry, more frequently in earlier than in later ages, but which nevertheless retained their separate identity. Society consisted of a large number of groups which had been brought into the same spiritual and cultural framework, but which had been only partially fused together. Caste was not altogether static, for new sub-castes frequently arose from migration, fusion or sub-division. Old sub-castes sometimes lost their identity and rose or fell in status. All the same, the institution acquired a permanent character and coloured all organization, law, custom and social philosophy. Every caste or rather sub-caste, more strictly the local segments of sub-castes, enjoyed a very large measure of autonomy in their social code, cultural tradition and even in judicial matters. This state of things, as we have seen, was reflected at every step in political organization and political thought. Here it may be stressed that caste resolved function into a purpose, into something like an ethical principle, almost a religious conception, and exalted the group to the detriment of individual values. This is one of the reasons why Hindu political theory speaks frequently of the duties, but rarely of the rights of the individual. In society, individuality derives its worth and significance from its contribution of service to the universal whole. Personality is thus taught to transcend itself by giving its devotion to something beyond itself. To everyone, theory prescribes a way of life which accords best with the duties he has to discharge. For instance, it inculcates a life of poverty and austerity to priests, scholars and teachers, of whom the Brahmanic order was composed or ought to be composed. Caste furnished an additional incentive to that functional organization and self-government which are natural to all economic occupations, especially to industry and commerce. In such a community social control could not be concentrated at a single point. It was pluralistic and was diffused among a variety of groups and associations. So, it is believed that the caste system in the society of ancient Kashmir was not so rigid as in other parts of country by that time. We even find men and women of the low-caste occupying positions of responsibility. Under Cakravarman the Dombas practically held all the important posts in the court and two Domba women became the king's favorite queens.

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