



# Role of women in ancient and medieval politics of Kashmir:

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## Abstract:

In the whole Indian sub-continent, the only valley of Kashmir has its source of well-recorded ancient history. It has rich sources like Rajatarangini and Nilamata Purana which are the fullest and most authentic accounts of early Kashmir. These texts not only provide the authentic history of Kashmir but also highlight the power and agency of women in royal court culture in two essential ways as sovereign rulers in their rights and as powers behind the throne. Besides these sources, the other historians also gave a considerable picture of ancient and medieval women's politics. During these times women had emerged from the domestic arena to the political stage. They distinguished themselves as powerful rulers, diplomats in peace and war, commanders of armies and had their treasures for the welfare of state affairs. Since the past they enjoyed remarkable freedom and yielded ample power which gave them a high status in the society. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the participation of women in the administration of the Kashmir region during ancient and medieval times.

**Keywords:** Prominent, Persona, Catherine of Russia, Dethrone, Lilavati of Ceylone.

## Introduction:

In the beginning, Kashmiri society flourished with the seven centuries of Hindu rule which ended in the mid-fourteenth century with the coming of Islam. During this period society of Kashmir witnessed considerable changes in almost all spheres of socio-cultural, economic and political as well. Politically the structure of the state was based upon the concept of patriarchal and hereditary kingship. Despite this, the land of Kashmir presented a vibrant example of female participation in a male-dominated political arena. There are many archaeological and literary sources that provide us with information about many female characteristics who played an important role in the development of the state politics. They served the state in various roles like queens, regents, queen consorts and held many other important administrative positions. In such female political participation, Kashmiri society witnessed a glorious past. As a result, Kashmiri women wielded considerable power and attained a much more respectable position in the society than women belonging to the rest of India. Thus, the present paper highlights the

role of women in early politics of Kashmir valley and their contribution towards the development of the society.

## **Women in early politics of Kashmir**

One of the most significant and surprising aspects of the early Kashmir polity was the power that women enjoyed. Several women have played a significant role in shaping the political history of Kashmir. Some of them carved out a permanent place for themselves in political history through their efforts and ability. The original myths of Kashmir identity start with Goddess Parvati's material manifestation. According to Kalhana, Yashowati the first women ruler of Kashmir is supposed to have been crowned by Krishna himself. She was a shadow of presence. The exercise of formal authority by women rulers of Kashmir is automatically validated by this comprehensive divine endorsement. Unfortunately, a detailed description of Yashowati's reign is not available, but the paucity of details on her persona could be linked to the fact that she became the mother of future heir Gonanda 2<sup>nd</sup>. The next was the Sugandha Devi, who ruled at the beginning of the tenth century, first as a regent and then directly. She was the chief queen of king Sankaravarman the son of the famous King Avantivarman of the Utpala dynasty. According to Kalhana, queen Sugandha was the first queen who not only entered the political arena but also exercised her power. After the death of Sankaravarman the other queens performed Sati but Sugandha choose to survive. She took over the reins of administration in the name of her minor son Gopalavarman. She fully exercised her powers for managing the affairs of the state. She was helped by her minister Prabhakaradeva. Kalhana says that the capture of power was also the beginning of her moral downfall. She fell in love with the minister, who was killed through black magic. After two years of her rule she was dethroned and Samkata, who was the son of Sankaravarman, was placed on the throne but he too died after a few days. In A. D. 904, Sugandha assumed royal power again and tried to please her subjects through acts of religious merits like the construction of temples and installation of images. She successfully completed her next two years of rule but she could not handle her enemies strongly and was deposed in A. D. 906 by Tantrins and a minor son of Nitjitavarman was placed on the throne. She stayed at Hushkapura for the next two years and at last was imprisoned and ultimately was put to death.

After a half century, Kashmir witnessed another queen's phenomenal rise, whose name was Didda, the third women ruler of Kashmir. She was a remarkable ruler in many ways and dominated the political scene of Kashmir, particularly for about half a century. Interestingly, Didda was a one sided paralytic and was carried around by a porter woman Valga. As a disabled, she did not let this deter her in her quest for authority. She represents the rule of women's power in Kashmir. She has been called the Catherine of Kashmir like the Catherine of Russia who was ruthless and ruled for a long period with her favorites, whom she purged from time to time. Even, before becoming regent Didda had considerable influence in state affairs and coins have been found that appear to show both her name and that of her husband Kesmagupta. Her first task was to rid herself of troublesome ministers and nobles whom she drove from office only to have them rebel against her. Didda's rule is significant from yet

another point of view. The share of women was very limited in the administration of the country. The success of the throne was confined to males and as a consequence the history of the Aryan India does not furnish us with many names of female sovereigns. Suganda, Didda and Lilavati of Ceylone were particularly the only female sovereigns who occupied a particular place in Indian history. But among these three queens again Didda is the only instance in the history of ancient India which furnishes us with a detailed account of the activities of a female ruler.

Another one is Kota Rani, regarded as the last Hindu ruler of Kashmir, ruling until 1339. History gives a very concise description of her as; she was the daughter of Ramachandra. Her father appointed an administrator namely Ranchana a Ladakhi. Ranchana became ambitious and killed Ramachandra and married her daughter Kota Rani. He employed Shahmir as a trusted courtier, who had entered Kashmir earlier and had been given an appointment in the government. Ranchana embraced Islam and changed his name to Sultan-Sadur-ud-din. He died as a result of an assassination after ruling for three years. Kota Rani was first appointed as a regent for Ranchana's young son. Later she was persuaded to marry Udayanadeva by the elders. Udayanadeva assumed power in his hands, but immediately after that a Turkish named Urwan invaded Kashmir and Udayanadeva had to flee away. Kota Rani collected some army and sent them to face Urwan under the command of Shah Mir. The army sent by Kota Rani defeated Urwan and consequently, Kota Rani assumed the power in her hands in the name of her husband and ruled Kashmir for fifteen years.

In her lifetime, she was a courageous and diplomatic lady. She weathered every storm with poise and emerged stronger after every event. But misfortune never allowed her life, it hunted her at every step. She had to fight anarchic conditions prevailing in the state at that time when foreign invasions and intrigues were a common feature. At every stage, she succeeded in reassuring the people about her capacities as a ruler. She has secured a place of prominence for herself in the history of Kashmir. She had two sons in which Ranchana's son was under the charge of Shah Mir and Udayanadeva's son was taught by Bhatta Bhikshana. After assuming power Kota Rani appointed Bhatta Bhikshana as her prime minister. Shah Mir pretended to be sick and when Bhatta visited him Shah Mir jumped out of his bed and killed him. Shah Mir forced Kota Rani to marry but she refused and committed suicide and offered her intestines to him as a wedding gift. It was not known what happened to her sons. With her death history witnessed the end of an era.

It is true that under Muslim rule the upper-class women lost many of the rights and privileges which they enjoyed throughout the ancient time and until the deposition and death of Kota Rani. Besides Hindu queens, many Muslim queens and ladies of noble birth took a prominent part in religious reforms, social and political activities. The first among such remarkable women to attract our attention was Lachima or Lakshmi Devi, wife of Sultan Shahab-ud-din (1354-1373) AD. Muslim rule was not yet well established when King ascended the throne. He married Lachima the daughter of a distinguished Hindu named Avtara and refused to have any other girl as his spouse.

Lachima the wife of Shahab-ud-din was a remarkable woman during the reign of her husband. Both the husband and wife are deeply attached to each other. She was an intelligent and sagacious lady and besides being virtuous, simple and generous. The king often used to take consultations with the queen and it proved beneficial for the state.

Sultan Qutub-ud-din (1373-1389) AD had a resourceful and active spouse named Bibi Haura. It is strange and inexplicable that no mention is made by the contemporary historians of her activities during the sixteen years long reign of her husband. But there can be little about that she must have assisted the King and learned the intricacies of politics as well as the difficulties in the path of successfully governing the country while Qutub-ud-din was alive. Immediately after the King's death Bibi Haura was called upon to act as the regent of the vast dominion because Sikandar his son was only eight years old. There were many enemies of the ruling dynasty, including some of the nearest relatives of the deceased King. Bibi Haura was a successful, able and energetic but extremely selfish lady. She ruled with a heavy hand and crushed all oppositions. It is said that she even put to death her own daughter and son-in-law for conspiring against the Sikandar. Her actions were adversely commented upon near relations were engaged, intimate friends were scared. But it gave a quietus to all the evil-intentioned courtiers and others who had designs on the throne. Peace was re-established and tranquility restored to be the land. Haura next devoted her attention to re-organize the civil administration and managing the defense force. The historians did not know when Bibi Haura died or how long she functioned as the regent. Probably she wielded the rod of authority for ten years (1389-1399) AD till Sikandar came to age.

The next queen to be noticed by contemporary historians is Gul Khatoon, the virtuous wife of the profligate Sultan Haider Shah (1470-1472) AD. This graceful lady was very popular among the Kashmiries because she walked in the footsteps of her father-in-law, the famous King (Zain-ul-Abdin) of Kashmir. There is no doubt that the queen should have proved a great asset to a wise ruler as his spouse and helped in the affairs of the state. But Haider Shah her husband was a contemptible wretch who took pleasure in the company of vulgar, mean and wicked people and abandoned himself to licentiousness. Gul Khatoon frequently found him in a drunken state and made tremendous efforts to wean him away from the pernicious habit but all in vain. This immoderate living and wild ways soon ended the life of the King and he remained on the throne hardly for two years. Historians say that Gul Khatoon was like the former Queen Didda who builds many structures, a large edifice in the form of mosques, khankahas and schools. Her admiration for the indigenous culture was immense. She was a supporter of the religious humanist movement and for that reason both Hindus and Muslims claimed her to be their own. But Gul Khatoon was not destined to live long. She died suddenly in the prime of her youth and in the midst of her active life.

After Haider Shah, Hassan Shah (1472-1484) his son sat on the throne. His starting career was just like his grandfather and used to treat Hindus and Muslims alike. He was a lover of fine art and architecture. Hassan Shah had several queens but the best known among them was Mera Mukhta or Muslim historians call her Hayat Khatoon. She was a resourceful woman commanding powers of persuasion and capable of hood-winking politics and of creating rifts in

the ranks of enemies. Every day, her kinsmen were exiled because of conspiring against the King. Mira Mukhta started taking interest in administration and kept herself informed of the currents and cross-currents of state politics.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above analyses, we can say that during the period of our study, Kashmiri women enjoyed a very prominent position in society. They played a significant contribution towards leading to the welfare of the family and society. In royal households, women were given respect and they rendered a significant contribution to the making of decisions and administrative functions. Besides this women belonging to lower classes assist their men to run domestic affairs and move freely without any fare in society.

Thus, we can conclude that from time to time, they came to the forefront and play a very remarkable part for the wellbeing of the society and especially in the Political sphere. Whenever they were given such opportunities, they acted like strong warriors, shrewd administrators and bore the political titles like their male counterparts. They played a significant role in the smooth functioning of the affairs of the state.

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