

# Outline of the Political Structure of Early Medieval Kashmir

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With the beginning of the modern writing on the Indian subcontinent, a research and investigation started to find out the history of the sub-continent in general and India in particular especially by those who came to be known as the oriental writers. The oriental world lured their fantasies and they ventured into a territory which was about to open a Pandora box of an entirely different culture from the European world. While working on distinct areas, these scholars felt disappointed as no text could endorse their notion of being a historical text until they came across one of the most interesting works composed in the Kashmir region in the twelfth century- the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, the earliest historical text of its kind that dealt in detail with the history, culture and society of Kashmir. For any scholar working on the history of the valley, it is a matter of immense pride that a text is so readily available which can lead one to understand the contemporary Kashmir. This provided an opportunity to the Europeans to venture into the past of the valley. Kashmir region from then on became a fantasy for the writers and authors of all kinds. Some wrote verses on its beauty while some like Thomas Moore who never even visited the region romanticized it so much through his work *Lalla Rookh* that this region captured the imagination of one and all.

The study of polity, political ideas and structures has been a matter of much debate among the historians right from the beginning of the days of modern Indian historiography. The issue of political ideas and structures evolved at different point of time figures at one some way or other throughout the writings of modern history. While in the colonial historiography with respect to Indian history, the existence of political ideas and structures was completely denied and Max Muller's conclusion that India is a philosophical nation lacking any kind of political intellect and concept of a nation became the bench mark of the colonial writers. The nationalist historiography on the other hand challenged this very perspective of the colonial writing and mentioned about an 'Indian Civilization' in the past and their writings on political ideas and structures composed on the basis of literary sources oscillated between a centralized or decentralized structural form.

As the entire country was engaged in a national movement in the 1900s, the writings were also motivated by nationalistic fervor as a challenge to British supremacy. An attempt was being made to rewrite India's history and shun the colonial perceptions about it. A model and framework of glorification of the past was adopted as it was the need of the hour and it presented the real history of our nation. In such glorification, dynastic history came to occupy a center stage and political history was given all the importance. The economic and social histories were segregated from it and not studied in collaboration. The idea of an inter linkage between all these was often overlooked. Subsequently, when the regional histories were written, although few but present, also adopted this approach of revisiting the past. This approach led to the understanding of the regional histories from the peep hole of just the political development presented by the rise and fall of the dynasties.

The writings on the valley also stuck with this theme for a long period of time where the political history dominated the writings without taking into consideration the factors that basically led to the formation of a state structure. As far as Kashmir region is concerned, it has always been an area of interest and research for the scholars and has always attracted great attention. Despite this, the study of polity and political structures has hardly been taken into consideration. As far as political ideas and institutions are considered, they have to be viewed in the light of the existing socio-economic factors of the. Also looking into the study of the polity, its structural development cannot be treated as universal, for each region has its peculiarities and special features, needless to say same goes for Kashmir as well.

In the recent historiography, the issue of political ideas and structures is being viewed differently. The two main points that separate the recent historiography are a) given the different tract of historical development, the new political structure can't be treated as universal as mentioned above and b) one needs to look beyond the polar juxtaposition of a centralized and a decentralized administration. It is in this context that several historians have worked on different models of political ideas and structures at different points of time in history. More importantly the political ideas and structures should not be seen in terms of typical dynasties or empires rather the study of polity should be an understanding of nature of organization, distribution of power and power relations and how these relations encompass the society in one form or the other.

Further, the power and its distribution can be understood by tracing how the emergence of power and related political structures is also inextricably linked to the emergence of surplus in the society. Since the availability of surplus was limited in the early Vedic period, the political structure could not grow beyond the moorings of tribal polity. The state of that time was not what we refer to as a state in a modern sense, yet there was some kind of a political authority or an organization which developed over the period and assumed the shape of a modern state. Subsequently, various organs of the state developed at various points at time in history and have grown in the form of distinct structures. Therefore, it is quite important to trace the early gleanings towards the state formation and the political ideas that followed it.

Keeping in view the above trajectory of development in the context of political ideas and institutions emerging at different point of time in north, deccan, south India, the need arises to understand how these developed and shaped themselves overtime and how these developments have been worked out and traced by scholars working on the theme of state models and which model fits perfectly with the rise and growth of political structures. This also underlines the necessity of looking at political formation at regional level rather than situating the polity in the entire sub-continent in the framework of monarchical state.

Now, one needs to focus on the views and assumptions on which the study of polity, its ideas and structures is based upon. One of the views regarding traditional polity is based on the assumption that it is essentially a changeless one and the early medieval period within this traditional polity is not differentiated. The notion of Oriental Despotism and Marx's idea of Asiatic mode of production concede to this unchanging nature of the state where a strong central authority takes control of all the agricultural produce. The Indian Historiographical model as Hermann Kulke refers to a unitary centralized model with a strong bureaucracy also align somewhat with this notion. While the other view contains the possibility of a changing society and within this framework, it becomes interesting to study early medieval period with an empirical outlook. The feudal state and segmentary state models which talk of some form of a shift in the course of the state formation from an earlier strong centralized state to a weakened one provide an opportunity of situate the early medieval political structures.

By accepting the terminology of an early medieval phase, a different perception of looking towards Indian history emerges. This perspective is dominated by the fact that, even though various processes of continuity are seen, the historical development is now studied in terms of the change from that continuity. In simpler words, when the focus shifts from the chronology and periodization given by the colonial historiography, what is rejected and undermined is the theory of stagnation of Indian society. In the early medieval period, the king is still the absolute power, functioning through a bureaucracy but now the mainstay of actual power lies in the hands of feudal lords. A shift is seen from the usual dynastic dynamics and focus is on the emperor's territory which appears to be a huge area but in actuality is a smaller core area over which the emperor enjoys his sovereignty while the rest of the territory is under the control of feudatories referred to as *Samants* and *Mahasamants* with full control of administration. The king remains the overlord but the power becomes highly decentralized. However, this general idea of a centralized and a decentralized structure, should not take away the focus from the peculiarities of the region and how the power was distributed among various groups of that particular region. This is where one tries to fit in the evolution of political structures of the early medieval Kashmir region.

An autocratic and absolutist tendency is seen in the polity of Kashmir. Though initially an elective principle was prevalent but eventually with passage of time, an autocratic ruling tendency becomes more dominant over a period of time. However, there are various examples of popular uprisings against an unjust and dominating rule, followed by the establishment of a popular figure, like king Baka and Sathimata who were the choice of the masses. Further, various rivalries among the members of the royal family were integral in the politics which also affected the stability of the dynasties and the state. There are also numerous examples of incompetent rulers and misleading administration by unscrupulous ministers but at the same time, the absolutist power of the king was kept in check by the efficient administrators and ministers.

Kalhana quotes that the administrative reforms were introduced by Ashoka's son Jaluka which enables us to understand that the valley might have been governed on the lines of the mighty empire but with certain changes according to the regional and local conditions. When we talk about the early medieval Kashmir, the same type of bureaucracy appears to have continued headed by a king with full authoritative powers. It was Lalitaditya who introduced certain changes and created new offices, unanimously called by various historians as *Panchamahashabda*. However, whatever be the changes, one cannot deny that the polity appears to be a unified one with a strong administrative system headed by a king who enjoyed pomp and showcased his grandeur. It was the emperor who appointed the ministers and other high officials. The official hierarchy was maintained by the emperor and he was its head.

The other aspect of the polity other than the centralized one also needs to be analysed before reaching this conclusion as D.D. Kosambi makes an effort by associating the presence of a feudal structure in the region. There are also several examples to support to claim like king Meghavahana is believed to have founded a village, an *agrahara* and a temple. It becomes important to understand what the word *agrahara* denotes and if it was a land grant, to what extent the landed intermediaries were important. Further, the role of Damaras, Ekangas and Tantrins is of great interest to a scholar reading about Kashmir history. They grew so powerful that they came to decide who would sit on the throne. One needs to understand the context of these landed lords and their influence on the polity before passing any kind of judgement on whether it was a centralized structure or a decentralized one with the strong feudatories.

Within the larger monarchical framework, there also existed autonomous political space which was controlled by Damaras and other social groups and therefore, this must not have allowed the functioning

of the monarchy in a simple despotic way. These were socio-political groups that challenged the autocratic rule and provided an alternative focus of power within the local political development. Therefore, it is important to shift the lens and understand the region in a wholesome manner through the lens of its economic, social and cultural development and how those factors shaped its political evolution is a necessity to bring out the understanding regarding the contemporary political idea.

It is important to understand that a material base in the early medieval Kashmir played a strong role in the evolution of a political structure. The material conditions of the seventh century must have provided a base for the emergence of a strong political structure and there must have been some socio-economic shift that was important for the establishment of a strong polity. The role that agricultural produce and industrial development must have played to trigger the inception of the political authority in the early medieval period. The agricultural surplus must have provided an impetus to the industry which in turn must have allowed the political authority to consolidate its power by amassing wealth and maintaining a treasury. This idea has been derived from the fact that material conditions are often times give a thrust to a change in the society and in many cases the evolution of political ideas is a direct result of this change.

the birth and inception of the political structure in the early medieval Kashmir led to political power manifesting itself. It appears that the early medieval Kashmir was a centralized state structure with a strong dynastic setup and a bureaucratic control. But this is just one aspect of the political structure. It is observed through the Rajatarangini that various social groups had emerged in the early medieval period that were trying to control the political power. In this regard, the *Damaras* stand out as they are often involved in struggle for throne. They emerge as landed aristocracy which poses a constant challenge to the king as they control resources of the valley. This clearly shows that the early medieval polity of Kashmir was not just a centralized state structure but the peripheral elements like the *Damaras*, *Ekangas*, *Tantrins* gave a decentralized shape as well.

It therefore, needs to be understood that the political history of early medieval Kashmir by studying it from the lens of socio-economic perspective and analyzing how the material conditions provided a base for the development of a political structure is an important aspect. It is also equally pertinent to note the role played by religion and the legitimization it granted to the political authority to exert its position. And finally, the study polity should be beyond the boxed narrative of centralization and decentralization and give due importance to peculiarities of a region and its social groups.

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