

Women in Early Medieval Kashmir: Literary and Epigraphic Evidence

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Abstract:

The history of women in early medieval Kashmir (c. sixth–thirteenth centuries CE) presents a complex picture of social participation, political authority, religious patronage, and cultural agency. Although literary narratives often foreground royal women and exceptional personalities, inscriptions, archaeological remains, and material culture complement these accounts by illuminating women's broader roles in society. This paper examines representations of women through the combined evidence of Sanskrit chronicles, particularly *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and its continuations, epigraphic records, temple inscriptions, numismatic evidence, and architectural remains. It analyses women's participation in governance, land grants, religious patronage, education, property rights, and the economy while also examining social customs such as marriage, widowhood, and inheritance. By integrating literary narratives with epigraphic and archaeological data, the study argues that women occupied multiple and often influential positions within early medieval Kashmiri society, although their experiences varied according to class, political status, and religious affiliation. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender relations in early medieval Kashmir.

Keywords: Early Medieval Kashmir; Women; Epigraphy; *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*; Gender History; Temple Patronage.

Introduction

The history of women in early medieval Kashmir (c. sixth–thirteenth centuries CE) occupies a distinctive place in the historiography of South Asia because the region preserves an unusually rich corpus of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence. Unlike many parts of early medieval India, Kashmir possesses a continuous indigenous historical tradition beginning with Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (c. 1148–1150 CE), which records not only dynastic history but also provides valuable insights into the political, social, religious, and cultural roles of women (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900; Zutshi, 2018). Although literary narratives predominantly focus on queens and elite women, inscriptions, temple foundations, coins, and architectural remains complement these accounts by revealing women's participation in religious patronage, land endowments, administration, and public life. The combined use of literary and epigraphic evidence enables historians to reconstruct a more balanced understanding of gender relations than would be possible through narrative sources alone (Singh, 2008; Verma, 2018). The early medieval period in Kashmir witnessed the rise and fall of the Kārkoṭa, Uṭpala, and Lohara dynasties, during which several royal women exercised remarkable political authority. Queens such as Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī

not only served as regents but also ruled independently, commissioned temples, made religious endowments, and influenced succession politics. Their careers challenge conventional assumptions regarding the passive status of women in early medieval Indian society and demonstrate that political legitimacy in Kashmir could occasionally transcend gender boundaries (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900; Bamzai, 1994). Modern scholarship has increasingly shifted from examining the "status of women" toward analysing gender as a dynamic social and historical category. Historians such as Kumkum Roy (2012), Uma Chakravarti (1989), Upinder Singh (2008), and Devika Rangachari (2013) have emphasized that women's experiences varied according to class, region, political circumstances, and access to resources rather than conforming to a single pan-Indian model. In the specific context of Kashmir, Rangachari has demonstrated that literary texts such as the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* and the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* preserve significant evidence for both royal and non-royal women's agency, requiring historians to move beyond traditional patriarchal interpretations of the sources. Despite these advances, comparatively few studies have systematically integrated literary narratives with epigraphic and archaeological evidence to examine women's multifaceted roles in early medieval Kashmir. Most existing works remain centred on exceptional royal figures, leaving broader questions concerning women's economic rights, religious patronage, property ownership, and participation in public institutions insufficiently explored. This paper addresses that gap by combining textual analysis with inscriptional and material evidence to investigate women's political authority, religious patronage, economic agency, and social position in early medieval Kashmir. Such an interdisciplinary approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender relations within one of medieval India's most culturally vibrant regions.

Historiography and Sources

The historiography of women in early medieval Kashmir has evolved significantly over the past century, moving from descriptive accounts of royal women toward more nuanced analyses of gender, power, and social agency. Early historical writings largely concentrated on dynastic politics and portrayed women primarily in relation to male rulers. Consequently, queens such as Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī were discussed mainly for their political interventions rather than as historical actors operating within broader social, economic, and religious contexts (Bamzai, 1994). More recent scholarship, influenced by gender history and feminist historiography, has emphasized the need to examine women's experiences through multiple categories of evidence, including literary texts, inscriptions, archaeology, and material culture (Roy, 2012; Chakravarti, 1993). One of the greatest strengths of Kashmiri historiography lies in the exceptional continuity of its indigenous historical tradition. The principal source for the political and social history of early medieval Kashmir is Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, composed around 1148–1150 CE. Unlike many court chronicles of medieval India, Kalhaṇa consciously distinguished between historical tradition and legendary narratives, critically evaluated earlier sources, and attempted to establish a chronological framework for Kashmir's rulers (Stein, 1900). Although the work was primarily intended as a dynastic history, it contains valuable references to queens, princesses, noblewomen, female ascetics, temple patrons, and women participating in court politics. Kalhaṇa's descriptions of figures such as Queen Diddā, Sugandhā, and Sūryamatī reveal not only their political influence but also the ways in which gender intersected with kingship, legitimacy, and succession (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). The historical tradition initiated by Kalhaṇa was continued by Jonarāja, Śrīvara, Prājyabhaṭṭa, and Śuka, whose chronicles extend the narrative into the Sultanate period. Although these later works fall partly outside the chronological

scope of this study, they preserve important retrospective information regarding earlier institutions and demonstrate the continuity of historical writing in Kashmir. Together, these chronicles constitute one of the longest uninterrupted traditions of regional historiography in South Asia (Hasan, 2005).

Alongside the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* provides indispensable evidence for understanding the cultural and religious environment of early Kashmir. Composed between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, this Sanskrit text records rituals, festivals, sacred geography, and religious customs that illuminate women's participation in domestic worship, seasonal ceremonies, fertility rites, and community festivals (Vogel, 1928; Kumari, 1973). The text portrays women as active participants in religious life rather than passive observers, suggesting that ritual practice formed an important sphere of female agency within Kashmiri society. Literary evidence, however, must be approached critically. Court chronicles often privilege elite perspectives and portray women according to prevailing moral and political ideals. Queens who supported legitimate succession or religious institutions were frequently praised, whereas politically ambitious women were sometimes characterized as manipulative or morally suspect. Such representations reflect contemporary notions of kingship and gender as much as historical reality (Chakravarti, 1993; Roy, 2012). Kalhaṇa's assessment of Queen Diddā, for example, combines admiration for her administrative ability with criticism of her personal conduct, illustrating the gendered assumptions embedded within medieval historical writing (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Epigraphic evidence provides an important corrective to these literary biases. Although relatively few inscriptions have survived in Kashmir because of climatic conditions, political disturbances, and the destruction or reuse of building materials, those that remain document temple construction, land grants, religious donations, and royal patronage. Such inscriptions occasionally record women as independent donors, patrons of religious institutions, or members of ruling families participating in acts of public benefaction (Sircar, 1965; Verma, 2018). Unlike narrative chronicles, inscriptions generally served administrative or commemorative purposes and therefore offer more direct evidence concerning legal rights, property transactions, and patterns of religious patronage.

Archaeological remains further enrich the historical record. Monumental temple complexes at sites such as Martand, Avantipur, Pandrethan, and Payar provide evidence of the architectural patronage exercised by ruling elites, including royal women. Sculptural representations of female deities, donor figures, and devotional imagery contribute to understanding the symbolic and religious roles assigned to women within medieval Kashmiri society (Goetz, 1969; Mitra, 1971). Numismatic evidence also offers valuable insights, particularly coins issued in the name of Queen Sugandhā and Queen Diddā, which demonstrate the formal exercise of sovereign authority by women and their acceptance within the political institutions of the kingdom (Bamzai, 1994). Modern scholarship increasingly advocates an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary narratives with epigraphic, archaeological, and material evidence. Upinder Singh (2008) argues that inscriptions frequently illuminate aspects of social history overlooked in narrative texts, while Aloka Parasher-Sen (2011) emphasizes that gender relations can only be fully understood through the combined study of textual and material sources. For Kashmir, this integrated approach is particularly valuable because each category of evidence compensates for the limitations of the others. Literary texts provide rich narratives but often reflect elite ideological perspectives; inscriptions offer documentary precision but survive only sporadically; archaeological remains reveal patterns of patronage and religious practice but require careful contextual interpretation. Accordingly, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that critically compares literary testimony with inscriptional and archaeological evidence. Rather

than privileging one category of sources over another, it seeks to reconstruct the diverse experiences of women across political, religious, economic, and cultural spheres. Such an approach enables a more balanced understanding of women's agency in early medieval Kashmir while acknowledging the methodological constraints inherent in the surviving evidence.

Women in Sanskrit Literary Traditions

The literary traditions of early medieval Kashmir constitute one of the richest repositories for reconstructing the history of women in the region. Sanskrit texts composed between the sixth and twelfth centuries CE, particularly the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* and Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarangīṇī*, offer detailed insights into women's religious participation, political influence, social responsibilities, and cultural identity. Although these texts were composed by male Brahmanical authors and inevitably reflect elite perspectives, they nonetheless preserve valuable evidence for understanding the multiple roles women played in Kashmiri society. Rather than presenting women merely as wives and mothers, these works portray them as rulers, patrons, diplomats, religious participants, and influential members of the royal court (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900; Roy, 2012). Among the earliest literary sources, the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* occupies a unique position as a cultural and religious text describing the sacred geography, rituals, and social customs of pre-Islamic Kashmir. The text repeatedly emphasizes the participation of women in seasonal festivals, domestic rituals, and public religious ceremonies. Women are instructed to observe ritual fasts, perform offerings to household deities, and actively participate in festivals celebrating fertility, prosperity, and agricultural abundance (Kumari, 1973). Their participation was not merely symbolic but formed an integral component of communal religious life. Such descriptions indicate that women exercised considerable ritual agency within the household and the wider religious community.

The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* also reveals the importance of family as the central institution through which women's social identities were defined. Marriage was regarded as a sacred institution that integrated women into both kinship networks and religious obligations. At the same time, the text emphasizes ideals of mutual respect, household harmony, and shared participation in ritual observances rather than exclusively stressing female subordination (Vogel, 1928; Kumari, 1973). While these prescriptions undoubtedly represent normative ideals, they suggest that women's religious roles were considered indispensable for maintaining social and cosmic order. Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarangīṇī* provides a far more detailed and dynamic portrayal of women. Unlike many contemporary chronicles elsewhere in India, the work contains numerous accounts of female political actors who influenced royal succession, governance, diplomacy, and religious patronage. Queens appear not simply as consorts but as individuals capable of exercising independent authority during periods of political instability. Kalhaṇa records instances in which royal women served as regents, negotiated alliances, commanded loyalty among nobles, and supervised administrative affairs (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900).

Among the most remarkable figures is Queen Sugandhā (r. 904–906 CE), who assumed power following the death of King Śaṅkaravarman. Kalhaṇa describes her efforts to maintain dynastic stability amid intense factional conflict, illustrating that female sovereignty, although exceptional, was not considered impossible within the political traditions of Kashmir. Similarly, Queen Diddā (r. 980–1003 CE) emerges as one of the most powerful rulers in Kashmiri history. Initially acting as regent for her minor grandson, she gradually consolidated authority and ruled independently for more than two decades. Kalhaṇa portrays Diddā as politically astute, determined, and capable of suppressing aristocratic opposition, even while

criticizing aspects of her personal conduct through a moral lens shaped by contemporary gender expectations (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900; Bamzai, 1994). The narrative treatment of Queen Diddā demonstrates the complexity of medieval attitudes toward female rulership. Kalhaṇa admired her administrative ability and political intelligence but simultaneously employed gendered language to question her moral character and exercise of power. Modern historians argue that such ambivalent portrayals reflect broader patriarchal assumptions rather than objective assessments of her reign. Devika Rangachari (2013) observes that women who exercised authority in early medieval sources were frequently judged according to standards different from those applied to male rulers, revealing how gender shaped historical memory.

Another prominent figure is Queen Sūryamatī, wife of King Ananta (r. 1028–1063 CE). Kalhaṇa praises her wisdom, generosity, and religious devotion, describing her extensive patronage of temples, monasteries, and charitable institutions. Sūryamatī repeatedly intervened in political affairs to stabilize the kingdom during periods of financial crisis and dynastic conflict, demonstrating that queens could influence governance through counsel as well as direct patronage (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Her example illustrates how religious benefaction became an important avenue through which elite women exercised public authority while reinforcing royal legitimacy. Beyond royal women, the *Rājatarangīnī* also contains references to female ascetics, dancers, attendants, servants, and women associated with temples and courtly culture. Although these figures receive less detailed treatment, their presence indicates that women participated in diverse social and occupational spheres. Kalhaṇa occasionally describes women who acted as informants, intermediaries, or participants in diplomatic negotiations, suggesting that female influence extended beyond the domestic domain (Stein, 1900). At the same time, literary representations remained deeply shaped by Brahmanical ideals of femininity. Women were frequently praised for chastity, loyalty, generosity, and religious devotion, while ambition or political assertiveness was sometimes depicted as morally problematic. Such portrayals correspond with broader patterns observed in Sanskrit literature across early medieval India, where female virtue was closely associated with household stability and dynastic continuity (Chakravarti, 1993). Consequently, literary narratives should not be interpreted as transparent reflections of social reality but rather as texts that both recorded and constructed contemporary gender norms. Despite these limitations, Sanskrit literary traditions from Kashmir provide indispensable evidence for reconstructing women's history. They reveal that women could occupy positions of considerable political authority, participate actively in religious life, influence dynastic succession, and shape cultural patronage. When read critically alongside inscriptions and archaeological evidence, these texts demonstrate that women's experiences in early medieval Kashmir were considerably more diverse than conventional stereotypes of medieval patriarchy might suggest.

Royal Women and Political Authority

The political history of early medieval Kashmir is remarkable for the prominence of several royal women who exercised authority as regents, sovereigns, advisers, and patrons. While female rulership was exceptional in much of early medieval South Asia, Kashmir produced a succession of influential queens whose political agency is extensively documented in literary sources and, in some cases, corroborated by numismatic and epigraphic evidence. The careers of Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī illustrate that political legitimacy in Kashmir could, under particular circumstances, extend beyond conventional patriarchal norms. Their authority, however, remained contingent upon dynastic politics, aristocratic

support, and the ability to negotiate court factionalism (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900; Bamzai, 1994). One of the earliest examples of female sovereignty is Queen Sugandhā, the widow of King Śaṅkaravarman (r. 883–902 CE). Following her husband's death during a military campaign, Sugandhā initially served as regent for her minor son, Gopālavarman. After his death, she assumed the throne in her own right and ruled between 904 and 906 CE (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900, Book V). Her accession reflected both the absence of an effective male claimant and the political influence she had cultivated within the royal court. Although her reign was brief and ultimately ended with her deposition by the powerful *Tantrin* military establishment, Sugandhā's rule demonstrates that royal women could exercise sovereign authority during periods of dynastic crisis (Bamzai, 1994). Numismatic evidence significantly strengthens the historical record concerning Sugandhā's reign. Coins issued in her name bearing the legend "Śrī Sugandhādevī" constitute direct material evidence of her recognized royal status. The issuance of coinage was one of the most visible symbols of sovereignty in early medieval India, indicating that Sugandhā exercised formal political authority rather than merely acting as a ceremonial regent (Allan, 1936; Mitchiner, 1998). The survival of these coins provides valuable corroboration of Kalhaṇa's narrative and demonstrates the importance of integrating literary and material evidence in reconstructing women's political history.

The most celebrated female ruler in Kashmiri history was undoubtedly Queen Diddā (r. 980–1003 CE). Born into the Lohara royal family and married to King Kṣemagupta, Diddā first acted as regent following her husband's death in 958 CE on behalf of her minor son Abhimanyu II. After the deaths of her son and grandsons, she gradually consolidated authority and assumed full sovereign power, ruling independently until her death in 1003 CE (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900, Books VI–VII). Her reign marked a decisive phase in the political evolution of Kashmir, as she successfully curtailed the power of influential aristocratic factions and laid the foundations for the subsequent Lohara dynasty. Kalhaṇa presents Diddā as an extraordinarily capable yet controversial ruler. He praises her intelligence, administrative ability, and determination while simultaneously criticizing her ruthlessness in eliminating political rivals. Such moral judgments have often shaped later perceptions of her reign. However, modern historians caution that these portrayals reflect gendered expectations embedded within medieval historiography. Male rulers who employed similar methods to consolidate power were frequently celebrated for their strength, whereas Diddā's political decisiveness attracted moral criticism because it challenged prevailing ideals of feminine conduct (Rangachari, 2013; Roy, 2012). Consequently, her reign should be evaluated within the broader context of medieval state formation rather than through normative assumptions about gender. Numismatic evidence again substantiates the literary record. Coins attributed to Diddā circulated widely during her reign, affirming her status as an independent sovereign. These issues continued established Kashmiri monetary traditions while incorporating her royal authority, illustrating that neither the administrative machinery nor the economic institutions of the kingdom excluded female rulership (Allan, 1936). The circulation of such coinage suggests that Diddā's sovereignty enjoyed official recognition throughout the kingdom despite opposition from segments of the aristocracy.

Another influential royal woman was Queen Sūryamatī, consort of King Ananta (r. 1028–1063 CE). Unlike Sugandhā and Diddā, Sūryamatī did not formally assume the throne; nevertheless, she exercised considerable influence over state affairs through political counsel, financial administration, and religious patronage. Kalhaṇa credits her with stabilizing the kingdom during periods of fiscal crisis by encouraging responsible governance and restraining the extravagant expenditure of the king (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900, Book VII). Her interventions demonstrate that queens could shape public policy even without

occupying the throne directly. Sūryamatī is particularly remembered for her extensive patronage of temples, monasteries, and charitable institutions. According to Kalhaṇa, she sponsored the construction and restoration of numerous religious establishments, endowed Brahmanical institutions, and supported acts of public charity (Stein, 1900). Such patronage served multiple purposes: it expressed personal devotion, enhanced dynastic prestige, and reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling house through visible acts of religious benefaction. Modern scholarship increasingly recognizes temple patronage as an important form of political communication through which royal women exercised authority within accepted cultural frameworks (Singh, 2008). The political influence of Kashmiri queens also extended to matters of diplomacy and dynastic succession. Marriage alliances linked Kashmir with neighbouring Himalayan and north Indian polities, making royal women important agents in interstate relations. Queens frequently acted as guardians of minor heirs, mediated disputes among rival factions, and influenced the selection of successors during periods of political uncertainty. Their authority derived not solely from personal ambition but also from their strategic position within royal kinship networks (Hasan, 2005). Despite these examples of female political agency, royal authority remained embedded within a predominantly patriarchal political culture. Access to power generally depended upon dynastic relationships as wives, widows, or mothers of kings rather than independent hereditary claims. Furthermore, literary narratives often portrayed politically active women ambivalently, praising their competence while simultaneously questioning their morality or femininity. Such representations underscore the tensions between women's practical exercise of authority and prevailing ideological conceptions of gender (Chakravarti, 1993). Nevertheless, the cumulative literary, numismatic, and limited epigraphic evidence demonstrates that early medieval Kashmir provided exceptional opportunities for elite women to participate in governance. Queens such as Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī exercised authority in ways that influenced succession, administration, fiscal policy, diplomacy, and religious patronage. Their careers challenge generalized assumptions regarding the uniformly subordinate position of women in medieval India and illustrate the importance of regional political contexts in shaping gender relations. Rather than viewing these women merely as exceptional anomalies, they should be understood as products of a political culture that, under certain historical conditions, could accommodate female sovereignty and administrative leadership.

Women as Religious Patrons

Religion constituted one of the most important spheres through which women in early medieval Kashmir exercised public authority and social influence. Although political power remained concentrated within royal institutions, religious patronage enabled women—particularly queens and elite noblewomen—to shape the cultural landscape through the construction of temples, endowments to religious establishments, support for Brahmanical scholars, and the sponsorship of charitable activities. Literary narratives, inscriptions, and archaeological remains collectively indicate that women were not merely passive participants in religious life but active patrons whose benefactions reinforced both personal piety and royal legitimacy (Singh, 2008; Verma, 2018). The close relationship between political authority and religious patronage was a defining feature of early medieval Kashmir. Kings frequently legitimized their rule through the construction of temples, the restoration of sacred sites, and generous grants to religious institutions. Royal women participated in these processes with remarkable visibility. Their donations not only reflected religious devotion but also functioned as instruments of dynastic representation, allowing

queens to establish an independent public identity while strengthening the prestige of the ruling house (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Among the most prominent female patrons was Queen Sūryamatī, whose religious benefactions receive considerable attention in the *Rājatarangīnī*. Kalhaṇa describes her as exceptionally devoted to religious works, recording that she sponsored the construction and restoration of temples, supported Brahmins, and endowed charitable institutions throughout the kingdom (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900, Book VII). Her patronage extended beyond acts of personal devotion to encompass public welfare, including gifts for religious festivals and assistance to learned scholars. Such activities enhanced the moral authority of the monarchy while simultaneously demonstrating the independent agency exercised by royal women.

Similarly, Queen Diddā contributed to religious institutions despite her reputation as a politically assertive ruler. Kalhaṇa records that she established temples and supported religious establishments during her reign, illustrating that political authority and religious patronage were closely intertwined (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Although the chronicler criticizes aspects of her political conduct, he nevertheless acknowledges her contributions to sacred architecture and public religious life. These accounts suggest that temple patronage provided an important means through which female rulers could affirm the legitimacy of their authority in a society where kingship remained closely associated with religious merit (*dharma*). The broader religious culture of Kashmir also created opportunities for women's participation. The *Nilamata Purāṇa*, composed several centuries before Kalhaṇa, portrays women as active participants in numerous religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and household rituals. The text repeatedly prescribes the participation of women in festivals associated with fertility, harvests, rivers, and local deities, emphasizing that communal prosperity depended upon their ritual observance (Kumari, 1973). Women were instructed to perform offerings, prepare ritual foods, decorate sacred spaces, and participate alongside male family members during major religious celebrations. These prescriptions indicate that religious life in Kashmir extended beyond temple worship into domestic and community spaces where women exercised considerable ritual authority.

One of the distinctive features of Kashmiri religious culture was the coexistence of Brahmanical traditions with strong local cults centred on rivers, mountains, springs, and goddesses. Female deities occupied an especially prominent position within this sacred geography. Goddesses such as Śārikā, Jyeṣṭhā, and Rājñī (Kṣīr Bhavānī) were widely revered, while numerous local *nāga* and fertility cults incorporated women into ritual performances and seasonal observances (Kumari, 1973; Stein, 1900). The prominence of goddess worship may have contributed to the relatively visible role of women in religious ceremonies, although it should not be assumed that symbolic reverence for female divinities automatically translated into social equality for women. Archaeological evidence complements these literary accounts. Monumental temples at Martand, Avantipur, Pandrethan, Payar, and Pattan demonstrate the scale of royal investment in sacred architecture during the Kārkoṭa and Utpala periods. While most surviving inscriptions identify male rulers as principal patrons, literary sources indicate that queens frequently participated in financing, maintaining, or restoring these religious establishments (Goetz, 1969; Mitra, 1971). The combination of architectural remains and textual testimony suggests that temple patronage was often a collaborative enterprise involving members of the royal family rather than kings alone. Epigraphic evidence, although comparatively limited, further illustrates women's participation in religious donations. Across early medieval India, inscriptions frequently record gifts made by queens, princesses, merchants' wives, and female devotees to temples and monasteries. Such records document donations of land, lamps,

livestock, precious metals, and revenue assignments intended for the maintenance of worship and religious personnel (Sircar, 1965; Verma, 2018). While surviving Kashmiri inscriptions are fewer than those from regions such as Odisha or Tamil Nadu, the available evidence nevertheless confirms that women possessed sufficient legal and economic capacity to make independent religious donations.

Temple patronage also carried significant political implications. Religious endowments enabled royal women to cultivate relationships with influential Brahmanical communities whose ritual authority reinforced dynastic legitimacy. Grants to temples and learned scholars helped integrate regional elites into the political order while simultaneously projecting the image of queens as protectors of *dharma*. Such patronage was therefore not simply an expression of private devotion but a carefully constructed public act linking religion, governance, and royal ideology (Singh, 2008). Beyond elite patronage, literary sources occasionally allude to the participation of ordinary women in pilgrimage, ritual fasting, and devotional practices. *Kalhaṇa* refers to women visiting sacred shrines, observing religious vows, and participating in public ceremonies associated with important temples (*Kalhaṇa*, trans. Stein, 1900). The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* similarly describes women taking part in seasonal festivals celebrated collectively by different sections of society (Kumari, 1973). Although these references remain scattered, they indicate that women's religious activities extended well beyond the royal court.

Modern historians have emphasized that religious patronage offered women one of the few socially sanctioned avenues for exercising public influence in early medieval India. Kumkum Roy (2012) argues that donations to temples and religious institutions enabled elite women to acquire prestige independent of their husbands while simultaneously reinforcing family status. Likewise, Aloka Verma (2018), through her study of inscriptional evidence from across early medieval India, demonstrates that female donors frequently appear as autonomous patrons whose benefactions reflected recognized legal rights over property and wealth. These observations are equally applicable to Kashmir, where literary narratives repeatedly associate royal women with acts of public charity and temple construction. Nevertheless, caution is required when interpreting literary descriptions of female patronage. Court chroniclers often highlighted queens' religious generosity because such acts conformed to idealized models of feminine virtue. Consequently, the prominence of temple patronage in literary texts may partially reflect normative expectations rather than the full range of women's social activities. This limitation underscores the importance of integrating literary narratives with archaeological and epigraphic evidence, which provides more concrete documentation of religious donations and institutional support (Sircar, 1965). Taken together, the available evidence demonstrates that religious patronage constituted a central dimension of women's public life in early medieval Kashmir. Through temple construction, charitable endowments, support for religious institutions, and participation in ritual practices, women contributed significantly to the religious and cultural development of the region. Their activities reveal that religious authority was not monopolized by men but could also serve as an important arena through which women expressed agency, enhanced dynastic legitimacy, and shaped the sacred landscape of Kashmir.

Epigraphic Evidence and Land Grants

While literary sources provide rich narratives about queens and elite women, epigraphic evidence offers more direct insights into women's legal status, economic rights, and participation in public religious life. Inscriptions, copper-plate charters, donative records, and foundation inscriptions are less concerned with moral judgments than literary chronicles and therefore constitute valuable documentary evidence for

reconstructing aspects of women's history. Although the epigraphic corpus of early medieval Kashmir is relatively limited compared to regions such as the Deccan or South India, surviving inscriptions, together with archaeological remains and numismatic evidence, illuminate women's roles as patrons, donors, and members of the royal household. Furthermore, comparative evidence from early medieval Indian epigraphy provides an important contextual framework for interpreting the Kashmiri material (Sircar, 1965; Verma, 2018). The limited survival of inscriptions in Kashmir is attributable to several historical factors. The valley's climatic conditions, repeated invasions, earthquakes, and the reuse of stone in later constructions contributed to the loss of many inscriptions that may once have existed. Consequently, historians must supplement surviving epigraphic records with archaeological evidence and literary narratives to reconstruct patterns of patronage and property ownership (Kak, 1933; Stein, 1900). Despite these limitations, the available inscriptions reveal important dimensions of women's participation in public and religious institutions. One of the principal contributions of epigraphic evidence is its documentation of female patronage. Foundation inscriptions associated with temples and religious establishments occasionally identify queens or royal women as donors or co-patrons. Such records indicate that women participated in financing sacred architecture, commissioning images, and supporting the maintenance of religious institutions. Unlike literary accounts, which often idealize queens as embodiments of piety, inscriptions record specific acts of donation, thereby providing more concrete evidence of women's economic agency (Sircar, 1965).

The archaeological remains of early medieval temples at Avantipur, Martand, Pandrethan, and Payar further reinforce the importance of royal patronage in Kashmir's religious landscape. Although most surviving inscriptions from these sites commemorate kings, literary testimony suggests that queens frequently participated in these projects through endowments, maintenance, or the establishment of subsidiary shrines (Goetz, 1969; Mitra, 1971). The absence of extensive inscriptions naming women should not be interpreted as evidence of their exclusion; rather, it reflects the fragmentary nature of the surviving epigraphic record. Epigraphy also sheds light on women's property rights. Across early medieval India, inscriptions demonstrate that women could possess and donate various forms of property, including land, villages, gardens, livestock, ornaments, and monetary wealth. Queens, princesses, and elite women regularly appear as independent donors making grants to temples, monasteries, and Brahmanical institutions without explicit reference to male guardians (Verma, 2018). Such evidence indicates that at least among elite social groups, women enjoyed recognized legal rights over certain categories of property. Although comparable documentary evidence from Kashmir remains limited, literary sources support similar conclusions. Kalhaṇa repeatedly describes queens possessing independent wealth, maintaining personal entourages, rewarding officials, and financing religious works from their own resources (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Queen Sūryamatī's extensive charitable activities, for example, imply access to substantial financial resources under her direct control. Likewise, Queen Diddā's ability to reward loyal supporters, suppress political rivals, and sponsor religious institutions suggests effective command over royal revenues during her reign (Bamzai, 1994).

Numismatic evidence provides another important category of material documentation. Coins issued in the names of Queen Sugandhā and Queen Diddā constitute official expressions of sovereign authority and economic control. The right to issue coinage represented one of the defining prerogatives of kingship in early medieval India. The existence of these coins therefore confirms that female rulers exercised powers extending beyond ceremonial status to include fiscal administration and monetary policy (Allan, 1936;

Mitchiner, 1998). Such material evidence complements Kalhana's narrative by demonstrating that female sovereignty possessed institutional recognition within the political structure of Kashmir. Land grants formed another significant dimension of religious patronage during the early medieval period. Throughout India, rulers frequently transferred villages, agricultural lands, irrigation facilities, and revenue rights to Brahmins, temples, monasteries, and educational institutions. Women occasionally appear in these grants either as donors or beneficiaries, illustrating their participation in systems of landholding and religious endowment (Sircar, 1965). Although Kashmir has yielded fewer surviving copper-plate grants than many other regions, references preserved in literary sources indicate that queens participated in similar practices by supporting temples and learned religious communities (Kalhana, trans. Stein, 1900). The legal implications of these donations are particularly significant. Epigraphic records frequently specify that donated property was exempt from taxation, protected against interference by future rulers, and intended to remain in perpetual possession of religious institutions. When women appear as donors in such records, they are recognized as individuals capable of transferring legally valid property rights. This documentary evidence challenges older assumptions that women possessed little or no control over economic resources in early medieval India (Verma, 2018). The relationship between gender and economic authority is further illuminated through comparative inscriptional studies. Aloka Verma's comprehensive analysis of early medieval inscriptions demonstrates that female donors appear across numerous regions and religious traditions, including Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain institutions. Women donated lamps, land, temples, irrigation tanks, sculptures, and financial endowments while also participating in collective family donations (Verma, 2018). Although the Kashmiri evidence is less abundant, these broader patterns provide an important interpretative context suggesting that elite women in Kashmir likely exercised comparable forms of economic agency.

Epigraphic evidence also contributes to understanding women's social identity. Donor inscriptions generally identify women through kinship relationships—such as wife, queen, mother, or daughter—but they also frequently record personal names and independent acts of donation. This dual pattern reflects the interaction between patriarchal social structures and women's individual legal capacity. Women's public identities remained connected to family and dynasty, yet inscriptions nevertheless acknowledged them as distinct historical actors capable of making legally recognized benefactions (Sircar, 1965). At the same time, historians must recognize the limitations of epigraphic evidence. Surviving inscriptions overwhelmingly concern elite society and religious institutions, providing relatively little information about ordinary women engaged in agriculture, craft production, trade, or domestic labour. Moreover, the uneven preservation of inscriptions across Kashmir prevents broad statistical conclusions regarding women's economic participation. Consequently, epigraphy should be interpreted alongside literary narratives, archaeology, and comparative historical evidence rather than treated in isolation (Singh, 2008). Despite these limitations, the combined inscriptional, archaeological, and numismatic evidence significantly enriches our understanding of women in early medieval Kashmir. It demonstrates that elite women possessed recognized legal identities, controlled economic resources, sponsored religious institutions, and occasionally exercised sovereign authority over fiscal administration. Rather than merely confirming literary narratives, epigraphy provides independent documentary evidence that women participated actively in the political, economic, and religious life of the kingdom. These records therefore represent an indispensable source for reconstructing the historical agency of women beyond the rhetorical conventions of courtly literature.

Property Rights, Marriage, and Family

The institutions of property, marriage, and family constituted the principal social frameworks within which women in early medieval Kashmir negotiated rights, obligations, and authority. Literary texts, legal traditions, and epigraphic evidence collectively suggest that women's social status was neither static nor uniform but varied according to rank, wealth, family background, and political circumstances. While patriarchal norms structured inheritance and household organization, women—particularly those belonging to royal and elite families—possessed recognized legal identities, controlled movable wealth, participated in religious donations, and occasionally exercised considerable influence over dynastic affairs (Roy, 2012; Singh, 2008). The evidence from Kashmir thus reveals a more complex social reality than the conventional image of medieval women as wholly dependent upon male authority. Marriage represented the foundation of social organization in early medieval Kashmir. The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* presents marriage as a sacred institution (*samśkāra*) that integrated women into religious, familial, and social life. Husbands and wives were expected to participate jointly in household rituals, seasonal festivals, and acts of charity, reflecting the ideal of the household (*grhastha*) as the centre of religious and social order (Kumari, 1973). Although the text reflects Brahmanical normative ideals rather than everyday practice, it portrays women as indispensable partners in maintaining both domestic harmony and ritual continuity.

Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarangīṇī* likewise demonstrates that marriage among the ruling elite was not merely a personal relationship but a political institution. Royal marriages forged alliances between powerful dynasties, strengthened diplomatic ties, and legitimized claims to the throne. Queens frequently originated from influential noble or neighbouring royal families, making matrimonial alliances an important instrument of statecraft (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Queen Diddā, for example, belonged to the Lohara ruling house before her marriage to King Kṣemagupta, and her familial connections later facilitated the establishment of the Lohara dynasty in Kashmir (Bamzai, 1994). The political significance of marriage also enhanced the position of royal women within the court. Queens often acted as advisers, mediators, and guardians of dynastic interests. During periods of succession disputes, widowed queens frequently assumed regency on behalf of minor heirs, thereby transforming familial authority into political power. Sugandhā and Diddā exemplify this process, demonstrating that widowhood could create opportunities for women to exercise sovereignty under exceptional circumstances (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). The position of widows in early medieval Kashmir deserves particular attention. In many parts of early medieval India, widowhood imposed severe social restrictions, especially among upper-caste communities. Yet the Kashmiri evidence suggests a more varied pattern. Widowed queens occasionally exercised substantial political authority rather than retreating into social isolation. Sugandhā ruled the kingdom following the death of Śaṅkaravarman, while Diddā emerged as one of Kashmir's most successful rulers after becoming a widow (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Their examples indicate that royal widowhood could, under specific political conditions, enhance rather than diminish female authority.

This evidence also raises important questions concerning the practice of *satī*. Unlike certain regions of early medieval India where inscriptions and literary sources increasingly record widow immolation, Kalhaṇa's chronicle contains relatively few references suggesting that *satī* was a widespread or obligatory practice in Kashmir during the early medieval period (Stein, 1900). The survival and political prominence of widowed queens imply that widowhood did not automatically entail ritual self-immolation among the Kashmiri elite. Historians therefore caution against assuming uniform patterns of social practice across

different regions of the subcontinent (Chakravarti, 1993; Singh, 2008). Women's property rights are more difficult to reconstruct because direct documentary evidence from Kashmir remains limited. Nevertheless, literary and comparative legal evidence indicate that women possessed recognized rights over certain categories of property, particularly *strīdhana* (women's property). According to the *Dharmashastra* tradition, *strīdhana* included gifts received at marriage, ornaments, jewellery, clothing, and property acquired through inheritance or personal gifts from relatives (Kane, 1941). Although these legal prescriptions do not necessarily describe actual practice, they provided the normative framework within which property rights were understood during the early medieval period. Kalhaṇa's descriptions of elite women suggest that queens controlled significant economic resources. Diddā rewarded loyal officials, distributed gifts, financed religious institutions, and maintained her own political supporters, implying access to independent financial resources under royal administration (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Similarly, Sūryamatī's charitable activities and temple patronage required substantial wealth that appears to have been managed under her authority. These examples suggest that elite women exercised practical control over movable wealth and perhaps portions of landed revenue, even if ultimate ownership remained embedded within dynastic structures.

Comparative epigraphic evidence reinforces this interpretation. Across early medieval India, inscriptions frequently record women donating land, villages, lamps, livestock, and precious metals to religious institutions. Such acts presupposed legal recognition of women's capacity to possess and transfer property (Verma, 2018). Although surviving Kashmiri inscriptions are comparatively few, there is little reason to suppose that elite women in Kashmir enjoyed significantly fewer legal rights than their contemporaries elsewhere in northern India. Family remained the primary institution through which women's identities were defined. Literary sources generally identify women as daughters, wives, mothers, or queens, emphasizing kinship relationships rather than autonomous individuality. Such terminology reflects the patriarchal organization of early medieval society, where lineage and inheritance were traced primarily through the male line (Roy, 2012). Nevertheless, these familial identities could also become sources of considerable influence. Queens often derived political legitimacy from their positions as mothers of minor kings or widows of deceased rulers, enabling them to intervene decisively in matters of succession and governance. Motherhood occupied a particularly important place within royal ideology. The mothers of kings frequently acted as regents during periods of minority and exercised influence over court politics through their proximity to the throne. Kalhaṇa repeatedly records the political interventions of royal mothers, illustrating that maternal authority possessed constitutional significance within the monarchy (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Such examples demonstrate that gender roles in early medieval Kashmir cannot be understood solely in terms of domestic subordination but must also be examined within the institutional structures of kingship.

Modern scholarship has emphasized that property rights and family relations should be viewed as historically contingent rather than universally fixed. Kumkum Roy (2012) argues that women's legal and economic capacities varied considerably according to class, region, and political context, while Uma Chakravarti (1993) demonstrates that patriarchal institutions were continually negotiated rather than uniformly imposed. The Kashmiri evidence supports this interpretation. Elite women enjoyed opportunities unavailable to most ordinary women, yet even within the royal household their authority remained dependent upon changing political circumstances. Taken together, the available evidence indicates that marriage, family, and property formed interconnected dimensions of women's lives in early

medieval Kashmir. Patriarchal norms undoubtedly shaped inheritance, kinship, and domestic organization, but they did not entirely exclude women from exercising legal, economic, or political authority. Through marriage alliances, regencies, control of wealth, and participation in dynastic governance, royal women in particular demonstrated that family institutions could function not only as mechanisms of social control but also as avenues for the exercise of female agency.

Women in Education and Cultural Life

The intellectual and cultural history of early medieval Kashmir occupies a distinguished place in the history of South Asia. Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, the valley emerged as an important centre of Sanskrit learning, philosophy, historiography, aesthetics, and religious scholarship. Thinkers such as Abhinavagupta, Kṣemendra, and Bilhaṇa contributed significantly to Indian intellectual traditions. Although the surviving literary corpus was overwhelmingly composed by men, textual and historical evidence indicates that women also participated in the educational and cultural life of Kashmir, particularly within elite and royal circles. Their contributions are visible in religious learning, literary patronage, artistic production, and the preservation of cultural traditions, even though they remain less extensively documented than those of their male contemporaries (Stein, 1900; Singh, 2008). Education in early medieval Kashmir was closely associated with temples, monasteries, Brahmanical households, and centres of Sanskrit learning. Formal education remained largely restricted to upper social groups, especially Brahmins and members of the ruling elite. While literary sources seldom describe women's education systematically, the intellectual accomplishments attributed to several royal women imply that elite women received instruction in religious texts, ethics, statecraft, and courtly culture (Roy, 2012). Queens who exercised political authority, advised rulers, or supervised religious endowments necessarily possessed levels of literacy and administrative competence that exceeded purely domestic education.

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī* repeatedly portrays royal women as intelligent political actors capable of influencing governance through counsel, diplomacy, and administrative judgment. Queen Sūryamatī, for instance, is praised not only for her generosity but also for her wisdom in advising King Ananta during periods of financial instability and political crisis (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Similarly, Queen Diddā's successful management of state affairs over more than two decades presupposes familiarity with administrative procedures, court politics, and revenue management. Although Kalhaṇa does not explicitly discuss their education, the effectiveness of these queens suggests that elite women acquired practical knowledge essential for governance (Bamzai, 1994). The broader intellectual climate of Kashmir further supports this conclusion. During the early medieval period, the valley became one of the principal centres of Sanskrit scholarship in the subcontinent. Philosophical traditions such as Kashmir Śaivism flourished under scholars including Abhinavagupta, whose works integrated theology, philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism. While extant philosophical treatises rarely mention women as formal disciples, the ritual and devotional practices associated with Śaiva traditions often involved both men and women, particularly within household and temple settings (Pandey, 1963). The transmission of religious knowledge therefore extended beyond institutional learning into family and community contexts where women played an important role. Literary evidence also indicates that women contributed to the preservation and transmission of religious traditions. The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* assigns women central responsibilities in observing ritual calendars, preserving domestic religious customs, and transmitting ceremonial practices across generations (Kumari, 1973). Their participation in seasonal festivals, household worship, and

community rituals required familiarity with religious traditions and sacred observances. Such forms of knowledge, although different from formal scholastic education, constituted an essential component of Kashmir's cultural continuity.

Royal women also influenced cultural life through literary and artistic patronage. Across early medieval India, queens frequently supported poets, scholars, temple architects, and religious teachers as part of broader programmes of royal patronage (Singh, 2008). Kashmir was no exception. Kalhaṇa records that queens endowed temples, monasteries, and charitable institutions that functioned not only as religious centres but also as places where manuscripts were preserved, scholars were supported, and intellectual activities flourished (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Such patronage contributed indirectly to the development of Kashmir's celebrated literary culture. Artistic expression similarly offered women opportunities for participation in public life. Courtly culture in early medieval Kashmir included music, dance, poetry, and ceremonial performances associated with royal festivals and temple rituals. The *Rājataranginī* occasionally refers to female dancers, musicians, attendants, and performers who participated in court ceremonies and religious celebrations (Stein, 1900). Although these references are brief, they demonstrate that women contributed to the cultural life of the kingdom through artistic and performative traditions. Archaeological evidence complements these literary descriptions. Sculptural programmes in early medieval Kashmiri temples frequently depict female figures representing goddesses, attendants, musicians, and devotees. These images reveal contemporary ideals of femininity while also highlighting the prominence of women within religious iconography (Goetz, 1969; Mitra, 1971). Although artistic representations cannot be read as direct reflections of historical reality, they provide important evidence regarding the symbolic roles assigned to women within the religious imagination of medieval Kashmir. The worship of female deities further enriched women's cultural presence. Goddesses occupied a central position within Kashmiri religious traditions, particularly in Śākta and Śaiva practices. Sacred centres associated with Śārikā, Kṣīr Bhavānī (Rājñī), and other local goddesses attracted widespread devotion, and women participated actively in the festivals and rituals connected with these cults (Kumari, 1973). While the veneration of goddesses did not automatically produce gender equality, it nevertheless created religious spaces in which female symbolism and ritual participation assumed considerable significance.

The transmission of oral traditions constituted another sphere of female cultural influence. Although direct evidence is limited, historians have argued that women played an important role in preserving folklore, domestic rituals, songs, and local customs through oral communication within families and communities (Rangachari, 2013). Such traditions, rarely documented in formal literary texts, contributed substantially to the continuity of Kashmir's cultural heritage across generations. The survival of many ritual practices described in the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* into later centuries suggests the importance of domestic transmission in which women likely served as principal custodians. Modern gender historiography has encouraged historians to broaden definitions of education beyond formal literacy and scholastic institutions. Kumkum Roy (2012) argues that women's knowledge systems encompassed ritual expertise, household management, oral traditions, and practical skills that were essential to the functioning of early Indian society. Applying this perspective to Kashmir reveals that women's contributions to intellectual life cannot be measured solely through surviving written texts authored by men. Rather, cultural knowledge was produced and transmitted through multiple social contexts in which women exercised significant influence. Nevertheless, important limitations remain. Most surviving literary works from early medieval

Kashmir were composed by elite male scholars writing for royal courts and learned audiences. Consequently, ordinary women's educational experiences remain largely invisible in the historical record. The available evidence primarily reflects the lives of queens, noblewomen, and women associated with religious institutions, making it difficult to reconstruct educational opportunities available to women from lower social strata. Historians must therefore distinguish between the exceptional visibility of elite women and the broader realities of medieval society (Chakravarti, 1993). Thus, women in early medieval Kashmir participated in educational and cultural life through diverse yet interconnected roles. Elite women acquired knowledge that enabled them to advise rulers, administer religious endowments, and influence political affairs. Women also preserved religious traditions, patronized scholarship, participated in artistic performances, and transmitted cultural practices within households and communities. Although their contributions are less extensively documented than those of male scholars, the combined literary and archaeological evidence demonstrates that women formed an integral part of Kashmir's vibrant intellectual and cultural landscape.

Women in Economy and Craft Production

The economic history of early medieval Kashmir reveals that women participated in a range of productive activities extending beyond the domestic sphere. Although surviving literary and epigraphic sources focus primarily on queens and elite women, they also contain scattered references to female labour, household industries, agricultural production, trade, and religious economies. When these sources are read alongside archaeological evidence and comparative studies of early medieval India, they suggest that women contributed significantly to the region's agrarian, artisanal, and commercial life. Their economic roles, however, varied according to social status, occupation, and access to property, with elite women exercising control over wealth and patronage while ordinary women participated more directly in productive labour (Sharma, 2001; Singh, 2008). Agriculture formed the foundation of Kashmir's economy during the early medieval period. The fertile valley supported the cultivation of rice, wheat, barley, fruits, saffron, and vegetables through an extensive irrigation system sustained by rivers, springs, and canals. Although literary sources rarely describe women's agricultural labour explicitly, the seasonal festivals recorded in the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* closely associate women with agricultural cycles, harvest celebrations, and fertility rituals (Kumari, 1973). Such ritual participation suggests that women occupied an important place within the agrarian household, where domestic responsibilities were closely integrated with agricultural production. Comparative studies of early medieval Indian society indicate that women regularly participated in sowing, harvesting, food processing, animal husbandry, and the management of household resources (Sharma, 2001). There is little reason to assume that Kashmir differed substantially from these broader patterns. Rural households depended upon family labour, and women likely contributed to cultivation, storage of grain, dairy production, weaving, and other forms of subsistence activity. While these contributions remain largely invisible in elite literary narratives, they constituted an essential component of the regional economy.

The textile industry represented another important sphere of female economic activity. Kashmir had acquired a reputation for high-quality woollen textiles, fine fabrics, embroidery, and shawl production long before the emergence of the celebrated shawl industry of the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Although the large-scale commercialization of Kashmiri shawls belongs to a later era, the skills of spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery were already well established during the early medieval period (Bamzai,

1994). These household industries traditionally relied heavily upon women's labour, particularly within rural and artisan families. Women also participated in the production of clothing, domestic textiles, baskets, mats, and other household goods. Such activities combined economic necessity with domestic responsibility, allowing women to contribute directly to household income while remaining integrated within family production systems. Historians of early medieval India have argued that these forms of labour were indispensable to local economies despite receiving little recognition in elite literary texts (Roy, 2012). The religious economy likewise created opportunities for women's economic participation. Temples and monasteries functioned not only as centres of worship but also as important economic institutions that controlled land, employed artisans, organized festivals, and distributed charitable resources (Singh, 2008). Women participated in these institutions as donors, devotees, attendants, and providers of ritual materials. Literary references to women preparing offerings, textiles, flowers, and ceremonial objects indicate that religious practice generated forms of labour closely connected with local economic activity (Kumari, 1973).

Royal women exercised economic influence on a much larger scale. Queens such as Diddā and Sūryamatī controlled substantial financial resources, sponsored religious institutions, rewarded political supporters, and financed construction projects (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). Their economic authority extended beyond household management to include decisions affecting temple endowments, charitable donations, and, in the case of Diddā, the broader fiscal administration of the kingdom. Such evidence demonstrates that elite women could exercise meaningful control over wealth within the framework of royal governance. Numismatic evidence further illustrates women's economic authority. Coins issued in the names of Queen Sugandhā and Queen Diddā indicate not merely symbolic sovereignty but also participation in the monetary economy of the kingdom. The authority to issue coinage reflected control over fiscal institutions, taxation, and commercial exchange, placing these queens among the few women in early medieval South Asia whose economic authority is directly documented through material evidence (Allan, 1936; Mitchiner, 1998). Their coinage reinforces literary accounts describing them as independent rulers with responsibility for the kingdom's financial administration. Trade also contributed to the prosperity of early medieval Kashmir. Owing to its strategic location between the Indian plains, Central Asia, Tibet, and northwestern regions, Kashmir participated in extensive commercial networks involving textiles, saffron, medicinal plants, horses, precious metals, and luxury goods (Sharma, 2001). While merchants appearing in literary sources are generally male, women belonging to merchant households likely participated in the management of family enterprises, storage of goods, textile production, and local exchange. Comparative evidence from early medieval India suggests that women in mercantile communities frequently contributed to commercial activities, even if they seldom appear independently in documentary records (Verma, 2018).

Household management constituted another significant aspect of women's economic responsibilities. Literary texts portray elite women supervising servants, organizing food distribution, maintaining household stores, and administering palace establishments (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). These activities required considerable organizational ability, particularly within royal households employing large numbers of attendants and officials. Modern economic historians increasingly recognize household management as an important form of economic labour rather than merely a domestic obligation (Roy, 2012). Despite these examples of female participation, economic opportunities remained structured by social hierarchy. Elite women possessed access to wealth, education, and political influence unavailable

to ordinary women, while lower-status women engaged primarily in agriculture, domestic industries, and service occupations. Literary sources seldom acknowledge these women except in passing references to attendants, dancers, servants, or artisans, reflecting the elite perspective of surviving texts (Chakravarti, 1993). Consequently, the economic contributions of non-elite women must often be reconstructed indirectly through comparative historical analysis. Epigraphic evidence from early medieval India further supports the conclusion that women exercised recognized economic rights. Donative inscriptions frequently record women making independent grants of land, lamps, livestock, jewellery, and monetary resources to temples and monasteries (Verma, 2018). Although Kashmir has preserved comparatively few such inscriptions, the available literary and numismatic evidence suggests that elite women similarly possessed the legal capacity to control and transfer economic resources.

Modern historiography has increasingly emphasized that women's labour in pre-modern societies extended beyond formal markets to include subsistence production, household industries, ritual economies, and family enterprises. R. S. Sharma (2001) argues that the expansion of agrarian economies during the early medieval period depended substantially upon household production, in which women played indispensable roles. Likewise, Kumkum Roy (2012) contends that economic history must account for forms of labour traditionally excluded from political narratives, including domestic production and ritual work. Applying these perspectives to Kashmir reveals that women's contributions to the regional economy were more extensive than surviving literary evidence alone would suggest. Thus, women in early medieval Kashmir participated in economic life through multiple and interconnected activities. Elite women exercised authority over wealth, religious endowments, and fiscal administration, while ordinary women contributed to agriculture, textile production, household industries, and religious economies. Although the documentary record remains uneven, the combined evidence of literary sources, archaeology, numismatics, and comparative epigraphy demonstrates that women were active participants in the economic development of early medieval Kashmir rather than passive dependants within the household. Their labour, patronage, and management formed an essential, though often underrepresented, component of the region's social and economic history.

Comparative Analysis of Literary and Epigraphic Evidence

The reconstruction of women's history in early medieval Kashmir depends upon the careful integration of literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence. Each category of source illuminates different dimensions of women's lives while simultaneously presenting methodological limitations. Literary texts provide detailed narratives of political events and individual personalities but frequently reflect elite ideological perspectives. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence, by contrast, offers more direct documentary testimony regarding donations, property rights, royal authority, and religious patronage, although the surviving corpus from Kashmir is comparatively limited. A balanced historical interpretation therefore requires the critical comparison of these diverse forms of evidence rather than privileging one source over another (Singh, 2008; Sircar, 1965). Among literary sources, Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī* remains the principal foundation for reconstructing the political history of women in early medieval Kashmir. Unlike many court chronicles of medieval India, Kalhaṇa explicitly consulted earlier chronicles, inscriptions, genealogies, and oral traditions while attempting to establish a chronological framework for Kashmir's rulers (Stein, 1900). His work preserves detailed accounts of queens such as Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī, describing their political interventions, administrative capabilities, religious patronage,

and influence over dynastic succession. Without the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, much of the political history of Kashmiri women would remain unknown. Nevertheless, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* cannot be treated as an entirely objective historical record. Kalhaṇa wrote within the intellectual framework of twelfth-century Brahmanical society, and his assessments of female rulers were often shaped by prevailing gender ideals. Women who embodied virtues such as piety, generosity, and loyalty were generally praised, whereas those exercising independent political authority were sometimes portrayed ambivalently or criticized for personal ambition (Chakravarti, 1993). Queen Diddā exemplifies this pattern. Although Kalhaṇa acknowledges her administrative skill and political success, he simultaneously condemns her ruthlessness in language that modern historians identify as reflecting gendered moral expectations rather than purely political evaluation (Rangachari, 2013). Such portrayals require careful contextual interpretation.

The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* presents a different type of literary evidence. Rather than narrating political events, it records religious practices, festivals, sacred geography, and ritual customs associated with pre-Islamic Kashmir. Its descriptions of women's participation in seasonal festivals, domestic worship, and communal ceremonies illuminate aspects of everyday religious life that receive comparatively little attention in political chronicles (Kumari, 1973). However, as a normative religious text, the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* prescribes ideal behaviour rather than documenting historical practice. Consequently, historians must distinguish between ritual prescriptions and the actual experiences of women in medieval Kashmiri society. Epigraphic evidence serves as an important corrective to these literary limitations. Inscriptions generally record specific historical acts—such as land grants, temple endowments, donations, and commemorative foundations—and therefore provide documentary evidence less influenced by narrative conventions. Where women appear in inscriptions, they are usually identified as donors, patrons, or members of ruling families exercising legally recognized authority over property (Sircar, 1965). Such records confirm that women possessed the capacity to sponsor religious institutions and transfer economic resources, thereby corroborating literary descriptions of elite female patronage. The Kashmiri epigraphic record, however, remains fragmentary. Climatic conditions, repeated political upheavals, the destruction of monuments, and the reuse of building materials have resulted in the loss of many inscriptions that may once have existed (Kak, 1933). Consequently, surviving inscriptions alone cannot provide a comprehensive account of women's history. This scarcity necessitates greater reliance upon literary narratives than would be required for regions such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, or Odisha, where thousands of inscriptions survive documenting women's donations and property rights (Verma, 2018).

Numismatic evidence provides another independent line of historical verification. Coins issued in the names of Queen Sugandhā and Queen Diddā constitute tangible proof that women exercised sovereign authority within the political institutions of Kashmir (Allan, 1936; Mitchiner, 1998). Unlike literary narratives, which may contain rhetorical embellishment, coinage reflects official state authority because the issuance of currency required administrative recognition of the ruler's legitimacy. The existence of these coins therefore substantiates Kalhaṇa's account of female sovereignty and demonstrates that women's political authority extended beyond symbolic representation. Archaeological evidence likewise complements literary testimony. Monumental temple complexes at Martand, Avantipur, Pandrethan, and other sites reveal the scale of royal investment in religious architecture during the Kārkoṭa and Utpala periods (Goetz, 1969). Although surviving inscriptions seldom identify female patrons explicitly, literary sources repeatedly associate queens with temple construction, restoration, and charitable endowments. Archaeology thus provides the physical context within which literary accounts of religious patronage can

be evaluated. A comparison of these different categories of evidence reveals important areas of convergence. Both literary and material sources consistently indicate that royal women exercised considerable influence in political and religious life. Kalhaṇa's descriptions of Diddā's reign, for example, are reinforced by the existence of coins bearing her name, while accounts of royal patronage correspond with the archaeological remains of major temple complexes. Such convergence strengthens confidence in the historical reliability of these aspects of the literary tradition (Stein, 1900; Allan, 1936).

At the same time, significant differences exist between literary and epigraphic representations of women. Literary narratives emphasize exceptional individuals—queens, princesses, and noblewomen—whose actions affected dynastic politics. Epigraphic evidence, by contrast, often records routine acts of donation made by women without dramatic political significance. Consequently, inscriptions broaden the historical picture by demonstrating that women's public activities were not confined solely to royal courts but also included religious patronage and property transactions undertaken by women of varying social backgrounds (Verma, 2018). Modern historiography increasingly advocates an interdisciplinary approach that integrates textual, archaeological, and material evidence. Upinder Singh (2008) argues that no single category of source is sufficient for reconstructing early Indian social history because each preserves different aspects of historical experience. Similarly, Kumkum Roy (2012) emphasizes that gender history requires moving beyond political narratives to examine ritual practices, property rights, economic activities, and material culture. The study of early medieval Kashmir particularly benefits from this methodology because the strengths of one category of evidence compensate for the limitations of another. This interdisciplinary perspective also challenges earlier historiographical assumptions that portrayed medieval women primarily as passive dependants within patriarchal households. The combined evidence demonstrates that women participated actively in governance, temple patronage, economic management, religious ceremonies, and cultural life. While patriarchal institutions undoubtedly structured social relations, they did not eliminate opportunities for female agency. Rather, women's experiences varied according to class, political status, kinship networks, and access to economic resources. The comparison of literary and epigraphic evidence therefore leads to a more nuanced understanding of women's history in early medieval Kashmir. Literary narratives preserve invaluable information regarding political personalities and courtly life but require critical interpretation because of their ideological character. Epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence provide documentary confirmation of many literary accounts while simultaneously illuminating aspects of women's legal, economic, and religious activities absent from narrative texts. Together, these sources reveal that women occupied diverse and influential positions within Kashmiri society, challenging simplistic assumptions about gender in early medieval India and demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary historical methodology.

Conclusion

The study of women in early medieval Kashmir demonstrates that gender relations were far more complex and dynamic than traditional historical narratives have often suggested. By integrating literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence, this paper has shown that women occupied diverse roles in the political, religious, economic, and cultural life of the Kashmir Valley between the sixth and thirteenth centuries CE. Although patriarchal institutions continued to shape family organization, inheritance, and political succession, they did not completely exclude women from exercising authority or participating in public life. Instead, women's experiences varied considerably according to social status, political

circumstances, and access to material resources. The literary traditions of Kashmir, particularly the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* and Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, remain indispensable for reconstructing women's history. The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* reveals women's central role in ritual observances, household religion, and seasonal festivals, illustrating that they were active participants in the religious life of the community rather than passive observers (Kumari, 1973). Kalhaṇa's chronicle, despite its elite perspective and gendered moral judgments, provides detailed accounts of queens who influenced administration, diplomacy, succession, and religious patronage (Kalhaṇa, trans. Stein, 1900). These narratives preserve evidence for female political agency unparalleled in most other regional historical traditions of early medieval India. Among the most significant findings of this study is the prominence of royal women in Kashmiri politics. Queens such as Sugandhā, Diddā, and Sūryamatī exercised authority in different ways—as sovereign rulers, regents, advisers, and patrons of religious institutions. Their careers demonstrate that female political leadership, although exceptional, was institutionally recognized under particular historical conditions. The existence of coinage issued in the names of Sugandhā and Diddā further confirms that their authority extended beyond symbolic influence to encompass the formal mechanisms of sovereignty, including fiscal administration and state legitimacy (Allan, 1936; Mitchiner, 1998). Religious patronage emerged as another important avenue through which women exercised public authority. Literary accounts and the limited epigraphic evidence indicate that queens and elite women supported temple construction, charitable institutions, and religious communities. Such patronage was simultaneously an expression of personal devotion and a means of reinforcing dynastic legitimacy. Women's participation in religious festivals and domestic ritual practices further demonstrates that they played an essential role in preserving the religious and cultural traditions of Kashmir (Singh, 2008; Verma, 2018).

The examination of property rights and economic activities also reveals that women were active participants in the material life of the kingdom. Literary evidence suggests that elite women controlled wealth, supervised charitable donations, and managed religious endowments, while comparative epigraphic studies indicate that women across early medieval India possessed recognized legal capacities to own and transfer certain forms of property (Verma, 2018). Ordinary women contributed to agriculture, textile production, household industries, and religious economies, even though these activities remain underrepresented in elite literary narratives. Their labour formed an indispensable component of the regional economy and household production system (Sharma, 2001). The comparative analysis of literary and epigraphic evidence underscores the importance of interdisciplinary methodology in reconstructing women's history. Literary texts provide rich narratives but frequently reflect ideological assumptions regarding gender, morality, and kingship. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence, although comparatively sparse in Kashmir, offers more direct documentary testimony concerning women's legal and economic activities. Archaeological remains provide an additional material context for evaluating literary descriptions of temple patronage and royal benefaction. When interpreted collectively, these sources present a more balanced and historically grounded understanding of women's agency than any single category of evidence can provide (Sircar, 1965; Roy, 2012). At the same time, this study also highlights important limitations in the available evidence. The surviving sources overwhelmingly privilege elite women associated with royal courts and religious institutions, leaving the lives of ordinary women comparatively obscure. Climatic conditions, political upheavals, and the fragmentary survival of inscriptions further restrict the scope of historical reconstruction. Consequently, future research would benefit from greater attention to archaeological investigations, unpublished inscriptions, regional material

culture, and comparative studies with neighbouring Himalayan regions. Interdisciplinary approaches incorporating environmental history, landscape archaeology, art history, and digital epigraphy may further enrich our understanding of women's experiences in medieval Kashmir.

Ultimately, the evidence examined in this paper challenges generalized assumptions regarding the status of women in early medieval India. Kashmir presents a distinctive regional example in which women could, under certain circumstances, exercise political sovereignty, manage economic resources, sponsor religious institutions, and influence cultural life. Their agency was neither absolute nor universal, but it was nevertheless substantial enough to shape the political and religious development of the kingdom. Recognizing this complexity contributes not only to the gender history of Kashmir but also to broader debates concerning state formation, social organization, and the diversity of women's experiences in early medieval South Asia. Rather than viewing women solely through the lens of domesticity or exceptional queenship, future scholarship should continue to explore the intersections of gender, power, religion, economy, and material culture. Such an approach promises a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Kashmir's medieval past and reinforces the importance of integrating literary narratives with epigraphic and archaeological evidence in historical research.

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