

Position of Women in Ancient Kashmir as Gleaned from Nilmatpuran

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Abstract

Women occupy an important place in the developmental history of humanity. In order to ascertain the net progress of a society, the success or the status occupied or given to women forms an inalienable part. This paper is an attempt to analyse the position of women in case of Kashmir from a primary source, Nilmatpuran. It also aims at comparing the contemporary position with the past to find out whether the status of woman has progressed or degraded.

Keywords: Nilmatpuran, Sati, Women, Kashmir, Festivals.

Introduction

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellence and to realize its limitations is the study of history of position and status of women in it. Amongst the numerous and diverse literary sources the *Puranas* are an important and rich source of ancient Indian history and culture. The *Puranas* constitute a rich branch of Sanskrit literature quantitatively and qualitatively. The *Puranas* trace their antiquity to the Vedic literature and have come to be recognized as the fifth Veda. They are said to have been created for the benefit of the sudras and the women, and this tends to suggest the importance of the *Puranas*, especially, for the study of the status and position of women in ancient and medieval India.

The first literary source about Kashmir history is *Nilamatapurana*. The date of the *Nilamatapurana* is uncertain. But Kalhana's reference to it as a work of high antiquity may suggest a date earlier than the accession of the Karkotas. The mention of Buddha in the work as an incarnation of Vishnu has led some scholars to assign the book not much earlier than the 7th century CE.

Nilamatapurana is an ancient Sanskrit text dealing with the *tirthas* (Sacred places) rituals and ceremonials of Kashmir. It also deals incidentally with the legends of the origin of Kashmir, the myths relating to its original inhabitants and their gradual displacement by others. In dealing with rituals and ceremonies of worship and the duties to which they are to be offered, *Nilamatapurana* throws a great deal of light on the social conditions of ancient Kashmir. Buhler described it "as a real mine of information regarding the sacred places of Kashmir and their legends.

Position of Women:

Nilamatapurana provides the social background to *Rajatarangini's* dynastic and political history. It shows the Kashmiris as devout people, worshiping their gods, firmly believing in the sacredness of their land, celebrating numerous festivals and generally leading a happy life. *Nilamatapurana* throws welcome light on many aspects of Kashmir life. The most relieving feature of the family life of Kashmir as seen in the *Nilamatapurana* is the status and position of women.

We learn that the first part of a women's life was spent in her father's house when liberal education was imparted to her. According to *Nilmatapurana* she was trained in fine arts. Bilhana extols the women of Kashmir for their learning which allowed them to speak fluently both Sanskrit and Prakrit.

Nowhere is she considered 'the living torch illuminating the way to hell or the devourer of the intellect of men. There is no reference of veil worn by her and she moves quite freely in the society. There was no attempt to marginalize them, or de-cultarise their personality. The freedom that women enjoyed in Kashmir society is something which one does not come across elsewhere in north India. Participating joyfully in the numerous festivals prescribed in the *Nilmatapurana*, they would go the gardens in the company of their men folk without any inhibition or fear of approbation. Women are allowed to participate in the celebration of festivals and religious ceremonies. In the moonlit night of *Kaumudi Mahotsava*, we find her sitting besides the sacred fire in the company of her husband, children, servants, and husband's friends. On the day of *Iramanjari-Punjana* a festival of flowers the ladies were honored with presents of flowers and garlands. Such was the spirit of the times that young maiden were enjoined to go and enjoy water sports. Plying with men was allowed to women. Women were honored on the new snowfall day. They were honored on the 4th of the bright of Magha and on the 4th day of Asvayij and Jyestha. Once the girl had completed her education she was to be married suitably. As a wife she was loved and honored by her husband. There was *Madana Trayudashi* festival in honor to the god of love. On this special occasion the wife receives bath by her husband personally with sacred water. There were special occasions when men were to make ladies of the house happy by giving them new cloths as presents. It is important to mention here that it could have been happen only in a free atmosphere were ladies could move

freely and talk friendly with everyone. A mother was respected both in theory and in practice. Mother could even be installed on the throne on the demise of her sonless husband-king.

Women performed various rites, rituals and ceremonies. The significant feature was that mother Goddess cult had occupied a central place in the religious beliefs of Kashmir. Gods were always mentioned with their consorts. The goddesses Asokika, Syama, Durga, Sri, Karisini, Bhadrakali, Bheda, Kapinjali, Suresvari, Bhadresvaei, Gaudri, Suvijaya, Sakuni, Brahmacarini, Cakresvari, and Grhadevi were worshiped by the people of Kashmir. In fact it would appear from *Nilmata* that women in Kashmir not only enjoyed considerable freedom but were looked upon with honor and respect.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes apparent that the women were held in high prestige in Kashmir. But whether this phenomenon was general in nature or particular remains a mystery as there are no ample sources about them. The condition or position of the common women is not deciphered by *Nilmatpuran*. Hence we are not able to declare generally that the position of all women was better. But it seems that the description of the *Nilmatapuran* though seems to speak about the women of royal families, it can be inferred that the freedom that women enjoyed could have been applicable at the common level as well. We need not to forget that there were many women in Kashmir society who worked as prostitutes. Some were Devdasis. Even the tradition of Sati was there. Keeping in view these things, it seems that the prostitution was an established trade like in many developed countries of the contemporary world where pornography is a stable industry. Regarding the Devdasis, we often underestimate them. It seems that it was religious zeal in such a society where women were given ample freedom that brought some women to the temples to act as dancers in order to attain the religious merit. Rather, the learning of fine arts by women depicts the belief that women were born genius. Only the tradition of Sati seems a negative tradition regarding the position of women.

Ved Kumari while writing the explanation of *Nilmatpuran* states that the dancing girls even in the courts were not sexually exploited. It shows that there was a standard morality in the ancient society of Kashmir which naturally guarded the esteem of women. Here it seems that religious values were kept in high esteem and the people used to live a pure religious life where there was no room for the immoral activities. As we are aware that the Kashmir remained prone to foreign invasions, hence it is quite possible that the mingling of the alien traditions could have led to the degeneration of the earlier moral values which in turn could have degraded the position of women. In the contemporary Kashmir with Islam as the major religion, only Purdah system seems to have got stiff that too in some extreme religious families. Even now the education of women in Kashmir is stressed upon and we see that the women in Kashmir are excelling in every field of life.

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