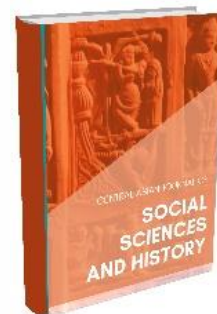




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Prevalence and Continuity of Vaishnavism in Early Medieval Kashmir.

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ABSTRACT

In order to comprehend the cultural basis of any community, it is pertinent to understand its religious beliefs. Religion has always been an integral component of the people in Kashmir valley. The advent of civilization in Kashmir and its growth paved the way for different religions to flourish there. During Pre-historic times people in Kashmir used to practice animism which is best reflected in the worship of snakes by Nagas who were the original inhabitants of the land. Thereafter Buddhism arrived in the region during the missionary life of Ashoka and it helped in the propagation of this faith. Kashmir has always been called as the land of Shaivism as the Shastras or Darshanic Philosophy associated with Lord Shiva emerged and developed here. In the paper we will discuss the growth of Vaishnavism in Kashmir through different phases in the history of the region.

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Introduction

Vaishnavism forms one of the many aspects of Hinduism and the revered deity in this school of thought is Lord Vishnu. He is one of the Gods which formulate the basic Hindu trinity most prominently known by the name of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh and since the beginning of Later

Vedic Age (900 B.C.) Vishnu has enjoyed popularity among the masses of Indian Sub-continent. There are many incarnations associated with lord Vishnu and prominent among them are Ram, Krishna, Matsya, Kuma, Varaha, Prashurama and even Lord Buddha is also considered by some Puranas as his incarnation. The main reason behind the popularity of this section of Hinduism is defined elaboratively in Bhagwad Gita where Lord Krishna himself states that whenever there would be a degradation of religion and the rise of unrighteousness takes place, he will himself appear on earth in the form of mortal being and get rid of all the evils and establish the rule of Dharma and righteousness. While Brahma is creator and Shiva is destroyer, the onus of the well being of humans lies within the hands of Vishnu and he is thus, rightfully, called as the preserver and protector of the world.

Religion in Kashmir:

From the testimony of Kalhana in his book Rajatarangini it is clear that Naga worship was already established in the valley prior to the advent of Brahmanical fold in Kashmir. The worship of Nagas among the natives of Kashmir can also be ascertained from the Buddhist chronicles which clearly shows a dissent among the locals against an alien faith. When Asoka sent Majjhantika to Kashmir he found that king Aravala of Nagas was already ruling there and was destroying the land and agricultural production of the land. These Buddhist chronicles then go and narrate that how this mighty king succumbed before the powers of Majjhantika and accepted Buddhism. This story shows that how amalgamation of people belonging to varying sects took place in the region. After Ashoka, his successor Jaluka adopted Shaivism as his religion and is indicator of the fact that people in Kashmir used to co-exist peacefully and lived amicably.

The establishment of Shaivism in Kashmir from pre-Ashokan days is a fact that is presented in Rajatarangini and even in Buddhist scriptures. Prior to the days of Ashoka there was already in Kashmir a temple by the name of Siva Vijyesha and the king himself is associated with the building of two Shiva temples by the name of Shiva Bhutesha and Shiva Ashokeshwara. Later when Hunan king Mihirkula invaded the valley he also built a number of Shiva temples because he was an ardent follower of the deity. But this is only one aspect of Shaivism in the region, the other aspect lies in the emergence of philosophical doctrines associated with Shiva and their development in Kashmir. This philosophy is sometimes called as Trika Shastra and it is a collection of different branches that revere Lord Shiva and are divided into Agamic Shastra, Spanda Shastra, Pratyabhijna Darshan and Kaul, Krama and other some branches are also associated with it. It was due to the emergence of these philosophical doctrines in Kashmir that the land associated with the region also begun to be identified with Shiva and these tenets were and are known by the name of Kashmir Shaivism.

The name Kashmir Shaivism began to be resonated with the region of Kashmir itself and for a layman it was quite difficult to ascertain that other deities were also venerated in the region, Vishnu being the prominent among them. Literary as well as epigraphic evidences do show the worship of Vishnu along with his many incarnations in Kashmir. As one of the Hindu trinity he is regarded as the embodiment of Satguna (the virtue of righteousness) and the protector of universe in contradiction to Brahma, the Creator and Shiva- the Destroyer. The oldest book of Kashmir, Nilmata Purana, supplies

ample information about the presence of Vaishnavism in the region and it also provides beautiful description of Vishnu as the penultimate god, praised and honored by Brahma and Shiva.

Rajatarangini provides the earliest historical reference to the worship of Vishnu where it has been claimed that an image of Vishnu Jayaswamin was dedicated by king Pravarseana II whose time period is about the end of sixth century AD. Another image of Vishnu Ranaswamin was consecrated by King Ranaditya near his capital at Pravarapura. Kalhan has ascribed Ranaditya with a reign of about three hundred years which is quite hyperbolic and serious exaggeration of facts. But the authenticity of Vishnu Ranaswamin is proved by Jayanta Bhattas mention of the same in his work Agamadambara. This temple has also been mentioned in the works of other Kashmiri dramatists and one such dramatist was Mankha. Mankha gives a beautiful description of the temple in his work Srikanthacharitam.

Through almost the details provided in Rajatarangini one can point out to the fact that almost all of the kings of the Karkota Dynasty were the worshippers of Vishnu and it was under their reign that Vaishnavism flourished in Kashmir. Vishnu became the most revered deity of the family and it occupied a prominent position amongst the deities worshipped in Kashmir. A son of king DurlabhaVardhana, called Malhana, built the shrine of Vishnu Malhansvamin and the king himself dedicated the shrine of Vishnu Durlabhsvamin at Srinagar.

After the death of Chandrapida Vajraditya, Lalitaditya came to the throne. He was a great follower of Lord Vishnu and honored him by building a shrine of Keshva Vishnu in the very early part of his tenure. He built a marvelous shrine of Vishnu Muktaswamin at Hushkapura and here also he dedicated a golden image of Lord Vishnu called Muktakesava. To honor his deity's incarnation in the form of boar (Varaha) he made another shrine called as Vishnu Mahavaraha. Ranasvamin and Govardhanadhara were two other silver images of his beloved deity made by him. His queen Kamlavati put up a large silver image of Kamalakesava and the king of Lata Kayya who was probably a feudatory of Lalitaditya, founded a shrine of Vishnu Kayaswamin.

Lalitaditya was an ardent follower of Vishnu and it is depicted by his zeal to honor and commemorate the deity by the construction of temples. Whenever he used to go on war it was his habit to take blessings from Lord Vishnu. As we already know that religious support or acceptance of any religious idea by a monarch helps in the propagation of that faith. Lalitaditya was the first king from valley who marked his stamp of dominance over the entire sub-continent by attacking into the interiors of India as deep as in plains of Punjab to the coastal areas of Gaur (modern Bengal) and Orissa. He was the man who defeated Yashovarman, King of Kannauj and brought Atrigupta, Grandfather of luminary scholar Abhinavagupta, to the valley in Kashmir. He was respected by his people and it would be apt to say that a person of such stature and his devotion and patronage to Vaishnavism would have definitely made an impact on his subjects. This would have helped Vaishnavism to grow in and around Kashmir and it definitely would have shed light on those who were near him and thus helped in the growth of this sect.

The grandson of Lalitapida, Jayapida was also an ardent follower of Vaishnavism. He made the town of Jayapura where he built several temples in honor of Lord Vishnu and Kalhana poetically praises them as, Kesava showing his quadruple form as well as reclining on the serpent Sesa, has truly

taken up Jayapia's abode, abandoning his residence in Vishnu-loka.

Karkotas were zealous followers of Lord Vishnu and this statement can be corroboratively substantiated by the fact that not the deity but even his Vahana (ride), Garuda, was adulated and revered by the regime. The construction of a massive stone pillar bearing the emblem of Garuda by Karkotas has been mentioned by Kalhana in Rajatarangini. They were called as Garuddhvajas whose literal meaning is the flag of Garuda but it symbolically means the flag of Vishnu. Garuddhvajas even in these days do form a prerequisite in the construction of a Vishnu temple and the fact that these massive emblems were constructed during the regime of Karkotas show the massive following of the deity in Kashmir.

Vishnu was also worshipped by the members of Utpal Dynasty, who succeeded Karkotas. Kalhana mentions the shrine of Vishnu Avantiswamin made by Avantiswamin made by AvantiVarman, the first king of Dynasty. His brother Samara founded a temple called Samarswamin. Avantivarman's irrigation minister Suyya built at the confluence of Sindhu and Vitasta a temple of Hrsikesa yogaswamin.

Kalhana's Rajatarangini also helps us in understanding the development of Vaishnavism in Kashmir from tenth century onwards. Queen Sugandha (904-906 A.D.) built a temple of Nandikesvara. A temple of Vishnu Meruvardhanswami was built by Meruvardhana, Partha's (906-921) minister.

Successor Parvagupta (949-950 AD) completed it. Kshemagupta's wife, Queen Didda founded a series of Vishnu shrines in order to increase the merit of her deceased son Abhimanyu, she built a temple in honor of Lord Vishnu called Abhimanyuswamin.

Among the various incarnations of Vishnu, Varaha (boar) Krishna and Narasimha were most popular. Lalitaditya built a temple of Mahavaraha and iconographic representation of boar, man and lion faced Vishnu (Vishnu Vaikunta) come from the ruins of Avantipura and as well as from Martanda temple.

In Kashmir one can find a synthesis of diverse Vaishnava cults which were prevalent in different regions of Ancient India. The Panchratra sects whose emergence we see in the time period of Guptas also find its presence in Kashmir valley. There was an juxtaposition of different sects of Vaishnava cults in Kashmir, for instance the Vedic God Vishnu, Panchratra school, Satvata philosophy of Vaishnavas and the God Krishna. Vishnu was worshipped in all his forms and the basic idea that God always helps his people whenever they need him was in vogue among the people of the valley. The kings of several dynasties in early to early medieval Kashmir adhered to this sect of Vaishnavism. We have at our expense not only the testimony of Kalhana for that but also the writings of different poets who predeceased him. They tell us about how different monarchs from Lohara, Utpala and other dynasties that ruled in that particular geographical entity were reverent of this sect of Vaishnavism.

It is because of the popularity of Shaivism in the region many people like to assume that Vaishnavism didn't have a solid ground here. But these assumptions are superseded once one gets into touch with the voluminous literature that has been cultivated in Kashmir. There is no doubt regarding the fact that Kashmir Shaivism emerged and developed in Kashmir but there is also no denying the

fact that Vaishnavism was part and parcel of the Brahmanical pantheon in the region. The first known and available source from the region is Nilamata Purana and it vouches towards the fact that Vishnu was a venerated deity throughout the valley. Not only has this but the book also claimed about the supremacy of Lord Vishnu among the trios of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. The most venerated God in the text is Vishnu himself. Regarding the origin of the Kashmir Nilamata Purana says that the demon King Jalodbhava had taken control of the land. In order to make land accessible to all Lord Hari (Vishnu) fought a fierce battle with that demon. In this battle he was helped by other Gods like Brahma, Shiva, Indra and many others. Finally Lord Vishnu was able to subdue the demon and he slayed him by cutting his head and emerging victorious in the battle. This fact that has been presented in the text insinuates towards a major point that prior to the Shaivism becoming a major cult in the region Vaishnavism was the major school of thought in Kashmir.

The divinity of Lord Vishnu is not limited to Nilamata Purana or in the Rajatarangini of Kalhana. Other texts produced in the region like Somdeva's Kathasaritsagar, Kshemendra's Dasavatarcharita, Narmamala, Deshpadesha and Brihatkathamajari, Damodargupt's Kuttanimatam and even Shaivite authors like Abhinavagupta, Somananda, Utpal Bhatta respected and revered Lord Vishnu. In the stories of Kathasaritsagar, Bhartmanjari, Narmamala and others a reader will definitely find out about several references to Lord Vishnu. There are several stories dedicated to him and shows him as the protector of the entire worldly realm. The stories about Lord Vishnu are both morally and ethically valuable to all generations and it gives us a glimpse about the structural aspect of the religion in the society of Kashmir.

Conclusion:

Based on the facts provided above it can be thoroughly summed up that Vaishnavism along with Shaivism was one of the major branches of Hinduism in Kashmir during Early Medieval Phase. The kings of all three major dynasties, Karkotas, Utpalas and Loharas gave patronage to this sect and it helped a lot in the propagation of Vaishnavite ideals in the valley. The authors that emerged in the region during this phase also had a positive outlook towards the faith and it resonates in their works. Kshemendra's Dasavatarcharita takes cue from the ten incarnations of the Lord Vishnu and in this work he depicts all those incarnations beautifully. In the same work he also characterizes Buddha as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. All these developments took place in the geographical domain of Kashmir and it would be very apt to say that in Kashmir Vaishnavism had a firm hold over the masses of the region and thus formed one of the major sects of Hinduism in Kashmir.

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