



Research Paper

Understanding the Early Medieval Polity of Kashmir through Modern Literary Works

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A serious effort towards the study of Indian political history was made after the revolt of 1857 because the British had felt that due to their lack of knowledge about the political structures of India, they could not comprehend the lacking and vulnerability of the Indian people. They made political history a tool of bifurcating the ruling dynasties in a communal shape which is stuck with us even today in the shape of the nomenclature we use to periodize our political history.

The works of Max Muller criticized India for being a stagnant and changeless society, James Mill's *The History Of British India* published in 1817, reflected the agenda of the colonialist policy and justification for their rule stating that they considered it to be their responsibility to make India a civilized nation with a proper administrative setup. The response to this outlook came very strongly towards the closure of 19th century when nationalist historiography hit back and challenged this colonialist approach of viewing the polity of the country. K.P. Jayswal's *Hindu Polity* published in 1924, became a benchmark for the writers as well as the readers of Indian polity. He argued that state was very much prevalent in ancient India and the art of governance was known to us.

Therefore, while studying polity it becomes essential to understand the various approaches adopted by writers in the understanding of political ideas and structures. While both colonial and nationalist writers have focused on dynastic histories, a recent approach has challenged the existing division of the period and thus, has emerged the debate on the early medieval period and its political institutions. Different perceptions and points of view have been put forth and the polity of this period is viewed beyond the conventional lines of a centralized or a decentralized one or even a mix of two.

D.D. Kosambi in his article *Origin of Feudalism in Kashmir* (1956) has tried to highlight how various classes were involved in the politics of the valley. Like the Brahmins most of the times remained passive and were not specifically invested in the politics. He has mentioned that the dynasties were not caste driven as can be seen through the examples of Karkotas who rose from tribal origin and the Utpala dynasty being founded by the son of a spirit distiller. Another important question that has been dealt with by Kosambi is that of the Damaras, who played a very crucial role in the polity of Kashmir. Whether the Damaras were feudal lords or the holders of landed property and how over a time period they became so strong that had possession of arms and owned villages and fortified buildings are important questions that he has analysed. The later books of *Rajatarangini* have also mentioned the growing power of Damaras and their factions with the ruling families. So, it becomes interesting to understand the growth of this landed class in the context of the role played by them in the polity of early medieval Kashmir.

R.S. Sharma's *Aspects Of Political Ideas And Institutions In Ancient India* published in 1957, provides an insight into the political history of India. It's a very well documented work giving detailed development of ancient political structure. It fully gives an analysis of stages of development of Indian political ideas and structures encompassing the entire ancient polity. It discusses the theories of origin of state and helps one to understand the nature and various parameters of state and processes of state formation. The book has also dealt with the historiography of Indian polity and the merits and demerits of some perceptions. Issues like kin-ship, duties of the king, organization of administration, irrigation facilities, functions performed by political institutions, role of upper *varnas*, taxes and non-kin state apparatus have been explained by placing them in a socio-economic and material context. The text is highly informative and gives a thorough understanding of ancient Indian polity.

One of the most interesting work on the period has been presented by B.D.Chattopadhyaya in his book entitled *The Making Of Early Medieval India* published in 1994 , the book explores the period and the changes seen in the transition period along with the continuity of the earlier social order without its complete breakdown. The text explains about the model of Indian Feudalism and how it has been perceived differently by different historians. It has tried to explain the emergence of decentralized political structure with the rise of landed intermediaries and a material change in the social setup and how these changes led to the proliferation of various caste groups, subordination of peasantry and the rise of landed aristocracy.

The State In India (1000-1700), edited by Herman Kulke published in 1995, also focuses on the political setup, political processes and state formation. He has highlighted how study of a centralized empire is still very much important in political history of India but various other models of state be it the Segmentary model, Indian Feudalism, Patrimonial state among others have been a matter of debate in the recent historiography. He has enumerated various essays like the feudal debate by R.S.Sharma and Harbans Mukhiya. It also gives a narrative of Burton Stein's segmentary model. He has highlighted the transition from independent regional kingdoms of early medieval India to how a centralized empire was formed first by the Sultanate and then the Mughals. The book helps us to have an overall glimpse of all parts of India from a time transitioning towards medieval period.

Burton Stein's article entitled *The Segmentary State: Interim Reflections*(1995) throws light on the model of segmentary state in the context of south Indian history with special focus mainly on the *Chola* state, the piece provides a great understanding of the early medieval period. He has talked about the ritual sovereignty and political sovereignty and the difference between the two of them. The *nadus* of the *Cholas* are explained to be autonomous units dominated by the peasant class and considered as building blocks of the state structure. He has given details about the prevailing land charters and *Prasastis* in the early medieval period and how the rulers used the mode of ritual sovereignty for building up their rule.

The State in India- Past and Present, edited by Masaki Kimura and Akio Tanabe, published in 2006, has traced the evolution of state in India and its relation with the society and how these two are interdependent on one another. The book has traced the process of state formation from the period of sixteen *Mahajanapadas* and how the state has evolved from then on. The text also indulges into the discussion of whether the state existed in pre-colonial India or was it the result of the British rule.

As far as Kashmir region is concerned, various books written by the regional as well as pan Indian writers give us an insight into the regional polity and its functions.

P.N.K.Bamzai's *A History of Kashmir* (1962), has given a wholesome political history of the region starting from ancient down to the modern period. The author has traced all the important ruling dynasties of Kashmir, their rise, growth and fall, various elements of the administration and the role of king in the political institutions. The book along with the study of polity and political structures of the time, has also painted the economic and cultural conditions and how the culture of Kashmir was very distinctive being a result of blending of various cultures.

S.C.Ray's *Early History And Culture OF Kashmir* published in 1969, is considered to be the cult text in understanding the history of Kashmir region. The work has given a detailed description of the land and its people. The book traces the dynastic history of the valley and gives the account of all the dynasties of the region. The work has also highlighted the cultural peculiarity of the region and its various aspects. It traces the placement of the valley in various ancient texts and travel accounts and archaeological sources. The narratives have been built around certain facts provided by *Rajatarangini* but the author has also questioned the exaggeration of Kalhana. The work encompasses all the diverse historical aspects of the region.

K.S.Saxena's *Ancient Political History of Kashmir* (B.C.300-A.D.1200), published in 1974 constitutes as another important text in the understanding of the political history of Kashmir region. It has traced the political history of Kashmir from its mythical origin from a lake onwards. The text presents us with the wholesome information about various regional dynasties, the kings and kingship, governance, administrative and judicial setup, regional caste system and a cultural background of the area. When one tries to analyse the works of the Kashmir historians, it appears that they have written the history of Kashmir on the lines on which the nationalist historians usually do. Glorification of their region, grandeur of the kings and the court, the victories and a centralized administration form the main theme of their works. They have dedicated a huge amount of their work solely to the dynastic rule, administration and bureaucracy. It comes across as if they are trying to establish the superiority of the dynasties without paying attention to any other aspect of the political setup.

G.M. Rabbani's work *Ancient Kashmir: A Historical Perspective*, is another take on the history of Kashmir, tracing the entire history in detail. The work has also focused much on the sources of the Kashmir history, the ancient period and the Islamic period in the context of the valley.

All these works although provide ample information, yet in many ways the historiography still remains limited to dynastic history, result being that a huge amount of attention is paid to the administrative structure,

rather than understanding how this structure actually emerged and what all conditions led to its growth and development. Since not much alternatives have been discussed in the historiography of Kashmir, V.N. Drabu's *Kashmir Polity (c. 600 – 1200 A.D.)*, catches attention. Probably it is one of the only works of its kind that has dealt with the polity of Kashmir without constricting it to just the mould of a centralized one. Apart from discussing various kinds of state models, glimpses of administration, the thing that stands out is his analysis of feudalism with respect to Kashmir. He has discussed in detail the breaking of a centralized structure and the rise of feudalism, grants of land by donors and brahmins, development of a *Samanta* class and the role of Damaras. This work is rich in providing information of the early medieval Kashmir polity with respect to the presence of a feudal model, thus in some ways challenging the presence of only a centralized polity which for a long time remained the mainstay in the writings of Kashmir region. However, only the land grants have been seen as the basis to indicate a shift in the polity and other factors haven't been dealt with. To understand that one can always fall back to D.D. Kosambi's *Origin of Feudalism in Kashmir*. This work does give glimpses of the economic practices of the valley, the goods that were available and those which needed to be imported and irrigational facilities. He has raised some important questions like whether the Damaras were feudal lords? what was the relation between the nobles and Damaras like? And so on. These observations however, do show that early medieval Kashmir polity did have feudal gleanings, although not similar to the pan Indian level, and one needs to place the early medieval political developments and subsequent changes in Kashmir. It is also necessary to understand that maybe the existing models of how a state came into being might not be applicable to Kashmir for every region has its own peculiarities and a trajectory of historical development. So instead of boxing it into the existing juxtapositions, one needs a way to deal the early medieval polity that keeps intact its originality.

While the review of the works on the political ideas and structures in the early medieval India clearly indicates that it has grown exponentially both in terms of conceptualization and method of analysis of sources, most importantly all these works also point to the fact that political ideas and structures need to be situated in the regional context as regional specificities have important bearing on the formation of polity in that areas. However, when we look at the works on polity in the context of Kashmir it clearly reflects that it has hardly moved beyond the nationalistic paradigms of looking at polity. The idea of monarchical states, a centralized structure still remains the dominant theme. What is noteworthy is the fact that even in the case of monarchical state there is a tendency to draw parallel from political formation in middle gangetic basin. This is a clear indication of carryover of the burden of nationalist historiography disregarding the conceptual and methodological development which has occurred in the domain of political ideas and structures.

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