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Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin and the Advancement of Learning in Medieval Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

The present article examines the development of education, scholarship, and literary activities during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, one of the most enlightened rulers of medieval Kashmir. A distinguished linguist, scholar, and poet, the Sultan was proficient in Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Tibetan and extended generous patronage to literature, music, painting, and other branches of knowledge. His reign witnessed significant intellectual and cultural activity, particularly through the translation and preservation of important works. At his initiative, the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Rajatarangini were translated from Sanskrit into Persian, while several Persian works were rendered into Sanskrit. His encouragement of scholarship attracted numerous learned persons from different regions, thereby transforming Kashmir into an important centre of intellectual and literary exchange. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin also promoted institutional education by establishing schools, colleges, and residential facilities for students. Considerable resources were allocated for the construction of a royal library, while emissaries were sent to India, Persia, Iraq, and Turkistan to acquire books and manuscripts. These initiatives broadened access to education and encouraged people belonging to different social groups to pursue learning. During this period, Persian gained prominence in Kashmir and gradually emerged as the language of the royal court. The arrival of scholars and religious figures from Central Asia further contributed to the spread of Persian literary and intellectual traditions. At the same time, educational institutions such as maktabas and patshalas were established, where Persian and Sanskrit were taught. The intellectual atmosphere of the period is reflected in the writings of contemporary historians and scholars. Srivara highlights the widespread influence of education during Zain-ul-Abidin's reign, observing that learning extended beyond the traditional scholarly classes and reached ordinary sections of society. The Sultan provided students with teachers, books, accommodation, food, and financial assistance, thereby creating favourable conditions for the pursuit of knowledge. His patronage extended to diverse fields, including logic, grammar, literature, the arts, and fine arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420–1470), popularly remembered as Bud Shah, occupies a distinguished position in the history of medieval Kashmir for his sustained patronage of education, literature, scholarship, and the arts. His reign witnessed a significant expansion of intellectual and educational activities, supported by institutions, financial endowments, libraries, translation initiatives, and patronage extended to scholars from different linguistic and cultural traditions. Having received his own education under Maulana Kabir, the Sultan developed a strong personal interest in learning and sought to make educational opportunities accessible to a wider section of society, including economically disadvantaged groups. His educational policies contributed to the emergence of Kashmir as an important centre of learning and literary production. One of the most notable features of his educational policy was the establishment and support of institutions of higher learning. A prominent institution was founded at Nowshahr, near the royal palace, and was placed under the supervision of Maulana Kabir, who had received advanced education at Herat. The institution became an important centre of higher learning and attracted a number of distinguished scholars. The Sultan is said to have visited the institution frequently and participated in intellectual discussions. Another important centre of learning was associated with the hospice of Sheikh Ismail Kubrawi, which attracted students from distant regions, including Herat and Transoxiana. Educational institutions were also established at other places, including Zainagiri and the area near Islamabad, where Mulla Ghazi Khan served as principal. Endowments from villages and other sources were assigned to meet the expenses of these institutions.¹

The educational system under Zain-ul-Abidin was notable not merely for institutional expansion but also for the broadening of the curriculum. Traditional Islamic subjects, including the Qur'an, *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, jurisprudence, theology, logic, and grammar, continued to be taught, while greater attention was also given to literature, history, science, arts, and other branches of knowledge. Training in practical and martial skills, such as horsemanship, archery, and swordsmanship, was also provided. The Sultan encouraged the study of Sanskrit learning and removed restrictions that had previously affected the pursuit of Hindu religious and philosophical studies. Persian, Sanskrit, and Kashmiri were brought into closer intellectual interaction through translation activities. Kashmiri was also accorded importance as a language of instruction, reflecting the Sultan's recognition of the role of the vernacular in the dissemination of knowledge. A significant element of Zain-ul-Abidin's educational policy was the provision of material assistance to students. Students were reportedly provided with teachers, books, accommodation, food, and financial support. Hostels were established to provide residential facilities, while stipends helped students continue their studies without excessive financial hardship. Individuals were also sent to other regions for acquiring technical knowledge, with state assistance extended to their families during their absence. Such measures widened access to education and enabled individuals from families without established scholarly traditions to enter intellectual life. The sources cited in the study suggest that the expansion of learning reached different sections of society, although the evidence regarding systematic female education remains limited.²

Education and Vocational Development

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was known for his keen interest in education and promoting learning across his kingdom. He himself got a proper education from Maulana Kabir and later he gave much importance to the development of education especially for the backward class of the society. One of his achievements was the founding of an educational institution close to his palace at Nowshera. The Sultan's court was surrounded by a great number of scholars, poets, historians and intellectuals, both local and foreign. They included Mulla Ahmad, Sayyid Muhammad Rumi, Qazi Sayyid Ali Shirazi, Sayyid Muhammad Sistani, Maulana Kabir, Mulla Nadiri, Sayyid Muhammad Madani, Jonaraja, Srivara, Yodhabhatta, Bodha Bhatta, Mulla Hafiz, Mulla Qazi Jamal-ul-Din, Sayyid Husain Qummi Razavi, Maulana Qazi Mir Ali Bukhari, Notho Soma Pandit and Malik Haidar Chadura. The Sultan had constant discussions with these scholars, and arrangements were made for them to stay in the capital at Nowshahra. His educational efforts were not limited to any particular region of the kingdom, but included the region around the hospice of Sheikh Ismail Kubrawi. He also campaigned for the development of hostels, colleges and schools to provide educational facilities to less privileged students.³

Zain-ul-Abidin was an avid reader and very much appreciated the acquisition and preservation of knowledge, and is popularly known as Bud Shah. He set up a large library at his palace to enhance his intellects and to promote learning. He dispatched agents to various parts of the world and countries to acquire rare books and manuscripts, thus augmenting the royal library. His curiosity in learning wasn't limited to books. He also promoted the application of hands-on skills in the production and preservation of knowledge, such as papermaking and bookbinding, thus also providing employment opportunities locally. The Sultan also established an institution to be referred to as the Dar-ul-Uloom and handed it over to the administration of his teacher Maulana Kabir. A similar madrasa was opened off the main road to Islamabad and Maulana Gazi was named its head. Various villages contributed money to the educational institutions. His love for women education was also evident in the financial support he gave to promote women education. These actions imply his awareness of the significance of women's education and her potential role in social and intellectual development of the society.⁴

Zain-ul-Abidin had a good command of the language and was acquainted with some of the languages like Persian, Sanskrit and Tibetan. He is also reputed to have composed two treatises in Persian, one on fireworks and the other on the impermanence of this world. He also wrote Persian poems in the name of Qutb. His personal interest in academics and institutional support of education fostered an atmosphere in which intellectual activity could thrive throughout Kashmir. The Sultan's dedication to scholarship led to the revival of learning in Kashmir, and intellectual pursuits could thrive, said Jonaraja. Zain-ul-Abidin's policies did not just pertain to literary and academic education. He also encouraged commercial activity by facilitating trade and business and helping to establish market centers and trading places. These measures established good conditions for commerce, and allowed traders and merchants to profit from the more mobile commerce of goods and services. His economic policies were also connected with improvements in agriculture. Improvements in agricultural output were made through the use of better irrigation systems and methods of farming. Agricultural production helped to assure food security, to produce trade surpluses and to boost the regional economy.⁵

An additional part of the Sultan's economic and educational policy was the craft education. Schools and training programs were established to teach skills like calligraphy, woodwork, metalwork, papermaking, carpet weaving and other crafts. Knowledge was mostly passed from masters of skill to apprentices. Practical training was complemented by emphasis being placed on the quality and artistic nature of the finished products. Thus, alongside the skills needed to take up a job, craft education was an agent of social mobility, cultural growth and traditional knowledge. Under his rule Zain-ul-Abidin promoted the development and introduction of many crafts. These encompassed the polishing of stones, cutting of stones, weaving of carpets, papermaking, bottle making, calligraphy, window cutting, metalworking, bookbinding and gold beating. He promoted the arts of foreign artisans and craftsmen, especially those from Iran and Central Asia, that introduced new techniques to Kashmir. Persia's artisans and craftsmen learned new techniques from local craftsmen and weavers, such as better loom techniques. Papermaking and bookbinding were developed in Samarqand and brought to the region, adding to the artisanal prowess of the region.⁶ The policy of the Sultan to share cultural knowledge and many technical skills of his era made Kashmir an important centre of artistic and technical activity. He brought to their native land skills learned from other parts of the country, reviving old crafts, and developing new industries. He had, therefore, a comprehensive approach for vocational education, which has left a deep impression on the cultural and economic legacy of Kashmir.⁷

Literary, Scholarly, and Scientific Development

The intellectual atmosphere fostered during Zain-ul-Abidin's reign contributed significantly to the development of Persian and Sanskrit literary traditions in Kashmir. His court attracted scholars from Kashmir as well as learned individuals from important centres of Persian scholarship. Among the Persian scholars associated with his court were Maulana Mir Muhammad Rumi, Maulana Ahmad Rumi, Qazi Jamal, Maulana Kabir, Sayyid Muhammad Luristani, and Sayyid Muhammad Sistani. Maulana Kabir, who had earlier served as the Sultan's teacher, played an important role in supervising higher education at Nowshahr.⁸ The presence of these scholars strengthened Persian learning and contributed to the growth of literary culture in Kashmir. The Sultan himself was proficient in several languages, including Persian, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, and is traditionally associated with Persian poetry written

under the pen name *Qutb*. His patronage extended to scholars belonging to different intellectual and religious traditions. Hindu scholars received royal rewards and held significant positions at his court, demonstrating the relatively inclusive intellectual environment that characterized his reign.⁹

During the reign of Zain ul Abidin, the study of Sanskrit underwent a revival. Those who had migrated from Kashmir were invited back and established traditions of Sanskrit scholarship were once again patronised by the kings. The prominent Sanskrit scholars of the period were Jonaraja, Srivara, Pandit Nottasoma, Avatara Bhatta, Yodha Bhatta and Narahari. Jonaraja or Jyotsnakara was a court poet, and thus carried on the tradition of Kalhana. His *Rajatarangini* has been an extension of the history of Kashmir and gives a lot of information about the time of Zain-ul-Abidin. He also had written commentaries on significant Sanskrit works, showcasing his expertise in the field of classical literature.¹⁰ Srivara was another eminent scholar of the court of the Sultan, who was a follower of Jonaraja. He was an expert on Sanskrit, religion and philosophy and understood a little Persian. His *Jaina-Rajatarangini* was the continuation of Kashmir's history. His Sanskrit translation of Jami's *Yusuf-u-Zulaikha* (known in the source as *Kathakautuka*) is an important case in point of interaction between the Persian and Sanskrit literary traditions. Srivara also composed a collection of verses called *Subhashitavali* which is full of verses by a lot of poets. Yodha Bhatta was knowledgeable in Sanskrit, the literary art of Kashmir, and Persian literature, such as the *Shahnama* of Firdausi. Avatara Bhatta and Pandit Nottasoma were also involved in the literary culture of the time. Narahari was an expert on medicine and is linked to a medical dictionary from the fifteenth century, known as the *Rajanighantu*.¹¹

One of the important aspects of the reign of Zain-ul-Abidin was the development of Kashmiri literature. Under his patronage, vernacular language got greater literary importance over Persian and Sanskrit. During this era, several historically and literary important works were created in Kashmiri. Pandit Nottasoma is connected with the biography of the Sultan Zaina Charita and the *Banasurakatha* by Yodha Bhatta is an important Kashmiri literary sample of composition. The work is significant both as a work of literature and from an evidence-based perspective of how the Kashmiri language developed, based on the Puranic story related to Usha, Aniruddha, Krishna and Banasura. Zain-ul-Abidin's reign also saw advances in medical and scientific studies. The Sultan is said to have promoted medicine and allowed physicians to practice their art. He had such physicians as Shirya Bhatta who were prominent and received royal support. At this time both Ayurvedic and Unani medicine was still followed. Mansur Muhammad is linked to a medical text known as *Kifayah-i-Majahidiyya*. The development of the medical scholarship in Kashmir during the fifteenth century is further illustrated by Narahari's *Rajanighantu*.¹²

Translation, Knowledge Exchange, and Intellectual Legacy

Zain-ul-Abidin's love of learning was reflected especially in his royal library. He sent agents to India, Persia, Iraq, Turkistan, etc., to collect books and manuscripts, particularly in Persian and Sanskrit languages.¹³ The purchase and copying of manuscripts were done at high costs and scholars were encouraged to translate important works so that the knowledge would be available to people who belonged to different linguistic and intellectual backgrounds. One of the key partners in this intellectual trade was a translation bureau that was funded by the patronage of the Sultan. Persian was translated into Sanskrit and Sanskrit works were translated into Persian. The important works translated into Persian were the *Mahabharata* and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*.¹⁴ A selected set of other Sanskrit religious and philosophical texts were also rendered into the Persian language. Likewise, Srivara made Jami's *Yusuf-u-Zulaikha* translated into Sanskrit. A number of these translation tasks led to a greater mingling of the Persianate and Sanskrit intellectual traditions and to a wider dissemination of knowledge.¹⁵ Zain-ul-Abidin's greatest intellectual effort was his advocacy of the translation discipline as a tool for decreasing the barriers between linguistic and cultural communities. During his rule, scholars who translated manuscripts and books between Persian and Sanskrit facilitated the exchange of ideas among people from various traditions. The translation bureau founded by him is linked with the completion of the biography of the Sultan, *Zaina Charita*. The Sultan was kind to Hindu scholars and gave them respect equal to that of the Muslim scholars. Sanskrit scholars were given high posts at his court and Zana, a prominent scholar, involved in translation, was appointed in the translation bureau and helped spread



knowledge. The Sultan's endeavors, then, fostered intellectual communication between religious and linguistic communities.¹⁶

Technical and vocational learning was also a part of his educational policy. The crafts skilled artisans and specialists were brought from other regions, including Samarqand, to Kashmir to teach or develop specific crafts. Special attention was paid to the occupations of papermaking, bookbinding and carpet weaving. The people who gained these skills were expected to share this knowledge with area workers.¹⁷ A report of the arrival of a boat construction expert from Gujarat illustrates the Sultan's efforts in seeking technical support from a broader geographical region. This meant that his patronizing education was tied to knowledge, skill, work and economic growth. Sultan Zain ul Abidin provided an intellectual atmosphere in which the Persian, Sanskrit and Kashmiri traditions could interact and grow. He sponsored education, libraries, translation, literature, medicine, science and vocational training, which helped in augmenting the knowledge and culture production in Kashmir. His reign is thus of particular significance in the intellectual and cultural history of the area with its focus on education and on cross-culturalism and on the preservation and transmission of knowledge.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin marked a significant phase in the educational, intellectual, literary, and cultural development of medieval Kashmir. His approach to education extended beyond conventional religious learning and included the promotion of schools, madrasas, libraries, women's education, and vocational training. By supporting institutions and providing financial assistance to disadvantaged students, he sought to broaden access to knowledge. His encouragement of practical skills such as papermaking, bookbinding, carpet weaving, metalworking, and other crafts connected education with employment and economic development. Zain-ul-Abidin's patronage also created a favourable environment for the growth of Persian, Sanskrit, and Kashmiri literary traditions. His court attracted scholars from different regions and intellectual backgrounds, while Sanskrit scholars were encouraged to return to Kashmir and continue their scholarly activities. The works of scholars such as Jonaraja and Srivara contributed to the continuation of Kashmir's historical and literary traditions. At the same time, the development of Kashmiri literary works demonstrated the increasing significance of the vernacular language. One of the most distinctive features of his intellectual policy was his encouragement of translation and cross-cultural exchange. The translation of important Sanskrit and Persian works enabled ideas to circulate between different linguistic and intellectual communities. His royal library, supported by manuscripts collected from various regions, further strengthened the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. His patronage of medical learning and technical expertise also demonstrates the broad scope of his educational vision. Thus, Zain-ul-Abidin's contribution to education cannot be understood merely in terms of establishing educational institutions. His policies linked formal learning with literature, translation, scientific knowledge, vocational skills, handicrafts, and economic activity. By encouraging scholars, artisans, translators, and practitioners from diverse traditions, he fostered an atmosphere of intellectual interaction and cultural creativity. His reign therefore represents an important period in the history of Kashmir in which education became a significant instrument of cultural development, knowledge exchange, and socio-economic advancement.

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