



Politics of Desire: Sexual Exploitation and Agency in Kashmiri History

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the historical evidence of prostitution, concubinage, and polygamy in ancient Kashmir, highlighting their entrenchment within the socio-political and economic structures of the region. Drawing from texts such as the Rajatarangini, Kuttanimata Kavya, and Samayamatika, the research underscores the hierarchical and gendered nature of these practices, revealing how women's bodies were often commodified for political and economic gains. The prevalence of concubinage and polygamy among the elite, coupled with the diminished emphasis on virginity, challenges conventional notions of sexual propriety. The agency of royal women, including figures such as Queen Didda and Sughandha, further complicates gender narratives, demonstrating their strategic use of relationships for political leverage. The devadasi system, temple prostitution, and the professionalisation of courtesanship illustrate the intersection of religion and sexual exploitation. This study argues that rather than being peripheral, prostitution and related practices were integral to Kashmir's socio-political landscape. A critical reassessment of historical narratives is essential to understand the complexities of gender and sexuality in ancient Kashmir beyond moralistic interpretations.





INTRODUCTION

Particularly among the governing elite and rich classes, the historical scene of ancient Kashmir exposes a strongly ingrained system of prostitution, concubinage, and polygamy. Though not often institutionalised in the same way as some other ancient civilisations, these behaviours were extensively embraced and recorded in historical writings, therefore subverting strict moral standards about sexuality. Among other sources, the *Rajatarangini* offers strong proof of moral decay and women's exploitation—especially that of women from lower-caste, non-Brahmin origins. This hierarchical and gendered character of sexual interactions emphasises in ancient Kashmiri culture the interaction among political authority, economic concerns, and social institutions.¹ The predominance of concubinage and polygamy among the elite shows how frequently strategic concerns dominated sexual relationships rather than ethical or emotional ones.

One of the most remarkable features of the sexual rules of ancient Kashmir was the less stress on virginity, therefore challenging accepted ideas of decorum. The stories of leaders like Cakravarman and Sankravarman, who indulged in many liaisons, and Queen Didda, who had an open relationship with her spouse Tunga, point to a normalcy of extramarital partnerships. Likewise, Sughandha, widow of Samkaravarman of the Utpala dynasty, used her friendship with Prabhakardeva for political stability.² These events challenge conventional gender narratives of passivity and subordination by reflecting the agency certain royal ladies exercised despite patriarchal restrictions. The devadasi system found in Kashmir provides even more proof of the junction of religion and sexual exploitation. Devadasis, apparently committed to temple service, were often mistreated under the cover of religious obligation. The state-approved character of this practice is best shown by Jaluka assigning one hundred women to a royal seraglio in the Jyestharudra temple. Temple dancers like Kavya and Sahaja exercised power within a profoundly exploitative framework rather than being passive players in this sociopolitical system. The instance of Sahaja, who subsequently became a concubine to Prince Utkaresa and sati following his death, emphasises the few possibilities open to women in such roles.

The commercialising of women in transactional sexual relationships emphasises even more how sexuality was controlled for political and financial benefit. The deliberate exploitation of women's bodies in discussions of power is seen in the instance of Nona, a rich merchant who sold his wife Narendraprabha as a temple dancer before she was abducted by King Pratapaditya II. Likewise, Simhadeva of the Lohara dynasty's romance with his daughter of a nurse, which brought him down in 1301 CE, shows how broadly the ramifications of these partnerships may be. Periodical literary and religious books of the time support these historical conclusions. Explicit descriptions of prostitution in early mediaeval Kashmir found in Damodargupta's *Kuttanimata* explain courtesans' duties as spies, advisers, and influences over their clients. By outlining the methodical training and hierarchical system of courtesans, Kshemendra's *Samayamatrika* exposes even more the professionalising of prostitution. These books expose prostitution not as a fringe occurrence but rather as a planned and necessary component of society, therefore affecting social hierarchy and government.³

Through a comprehensive review of various historical accounts, this work aims to investigate the sociopolitical consequences of prostitution and allied activities in ancient Kashmir. It seeks to grasp the fundamental power mechanisms supporting these behaviours and their effects on women's agency, government, and social order rather than romanticising or demonising them. Far from being peripheral, these behaviours were ingrained in the political and economic fabric of Kashmiri culture, according to the data, which calls for a sophisticated historical study.



Review of literature

The review of literature explores various scholarly perspectives on gender, power, and socio-political structures in early medieval Kashmir. Abida S. Khanam (2002) and A. Chaturvedi (2004) provide insights into the socio-religious dynamics affecting Muslim women, shedding light on gendered agency and subjugation. Urvashi Butalia (2002) discusses women's voices in Kashmir, offering a feminist critique of historical narratives. Mandakranta Bose (2002) examines representations of femininity across different periods, contextualizing the evolving role of women, including courtesans. Moti Chandra's *The World of Courtesans* (1973) provides a foundational study on courtesans as a structured social class, discussing their influence in medieval India. Inderani Sen (2002) delves into colonial perceptions of women, drawing parallels with earlier patriarchal systems. Judith Evans (1995) explores feminist theories, which help analyze the performative and economic roles of courtesans in Kashmir's socio-political framework. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms* (2003) aids in understanding narrative structures within historical texts, while K. Hinton's (1888) collection of Kashmiri proverbs offers cultural insights into societal attitudes towards women. These works collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for examining prostitution in medieval Kashmir, linking historical documentation with feminist and socio-economic critiques.

Objectives

The study aims to critically examine the institutionalization of prostitution in early medieval Kashmir, exploring its socio-political, economic, and religious dimensions. It seeks to analyze the agency and subjugation of courtesans, their role within royal courts, and the intersection of power, gender, and exploitation. The research also investigates the literary depictions of prostitution in historical texts, highlighting its structured nature, hierarchy, and socio-economic implications.

Methodology

The study adopts a historical-analytical approach, utilizing primary sources such as Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, Damodargupta's *Kuttanimita Kavya*, and Kshemendra's *Samayamatika* to assess the socio-political role of courtesans. A comparative analysis of textual narratives and epigraphic references is employed to understand the interplay between power and prostitution. Secondary sources provide additional interpretations, contextualizing prostitution within broader socio-economic structures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Particularly among the rich classes and governing elite, the historical data from ancient Kashmir emphasises the systematic character of polygamy, concubinage, and prostitution. Although prostitution was not specifically institutionalised in the way some other ancient civilisations did, its broad acceptability and recording in historical records contradict any view of sexual morality as a strict construct in Kashmiri society. Revealing the hierarchical and gendered character of these practices, the *Rajatarangini* offers strong evidence of moral corruption and the exploitation of women, particularly those from lower castes and non-Brahmin origins.⁴ The predominance of concubinage and polygamy among the elite emphasises even more how political and financial factors sometimes shaped sexual relationships instead of moral or emotional ones.

The less focus on virginity in ancient Kashmir throws extra complexity into traditional ideas of sexual behaviour in historical settings. Multiple liaisons of kings like Cakravarman and Sankravarman as well as the sexual exploitation of Naga women by Asoka's son, Jaluka point to a normalising of sexual encounters outside of marriage. The participation of royal ladies in extramarital relationships not only questions conventional gender roles but also marks the autonomy certain women used within this framework.⁵ One of the most powerful kings of Kashmir, Queen Didda freely maintained a relationship



with her consort, Tunga, right up until her death. In same vein, Sughandha, the widow of Samkaravarman of the Utpala dynasty, had a romance with Prabhakardeva, a minister serving in the court of her dead husband. Such events illustrate a complex dynamic wherein royal women used relationships for political stability and personal power even within patriarchal limitations.⁶

The devadasi system existing in Kashmir highlights even more the junction of religion and sexual exploitation. These ladies, apparently committed to temple duty, were often abused under the cover of religious obligations. One hundred ladies assigned to Jaluka's seraglio in the Jyestharudra temple epitribes the state-approved character of this practice. Moreover, the recorded roles of temple dancers like Kavya and Sahaja during Kalasa's rule suggest that these women, although within a very exploitative framework, were not only passive players in the socio-political system. The story is further convoluted by Sahaja's later status as Prince Utkaresa's concubine and her choice to do sati upon his death, therefore highlighting the few choices open to women in such roles.⁷ The monetisation of women in transactional sexual relationships supports even more the case that sexuality in ancient Kashmir was frequently under control for political and financial benefit. Rich trader Nona sought royal favour by presenting his wife, Narendraprabha, as a temple dancer before she was finally abducted by King Pratapaditya II, therefore illustrating the strategic use of women's bodies in negotiations of power. Likewise, Simhadeva of the Lohara dynasty's romance with his nurse's daughter shows how such relationships might have far-reaching political repercussions as it finally brought him down in 1301 CE.⁸

The theological and literary works of the era support these conclusions even more. With an explicit narrative of the frequency of prostitution in early mediaeval Kashmir, Damodargupta's Kuttanimata details not only the sexual services given by courtesans but also their activities as spies and advisers wielding great power over their clients.⁹ Another layer of complication arises from the claim that some prostitutes engaged in sati after the deaths of their clients, therefore highlighting the degree to which their identities were entwined with the systems of power they serviced. The Nilamata Purana supports even more the case that prostitution was firmly ingrained in Kashmir's larger social fabric rather than just a courtly phenomena.¹⁰

The historical data therefore questions any oversimplified or moralistic interpretation of gender and sexuality in ancient Kashmir. Instead of being a side effect of society, prostitution and associated activities were fundamental part of its sociopolitical and economic structure. The broad extent of these practices, their entrenchment in both religious and secular institutions, and the agency exerted by certain women within these limitations expose a complicated and often conflicting history of gender and sexuality in Kashmir.¹¹ This calls for a critical review of historical accounts that either romanticise or denigrate such behaviours without considering their more general sociopolitical consequences.¹²

The institution of courtesanship in Kashmir saw notable growth throughout the later Hindu era, transcending its initial purview to include not just singing and dancing but also a more commercialised kind of sexual service. Kalhana's criticism of the support given to prostitutes, paramours, and courtesans by kings such as Kalasa, Kshemagupta, Uccala, and Harsha exposes a more general moral and political degradation.¹³ The sensuous excess of these leaders revealed a government system that had become permissive and corrupt, where the lines separating royal power from personal pleasure were dangerously thin. The predominance of courtesans at the royal court was not just a cultural phenomena but also a sign of how profoundly institutionalised prostitution had evolved within Kashmir's sociopolitical fabric.¹⁴

Revealing it not as an accidental or neglected activity but as a structured and tiered profession, the literary works of Kshemendra and Damodargupta provide priceless insight into the systematic character of prostitution in early mediaeval Kashmir.¹⁵ These books show how courtesans followed certain operational techniques meant to maximise social and economic advantage, underwent thorough training, and behaved within a well defined hierarchy. With Kshemendra especially stressing the importance elder women play in maintaining this system, Damodargupta's Kuttanimata Kavya and Kshemendra disclose the deliberate



techniques courtesans use to entrap affluent and powerful men. While procuresses (kuttanis) guided young courtesans in the ways of deceit and seduction, the book details how mothers purposefully brought their daughters into the profession.¹⁶

Kshemendra's *Samayamatrika*, which chronicles the life of Kankali, a prostitute who donned many disguises—including that of a Buddhist nun, a minister's nurse, a shepherd's wife, and a florist—to manipulate her targets, is a startling illustration of this professionalisation. The performance element of courtesans, who perfected the sixty-four skills mandated in the *Kamasutra*, emphasises their flexibility. These talents were weaponised for social and economic progress rather than developed for creative or aesthetic excellence. Through their alleged acts of devotion—such as immolating themselves on the funeral pyres of their lovers—such as theatrical displays rather than true acts of love or sacrifice—Kshemendra's stories also highlight the deliberate nature of courtesans' emotions.¹⁷

Because Damodargupta is prime minister under Jayapida, which gives him direct access to the royal court's inner workings, his insights have especially weight. His *Kuttanimata Kavya* shows the financial volatility, lack of long-term security, and susceptibility to exploitation that courtesans experience, therefore exposing the economic reality they live with.¹⁸ The study emphasises the fragility of their life: as the freshness and attractiveness of a prostitute faded, her economic possibilities dropped sharply. Many of them turned to thievery, dishonesty, even robbery because they had few other means of subsistence and finally faced terrible results. By depicting prostitution as a forced economic need reflecting the systematic vulnerabilities placed upon women in mediaeval Kashmiri culture, Damodargupta questions the idea of it being a chosen or liberating vocation.¹⁹

With a more clearly moralistic posture, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* condemns the spread of prostitution and links it to the degradation of royal power. According to his story, the Kashmiri court was where political unrest and inefficiency directly resulted from sexual excess. But his criticism goes beyond the simple existence of courtesans to include the weak and self-indulgent leaders who allow such excess to blossom. Although his narrative presents courtesans as agents of political and moral decline, it also recognises their strategic agency—many of them accumulated riches and influence by taking advantage of the shortcomings of their royal patrons, therefore displaying a strong awareness of power relations.²⁰

Texts like the *Nilamata Purana* and *Rajatarangini* cite the practice of temple prostitution, an expansion of this institutionalised system. Presumably for religious service, the habit of assigning young girls to temples (*Devadasis*) served as a society approved means of sexual exploitation. With rulers like Jalauka and Lalitaditya actively supporting temple dancers, Kalhana observes that this habit existed as early as the reign of Durlabhaka Pratapaditya and lasted into the Karkota era. In this sense, the temple became a multifarious institution where political, social, and financial exchanges crossed with sexual ones.²¹

Historical records describing the ties between kings and these ladies clearly show the permeability of roles between courtesans and temple dancers. Kalhana tells how Kalasha wed temple dancer Kavya and how his son Utkarsha abducted another temple courtesan, Sahaja, as a concubine. Originally committed to a temple, Sahaja's narrative shows even more the monetisation of women in both secular and religious spheres—initially chosen by Harsha, she eventually became a prostitute valued by him and even discouraged from performing sati after Utkarsha's death. The degree to which women's bodies were sold within both governmental and religious organisations is highlighted by this flux between religious and secular prostitution. Having seen elderly temple dancers in his own lifetime, Kalhana offers a first-hand view of how such ladies, once admired for their beauty and talent, were finally thrown aside by the same institution that had previously praised them. The story of Narendraprabha shows even more how religious traditions were used to justify sexual abuse. Trying to curry favour with King Pratapaditya II, her husband, a businessman called Nona, helped her go from a temple dancer to a member of the royal harem. Such



events highlight how patriarchal systems appropriated religious traditions to further political and personal goals, hence supporting the subordination of women under the cover of religious obligation.²²

Although there was opposition to the Devadasi system, as Alberuni notes, his findings show that the ingrained patronage of monarchs and nobles made such resistance mostly useless. Alberuni's writings expose the junction of power, religion, and gender where religious practices were deliberately used to support exploitation instead of to maintain spiritual purity. His comments show how strong the institution was, ingrained within the larger geopolitical context of Kashmir, despite sporadic ethical questions.²³ Taken together, these historical records show that prostitution in early mediaeval Kashmir was a firmly ingrained socioeconomic framework rather than just a moral or personal concern. Offering some women some degree of economic agency, it functioned as a complicated organisation that interacted with politics, religion, and social mobility, therefore exposing them to systematic exploitation.²⁴ The literary narratives reveal the complex systems of power, control, and survival that perpetuated and controlled prostitution within Kashmiri culture, therefore beyond simple documentation of existence. In the end, the historical data reveals a complex system wherein agency and subjection coexisted within a strictly hierarchical and patriarchal structure, therefore challenging simple notions of courtesans as just entertainers or victims.

CONCLUSION

The historical data from ancient Kashmir emphasises, especially among the governing elite and upper classes, the complex and firmly ingrained character of prostitution, concubinage, and polygamy. The extensive records of these techniques in books like as *Rajatarangini*, *Kuttanimata*, and *Samayamatrika* reveal their systematic existence in the socio-political structure rather than being isolated or minor events. The Devadasi system, temple prostitution, and courtesanship all point to the manner in which female bodies were controlled for political, financial, and social benefit, therefore highlighting the commercialisation of women within both secular and religious organisations. Although some women used their relationships for power and influence, therefore exercising agency within these limitations, their autonomy remained mostly confined by patriarchal systems. The literary evidence paints a complex picture, highlighting both courtesans' strategic flexibility and susceptibility as well as their concubine's. In Kashmir's mediaeval history, the junction of sexuality, politics, and economics calls for a critical reevaluation of conventional narratives that transcends moralistic readings to see the underlying structural elements at work. In the end, these historical facts expose a complicated web of power, exploitation, and agency, therefore challenging oversimplified conceptions of gender and sexuality.

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