

The Spirit Of Kashmiri Pandits

Historical Outline From The Ancient Times Through The Beginning Of Muslim Era

The American writer William Faulkner wrote, " The past is never dead. It is not even past."

Our past is a powerful element of our consciousness, besides the history it provides of events that we must know to understand the world we live in and learn from. Beyond the factual mosaic of events that history attempts to be, it is the irrigator of our consciousness, whose fertility we very much depend upon for the richness of our present and future. We are living carriers of our personal and historical past. If we only learnt from history keenly the world we live in today would have been a more peaceful place.

Ancient histories of different parts of the world are wrapped in a lot of fog, particularly those in India, where history gathering art and craft was not considered a significant intellectual activity in the distant past. However Kashmir has been an exception, where good records of the times were kept, though some of them got lost.

For much of the Kashmir ancient history we depend on Nilmatpurana, the oldest extant book on Kashmir, and Pandit Kalhana's Rajatarangini. Nilmatpruana was written between 6th and 8th centuries and Rajatarangini around 1149. Later work is very significant because it is the first history written in India and also because of the way it is written. Kalhana approached history in a scientific and democratic way, giving the kings and the common men the same importance while assessing the causes and significance of the events of a period under consideration. He saw

the transitoriness in the material and the political power . Here was a historian with a spiritual vision of human existence. He was a Kashmiri Brahman and wrote Rajatarangini in Sanskrit verse. His book is one of the most widely used references of the ancient Indian history. After his death his work was carried on by other historians, till almost the start of the Mughal era in Kashmir.

Nilmatpurana records (in the 6th to 8th cent. period) that Kashmiris were a religious people, upholding the sacredness of the land, and leading generally a happy life. Unlike some of the other parts of India, women enjoyed considerable freedom and were looked upon with respect and honor.

The name Kashmir is found in unbroken form in ancient Hindu texts like Nilmatpurana, Ashtadhyayi , Mahabarta, the Puranas, and the Braht Samhitta over a period stretching to 2,300 years. Legend has it that King Gonanda The First of Kashmir and his son Damodra lost their lives fighting in Kureva-Pandava war of Mahabarta.

From the earliest historical times Kashmir was ruled by Hindu kings. This lasted till 1339, when Sultan Shams'd Din, popularly known as Shah Mir, an émigré from Swat (which is in the present day Pakistan),laid the foundation of the Muslim era.

The earliest known rulers of Kashmir were Gonandiyas, a Hindu dynasty which ruled for about 3,049 years. Some records were kept during this era but unfortunately they were lost. Kalhana's history is only accurate from around Karkota Dynasty onwards, before that he is supposed to have used his imagination. Following this long stretch of Hindu era was Buddhist era brought on by King Ashoka (273 - 232 B.C.)

King Ashoka founded the Kashmir capital Srinagri, about three miles from the present city of Srinagar, during the time when his kingdom covered Kashmir. The

city developed rapidly and became prosperous and important. He constructed a large number of temples in Kashmir. After King Ashoka's brutally Pyrrhic victory in Kalinga, Orrisa, in 261 B.C., he turned Buddhist and made Kashmir the northern center for the development and diffusion of his new religion. This was the time Buddhism flourished in Kashmir. It is said that Buddha himself had thought that Kashmir's environment was suitable for the meditative practices of Buddhism.

But with history's unexpected turns Buddhism receded from Kashmir for about 200 years when Ashoka's son Jaluka, separating from his father's kingdom, founded an independent state, which practiced Hinduism. It was in King Kanishka's empire that Buddhism was brought back to Kashmir and it flourished then much more than its significant success the first time around. During this time an international Buddhist council, called the 4th Council, was organized just outside the present day Srinagar, in a place called Kundalvan, which is perhaps the present-day Harwan. This council, which lasted six months, was attended by some 500 Buddhist and Hindu scholars from different countries, under the chairmanship of a Kashmiri Brahman named Vasumitra. One of the momentous results of this council was the development of Mahayana Buddhism. The council was a watershed event in the diffusion of Buddhism outside India, like to Central Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Renowned Buddhist missionaries Kumarrajiva, Yasa, Vimalaksha, Sangabuti, Gautamasangha, and others started from Kashmir. Also spread abroad in the process were the stories of Mahabarta and Ramayana . So it was from Kashmir that Indian culture and Sanskrit literature traveled to some of the parts of the world.

One of the bright stars in the pantheon of kings was Lalataditya (699 - 736). Here was an ambitious conqueror of lands, an astute administrator and statesman, and a prolific builder. In his thirty-seven years of rule he expanded Kashmir's control over Tibet, Badakhan, Punjab, and Kanuj. He created several towns, viharas, stupas, and temples, the foremost of which is the grand sun-temple Martand, built over Mattan village in Kashmir. Martand's architecture and its location are greatly admired.

Hiuen Tsiang, the reknowned Chinese monk, came to Kashmir in the seventh century via Varamullah, present-day Baramulla, and stayed for two years. He found Kashmiri scholars of high intellectual caliber.

For some two thousand years Kashmir was the prime source of Sanskrit learning and literature. It was a center for scholarly exchanges. Some of the significant scholars and poets of Sanskrit were Kashmiris: Kalhan, Bilhan, Acharya Bhamba, Udbhata, Acharya Kutanka, Mammata, Anand Vardhana, Vamana, Rudrata, Kshemendra, Abhinav Gupta, Rojanak Shitianth, and others.

One of the most significant contributions that Kashmiri Hindus have made not only to the resplendent oeuvre of Indian philosophy but to the world philosophy has been the development of Kashmir Shaivism. Shaivism is a system of thought which prescribes the attainment of moksha (the absolute freedom) in Shiva. Although Kashmir Shaivism and Advaita Vedanta both teach nondualism, the nondualism of the former is quite different from the latter's. In Kashmir Shaivism this universe is real and true but Advaita Vedanta considers it to be the other way. In Kashmir Shaivism Lord Shiva is connected with the real world through the expansion of his shakti and the universe is a reflection through him, as if in a mirror. Shiva and shakti are the same. Lord Shiva has three energies: Para, the supreme energy, Parapara, the medium or cognitive energy , and Aparā, his inferior or objective energy. A human being lives in the inferior state of Shiva's energy and Kashmir Shaivism teaches how to attain Shiva's supreme energy.

We learn from the ancient Kashmiri history that fires were once lit somewhere in time in Kashmiri psyche for learning, for the pursuit of the truth of life, and for the devotion to God, which we know are still smoldering. We learn that a Kashmiri was always a lost soul in the clamorous world around him and he needed tranquility of the surroundings and a feeling of brotherhood with the fellow human beings to survive. The relationship between Kashmir and India had been like that between two brothers, separate but belonging to the same family - a

situation which has been further reinforced through the time stretching to the present.

Attached to this presentation is a chronology in the ancient Kashmiri history.