



GENDER AND POLITICS: A CASE STUDY OF QUEEN DIDDA

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Abstract

The history of women rulers has remained a mostly untouched subject because of the lack of sources and the dominance of male-centric historical narrative. The women rulers in Indian history constitute a fraction of political figures mentioned in sources but the earliest historical texts like that of Rajtarangni of Kalhana mention women who acted as rulers, regents, military commanders, administrators etc. By critically analysing the content of Rajtarangni it can be seen that among the women mentioned in the text, Didda was most prominent, not only among the women mentioned but also among the male rulers of Kashmir as well. In this paper, we have analysed the statesmanship of Didda and her role in the history of Kashmir from a feministic perspective.

Key Words: Rajtarangni, Feminism, Domba, Chandalla, Lohara.

The study related to the women of ancient India is the least explored area which only got some attention in the twentieth century onwards because of various feminist moments which took place all around the world in general and India in particular. Although various works were compiled that highlighted various women and their roles but when compared to other European nations, it is meagre. The lack of historical sources related to women rulers and the cultural aspect of India where women were treated as inferior in administration was the main cause responsible for their low status than men. There are very few women who acted as rulers and regent mothers in the name of their minor sons. The attitude of people in South Asia and beyond South Asia that women are unfit for political leadership led to a decrease in their public presence. In the Europe context, the notion that women are unfit for the rule cannot be totally ruled out either. The study of women in ancient Indian history is least explored area. It was from the 1980s onwards that focus was laid on women's issues and the role they played in our history but its progress was slowed because of the lack of historical sources which are mostly male-centric. The main reason was the discrimination and subordination of women all over the world which compelled feminist movements to rise against it. The political and administrative aspects were dominated by men and the authority of women was most dominant in the domestic realm. It can be said that the main cause of their universal devaluation was because of their restriction on political power.

While analysing India's first historical account Rajtarangni, it can be assumed that women who had emerged in the political stages of ancient and early medieval Kashmir were free, owned immovable property, manage their estates and even fought as the supreme commanders of their troops. All these things would have been impossible had there not been social flexibility which gave them the opportunity to rise in the political stages of Kashmir. Mahabharata states that a woman was appointed as a ruler in absence of a suitable male candidate despite being rarely executed in India.¹ But in Kashmir women rulers like Yasovati who was declared as *Avatar* of Goddess Parvati² and respected by those who desired prosperity.³ There are references to women of Satirajya (northwest beyond the Himalayas) who practised polyandry.⁴ Huen Tsang mentions that women in this country administered executive powers and the rule was the succession of the women, although the queen's husband was the king, it was the queen who holds the reign of administration in her hands.⁵ Rajtarangni shows that women have the ability to administer the affairs of the state in their own hands and names the women administrators like Sugandha, Didda, Suryamatti and Kota Rani who have ruled Kashmir in their respective times. The women in ancient Kashmir enjoyed extreme flexibility in different spheres of knowledge. Bilhana states that the women of Kashmir were very well educated which allows them to speak fluently both Sanskrit and Prakrit.⁶ The effective rule of these queens shows that women in the royal families were well versed in statecraft.

Interestingly all the queens were not of royal origin, they came across different backgrounds like daughters of merchants, feudatories, traders, spirit distillers and untouchables. King Chakravarman was married to a *Domba* woman (low caste) who was made the chief queen and is mentioned as visiting the Vishnu temple regularly in Srinagar. There are references where the queens could choose the Chandala lovers⁷, and sisters of queens were married to Kayasthas.⁸ Although Kalhana is showing some sort of Bias while writing the history of Queens of Kashmir but it should be kept in mind that no source mentioned the opposition to breaking these caste barriers which indicates the caste flexibility that Kashmir enjoyed over the rest of India. Although the Kalhana has mentioned the Varna and Jati order in his work the critical analysis of the work shows that it was not followed very strictly. The incorporation of *Domba* and *Chandalla* women into the administration shows the social flexibility that Kashmir enjoyed and which gave an opportunity to the women to rise in the political arenas of Kashmir. It is necessary to remember that while authority legitimises the use of power, it does not exhaust it, and actual methods of giving rewards, controlling information, exercising pressure and shaping events may be available to women as well as to men.⁹ Despite being male-dominated, the history

¹ *Mahabharata, Rajyadharma santiparva*, 33. 43-46.

² Here kings and queens are considered as a portion of Shiva.

³ Ved Kumari, *Nilmata Purana*, Vol. I, Srinagar-Jammu, 1968, pp. 12-13.

⁴ *Kamasutra of Vatsayana*, Devidutt Shastri (ed.) Varanasi, 1964, pp. 126-294.

⁵ T. Watters, *On Yuan Chang's Travel in India*, p. 330.

⁶ *Vikramanakdevacarita*, XVIII, 6.

⁷ *Rajtarangni*, 6.78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7. 150-152.

⁹ 17. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview", in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society*, California, 1974, p. 21
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of Kashmir is filled with the accounts of Kashmiri queens who shines brighter than their male counterparts. The most important and foremost among them is queen Didda.

Didda is one of the most powerful rulers of Kashmir. She became the constant topic of discussion after the emergence of various feminist schools of thought. The main reason was more powerful than many men of her period in the whole Indian subcontinent. She was the daughter of Simharaja- the Lohara chief and wife of Kshemagupta. By analysing her qualities in her life, it becomes clear that she was the most intelligent and capable woman Kashmir ever produced. The instinct to exercise the power herself can be seen in the coins of her husband Kshemagupta, who has the epithet *Di-Kshema* on his common coins and *Kshemagupta* on very rare coins. The only difference between these coins and those of Chandragupta I (who issued gold coins to commemorate the marriage alliance between the Guptas and Lichchhavis) are the appellations. In the coins of Kshemagupta, the appellations of Didda and the king are the same while this feature is missing in the Gupta coins. Kalhana mentions that Kshemagupta was so much influenced by her queen that he was called by the humiliating appellation of *Kshema*.¹⁰ She acted as a virtual head of the state while her husband was the king by name only. After the death of her husband, she did not follow the funeral pyre while other co-wives committed *sati* because of the tender hearted Minister Naravahana. It seems that Naravahana was aware of the qualities of Didda as the only individual who could save the kingdom from internal and external threats. Didda derived the legitimacy of the ruler from her husband, a widowed queen who is ruling on the behalf of her minor son. Being part of the patriarchal society is the reason for Kalhana to use very harsh language against Didda. He criticises Didda for not committing *sati*, a tradition of devotion towards the husband which according to Kalhana shows the wife and her devotion towards the husband. He mentions Didda as a disgrace to the women kind for doing so. His disrespect reaches the climax when he mentions the relationship between the Naravahana and Didda and uses the word *randa* (Prostitute) for her.¹¹

After the death of her husband, Didda assumed power as the regent of her son Abhimanyu in 958 A.D. She supervised every department and assumed the direct charge of the whole civil and military administration. The administration was so much under her control that it was difficult to pass any order and do anything without the direct involvement of the queen. The first and the foremost challenge which Didda faced was the challenge from Phalgunas who had served as Prime Minister earlier. Phalgunas were so frustrated by the powerful moves and planning of the queen that he surrendered in the temple of Varaha (Baramulla). The second revolt was organised by Mahima and Patala who incorporated various feudal lords and people against the queen Didda. Such was the intensity of the revolt that, all important ministers except Naravahana deserted the queen. She herself took the command of the troops on the battlefield either to crush the revolt or to get killed which encouraged the army. She broke the unity of their opponents by offering the Brahman rebels heaps of gold, which took the life out of the revolt. Didda crushed the revolt under her command with iron fist so that no one can challenge her authority again. The victory of Didda has been lamented by Kalhana as, “She whom none believed had strength to step over a cattle track, the lame lady traversed in the manner of the son of wind (Hanuman)

¹⁰ *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), VI, 177.

¹¹ *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), VI, 260

confederate force.”¹² Mahima who fled the battlefield was killed by the newly established commander of the army Yasodhara. By defeating the opponents with such a mighty army, Didda proved herself to be a competent stateswoman of her time. A few years later Yasodhara took the banner of the revolt against the rule of Didda which was crushed by the queen herself. The time gave Didda best visualisation of her faithful ministers whom she rewarded very lavishly. She gave the title of *Rajanka*¹³ to Naravahana for his undisputed loyalty to the queen. When her military commander Rakka died, she quickly re-invited her old minister Phalguna, who was eagerly waiting to repent his mistake. Phalguna took the charge and to impress the queen he suppressed the revolt of Dhamras.

The death of her son Abhimanyu broke Didda, it softened the queen. Further, the association with Bhuyya- a mystic official, transformed Didda by helping her to develop a love of people in her heart.¹⁴ But it seems that being unpopular among her subjects was one major reason why Didda softened her tone. After suppressing disloyal ministers and powerful Dhamaras, Didda made an effort to gain the confidence of her subjects to increase her status. She was in dire need to change the perception about her credulity which have spread like wildfire. To do so she started the construction of temples, towns, bridges, resorts etc. She constructed a Mohalla on the right side of river Jhelum called Diddamatha.¹⁵ In the honour of her son she established a shrine named Abhimanyusvamin and a town Abhimanyupur.¹⁶ She founded the Diddapur as her capital town. She founded the Diddasvamin temple on her own name and established a convent resort for the travellers of Madhyadesha, Lata and Saurashtra. To increase the merit of her husband she laid the foundation of the town of Kankanapur.¹⁷ She made another temple of white stones named Diddasvamin, which gleamed as if bathed with the waters of Ganga emerging from its feet.¹⁸ For local Kashmiris and the people of the plains she established a very high Vihara.¹⁹ She also built a temple in the memory of her father Simharaja called Simhasvamin.²⁰ In the memory of her grandfather she built a Vishnu temple known as Bhima Kesav²¹ on the left bank of the Lidder river near Martand temple at Anantnag in south Kashmir. She is being mentioned as constructing sixty-four foundations.²² Didda not only constructed the new structures, but she also repaired the dilapidated monuments.²³ She repaired the Jayavindra Vihara which was damaged by her husband.

¹² G.M. Rabbani, *Ancient Kashmir: A Historical Perspective*, Srinagar, 1981, p.161

¹³ Rajanaka is modern *Razdan*, added as surname among Pundits today

¹⁴ *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), VI. 296, D. 254

¹⁵ The ruins of the structure are still visible. The area is now renamed as Khan-Kah Sokhta; S.L. Sali, *Kashmir History and Archaeology through the Period*, 1993, p. 178.

¹⁶ *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), 299, D. 254

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 301. p. 254

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 302, p. 255.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 303, p. 255

²⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 304, p. 255

²¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 178.

²² *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), VI, 306, p. 255.

²³ *Ibid.*, VI, 307, p. 255

Didida underwent a change one year after the death of her son, she returned to a new character which was more power-oriented than in the earlier period. So, again got indulged in power, pleasure and lust. She destroyed her grandson named Nandigupta (973-974 A.D.) by witchcraft and another named Tribhuvana and her self ascended the throne. Her character is mentioned in Rajtarangni as,

“Although residing in a secret pool and observing the vow of silence, the Timi fish is addicted to eating up its kind; the peacock while leaving solely on the drops from cloud daily swallows the snakes, the stork ostensibly given to meditation makes the meal of the unsuspecting fishes which approach the edge.; even while acting piously there. Can be no certitude about a relapse into evil in the case of sinners.²⁴

Didida killed her grandson and ascended the throne in 981 A.D. She is known in the history as the queen who killed her three grandsons for the throne. Kumkum Roy²⁵ highlighted the fluidity of sexual relationship representing in Rajtarangni, where the ministers to get high posts present their beautiful wives to the rulers and queens like Didida consolidate their position by establishing relations with ministers. The kings in ancient and medieval Indian history as mentioned as establishing matrimonial relationship with the their neighbouring rulers to strengthen their rule while as women rulers were gaining the support of their ministers by establishing relations with them. Ministers like Tunga with whom Didida had relationship actually strengthened the state structure for some time. They collectively subdued the combined revolt of Brahmans, Damras and nobles. So, Tunga in return of stability and support gained the favours of queen. His five brothers were incorporated into the administration by the queen which were posted into different administrative posts and Tunga himself was appointed as prime minister.²⁶

In the matter of diplomacy and statecraft, these achievements are called the Bribe and Placation policy.²⁷ When the ruler of Rajouri decided to attack Didida, Tunga and his five brothers went to Rajouri through another route and burned the capital town. Prithvipala was forced to peace and he decided to pay tribute to Didida.²⁸ Didida on one hand was the fickle-minded queen and on the other hand one of the ablest sovereigns of the valley. According to H.C Banerjee,²⁹ she was “A ruthless and immortal lady but never the less an able queen.” She passed away in 1003 A.D. by peacefully passing the administrative setup into the hands of Sangramaraja who was his brother’s son and was proclaimed the ruler of Kashmir.³⁰

Conclusion: The male-centric dominance of history had side-lined the history of women in India in general and Kashmir in particular. The critical analysis of Kalhana's Rajtarangni

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Verse 309, p. 255.

²⁵ Kumkum Roy, *Turbulent Waves: Construction of Gender Relations in The Rajtarangni of Kalhana*, Indian History Congress Proceedings, 1999.

²⁶ Tunga was a buffalo herdsman with whom she fell in love. He had come to Kashmir from Poonch and who had obtained service as a letter carrier.

²⁷ See Devika Rangachari, *Constructing Society and Polity in Early Medieval North India, 7th - 13th Century AD*, PhD. Thesis, 2005, p. 144

²⁸ *Rajtarangini* R.S. Pandit (ed.), VI, 349-51, p. 259

²⁹ H.C. Banerjee, *Cultural Heritage of Kashmir*, Calcutta, 1965.

³⁰ *Op. Cit.*, VI, 356-65, pp. 259-60.

has given us a vivid description of Didda- the queen of Kashmir, in a most fascinating way. She is depicted in *Rajtarangni* as an able stateswoman, administrator, builder and military commander who established her power through her sheer wit and intellect. The woman was of such a calibre that even the most powerful aristocratic class, nobles and military commanders failed to bring her down. She ruled till her last breath as a proud monarch who controlled the state in a more centralised manner and left her imprint on the political, social and cultural history of Kashmir.

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