



The Role of Sources in Tracing the History of the Rulers of the Punjab Hills: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract

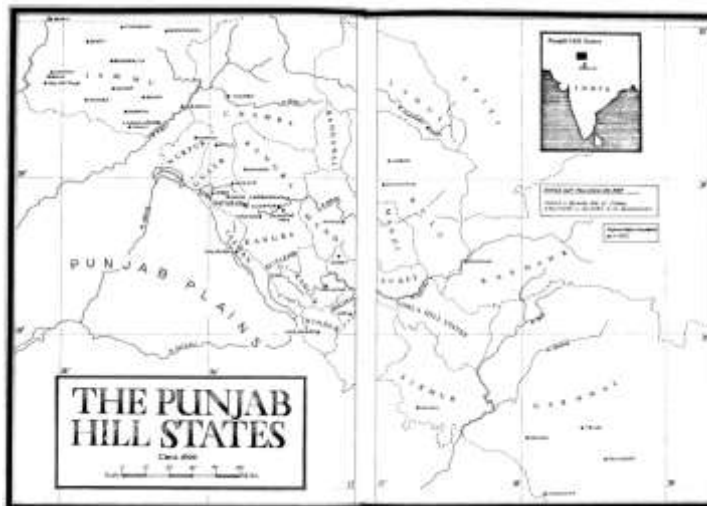
The Punjab Hills, with their scenic beauty and bountiful resources, gradually meta morphed into a precious jewel that adorned the crown of Punjab. These hills however are more than just a thing of beauty. They hide within their thickets, many intriguing facts, especially those pertaining to complex religio-political dynamics, that are essential for a holistic understanding of the history of the Punjab. In this rugged and relatively scarcely populated terrain, valid and reliable sources of history can be hard to obtain, much less evaluate. This article, through an analytical study of available historical works, aims to delve into the nature and type of sources, thus trying to highlight the role of sources in tracing the history of the chiefs and chiefdoms of Punjab Hills.

Keywords: Sources, Western Himalayas, Punjab Hills, Rajput Chiefs, Religio-political dynamics

Introduction

The etymology of the term 'Punjab Hills' can be traced (in its present sense) to the travelogues of European adventurers, travellers and the official accounts of British administrators. This term dates to a period which is much earlier to that of the Indian Independence and hence is not descriptive of the contemporary boundaries between India and Pakistan. It is sad that now this term and the rich culture of the it encompasses is majorly limited to discussing art and painting styles. Geographically lying at the western end of the foot of the Himalayan ranges, it is through these lands that the five rivers run before they flow into the fertile plains of Punjab (hence called *panj-ab*). Historically, these hills had enjoyed 'greater seclusion from the plains and hence were in one form or the other, able to retain their socio-cultural and political traditions, for a very long time'.¹ Herein we will be discussing the sources available to trace the history of Rajput Chieftains of the Punjab Hills and how, in many a sense, they are invaluable to any historian in general and an antiquarian in particular. We shall also throw light on the problem of acquiring and interpreting these sources from a historical perspective.

¹ The British Museum (n.d). *Punjab Hills*. Retrieved from URL <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/x115791>

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Sources

Initially, the history of the Punjab Hills and the Western Himalayas hardly piqued the interest of European scholars. Sir Alexander Cunningham³ is credited for channelling his attention and efforts to this area, the results hence finding mention in the reports of the Archaeological Survey of India and his book, 'The Ancient Geography of India'.

(A) Literary Sources

- Vanshavali

We find that a number of Indian writers (mostly unknown) have offered great help to historians by compiling *Vanshavalis* i.e. 'genealogical rolls' of the ancient rulers. Hutchison and Vogel elaborate that,

"From remote times it has been the custom, in the royal and noble families of India, to keep a careful record of their pedigree in a document called *Vanshavalis*. Such documents are common in the Western Hills, and are preserved with so much care that it is often with the greatest difficulty that a copy can be obtained."⁴

These painstaking and comprehensive records of pedigree and lineage of rulers are so carefully preserved that it is difficult to obtain even a copy of the original manuscript. The task of compilation and preservation was generally assigned to whom Hutchison and

² Archer, W.C. (1973) *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills Vol. I*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. vii.

³ Cunninham originally an engineer found passion and interest for archaeology and antiquity after his meeting and subsequent acquaintance with James Prinsep (Kejariwal,1999), p. 200. During 1836-1840, he was ADC (aide-de-camp) to Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General of India, wherein he visited the relatively unexplored Punjab Hills, especially Kashmir. Alexander Cunningham also finds mention during this time, in Emily Eden's (sister of Lord Auckland) 'Up the Country' (1867).

⁴ Hutchison, J. & Vogel, J. Ph. (1933) *History of The Panjab Hill States Vol. I*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, p. 2

Vogel call the "Rajaguru or royal preceptor".⁵ The office of the *Rajaguru* was generally hereditary and so was this important task of passing down the manuscript over generations, in the custody and care of the family. Some *Vanshavalis* are of obscure origin and with little value but there are others which possess information for historical record. We know that the main part of the *Vanshavali* (pronounced colloquially as *Basauli*) comprises of a lengthy list of the names of majority, if not all of the Rajas, (sometimes semi-mythical) who claimed the throne and their successive reigns. Most of them hardly contain nothing else of historic importance but a few of them have details of great historical interest. Mr. William Moorcroft can be credited with throwing light on the importance of *Vanshavali*. We find that when he visited the court of the then chief of Kangra, Raja Sansar Chand, who at that time was residing in Sujampur Tira, he was presented with the royal *Vanshavali* for his examination. He takes note and thus mentions,

"Sansar Chand deduces his descent from Mahadeo, and has a pedigree in which his ancestors are traced to their celestial progenitor, through many thousand years. I requested to have a copy of this document, and some Kashmir Pundits were ordered to transcribe it against my return. The pedigree is written in verse, and contains in general little more than the birth and death of each male individual of the family."⁶

Apart from the *Vanshavali*, which is official and hence primarily written in Sanskrit verse, we also find other chronicles written in vernacular script. Existing mainly as manuscripts, there exist a few cases where they are published and printed. However, despite their helpfulness in extricating obscurity, Hutchison & Vogel warn us to not use them without caution, since many times, even their compilers themselves fail to grasp the intended meaning of the original text.

Cunningham also emphasised the importance of *Vanshavalis*. While talking about Kangra he states,

"The royal family of Jalandhara and Kangra is one of the oldest in India, and their genealogy from the time of the founder, Susarma Chandra, appears to me to have a much stronger claim to our belief than any one of the long strings of names now shown by the more powerful families of Rajputana. All the different scions of this house claim to be of Somavansi descent; and they assert that their ancestors held the district of Multan and fought in the Great War on the side of Duryodhana against the five Pandu brothers. After the war they lost their country, and retired under the leadership of Susarma Chandra to the Jalandhar Doab, where they established themselves, and built the stronghold of Kangra."⁷

This statement still holds ground since these *Vanshavalis* contain names which can be corroborated by literary as well as epigraphical evidences. Cunningham, while giving his report of Punjab Hills, mentions a list of "Rajas of Kangra, Nurpur, Mandi, Suket, Chamba and Rajouri". It is interesting to note that Captain Harcourt, Assistant Commissioner of

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁶ Moorcroft, W. & Trebeck, G. (1841) *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, and Bokhara. Vol. I.* London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, p. 145.

⁷ Cunningham, A. (1871) *The Ancient Geography of India.* London: Trübner & Co., p. 138.

Kulu (1860-1871) edited the *Vanshavali* of the Rajas of Kulu. We find him share intriguing details of the same in his book.⁸ Dr Hirananda Shastri has also discussed the historical documents of Kullu in detail.⁹

- Kalhana's Rajatarangini

The meticulous efforts of Marc Aurel Stein in translating Rajatarangini have been of crucial benefit to the historians. We come across the role of many previous writers and chroniclers producing careful works, of older dates, consisting the royal chronicles of Kashmir. According to Stein's observations,

"In Kalhana's time, these works no longer existed in a complete state. Kalhana attributes their partial loss to the composition of Suvrata, who had condensed their contents in a kind of handbook. We know how often in India the appearance of a convenient abstract has led to the neglect and subsequent loss of all earlier works on the subject."¹⁰

Stein further applauds Kalhana for his honest and distinct admittance of going through "eleven works of former scholars containing the chronicles of the kings," other than the Nilamatapurana.¹¹ Kalhana describes his own work as an endeavour "to give a connected account where the narrative of past events has become fragmentary in many respects." To accomplish this objective, he not only used the earlier Chronicles already referred to, but also the record of another and more original description. Kalhana tells us that he has overcome "the trouble arising from many errors, by looking at the inscriptions recording the consecration of temples and grants by former kings, at all laudatory inscriptions and at written texts (shastras).

"According to Stein, "It shows that Kalhana, besides being a poet, was also an antiquarian, interested in, and acquainted with, such original historical documents as his country could furnish. To find an author of Sanskrit poetry ready to take up the part of an antiquarian student, is a fact as rare as it is gratifying."¹²

- Historical references

- i. In reference to the Hill States, the records of Hieun Tsang provide information of great historical value. The Chinese pilgrim visited India in A.D. 629 and stayed behind till A.D. 644. His records are authentic and relatively older than many available sources. His two years spent in Kashmir are not without significance. He mentions several places which Hutchison and Vogel inform us about, like "Urasha (Hazara), Pamotsa (Punch), Rajapuri (Rajouri), Trigarta or Jalandhara (Kangra) and Kuluta (Kulu)"¹³, the former three being the subjects of Kashmir back then.

⁸ Harcourt, A. F. P. (1871) *The Himalayan Districts of Kooloo, Lahoul, And Spiti*. London: WM H Allen & Co., p.67.

⁹ Archaeological Survey Report, 1907-08. p.200.

¹⁰ Stein, M.A. (1900) *Kalahana's Rajatarangini Vol I*. Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company Ltd, p. 24.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p.3.

- ii. Various and elaborate mentions are found of some of the hill states in works of the Muslim historians, be it the time of Ghazni or more specifically the Mughals. Most royal families in the hill states of Punjab possess not just letters but also *sanads* issued by Mughal emperors and their officers. Evidence is also found of but also correspondence with the Durani as well as Sikh Durbars. As is evident, from available sources, such correspondence also existed with neighbouring States.
- iii. European travellers have also been significant contributors to literary sources. These include travellers like Thomas Coryat and William Finch during the reign of Jahangir. Francois Bernier gives great insights about the reign of Aurangzeb. Forster, whilst serving the Company, wrote in the year 1788 while Moorcroft travelled extensively and documented his finding from 1820 to 22. Another traveller Vigne, visited between 1835 to 39.¹⁴

(B) Archaeological Sources

• Coinage

Numismatic evidence, which is abundant in the Punjab plains, is relatively scarce in the hills. Hutchison and Vogel inform us that

“Kashmir, Kangra and Kulu each had their own coinage system in former times and other States such as Chamba, Mandi, Jammu had a copper coinage.”¹⁵

We find that generally, coins of ancient times are rarely found in the hill states. This can be attributed to the prevalent practice of revenue payment in kind which existed until recent times. The ‘debased bull and horseman type’ of coin made of silver is of rare occurrence. V.A. Smith also showed interest in the same and ascribed it to the reign of Raja Asata Varman of Chamba (A.D. 1080-1106). But it must be noted that Smith’s inferences are a controversial topic amongst the numismatists.

• Epigraphical records

Inscriptions play an important role in tracing history of the hills. This is because in some regions not only are they abundant, but also common. These inscriptions are found on wood, gold, stone, brass, silver, copper etc. As is prevalent, they derive their general name based on the material they were engraved upon. Hence, they are generally known as rock inscriptions, copper-plate inscriptions, image inscriptions, slab inscriptions, etc. *Pathyar* and *Kanhiyara* in the present-day Kangra District provide us with the earliest of records of rock inscriptions in the Punjab hills. Arguably belonging to pre-Christian centuries, they both contain a few letters or words in ‘two characters in Brahmi and Kharoshti’. Chamba provides us with what Hutchison and Vogel call the “richest of all in epigraphical remains” in the Punjab hills. They are not wrong, neither are they exaggerating because it is here the in Chamba that we encounter a nearly unbroken and uninterrupted chain of inscriptions from AD 6th century onwards up until recent times. While states like Kangra, Kashmir and Kulu, despite being of much ‘greater antiquity’ and ‘historical importance’

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

have epigraphic evidence of limited quantity. Chamba, on the other hand, has produced inscriptions mounting to almost a staggering 180. Fifty of these belong to the pre-Muslim era while about eighty are of the Muslim period. Hutchison explains that the reason behind such "wealth" of epigraphic evidence is due to its "secluded position" and because large parts of the above mentioned "superficial area of 8,216 square miles" are uninhabited. This brings home the idea or assumption that huge amount of historically significant material in other regions, be it in the plains or the hills has been lost.

The following descriptions have been provided for some of the inscriptions by Hutchison and Vogel:

- i. "Of the epigraphical records the rock inscriptions are the oldest and least numerous, the oldest dating from the seventh century. Most of the slab inscriptions are found on flat stones, covered with grotesque figures, which originally formed part of elaborately carved *panihars* or cisterns; erected in the olden times, chiefly by the Ranas and Thakurs, who were feudatories of the Rajas, in memory of their deceased relatives, and for their spiritual bliss in the next world. The carved slabs are found all through the hills, but the inscribed stones seem to be peculiar to Chamba. The oldest of the slab inscriptions dates from about A.D. 1028."¹⁶
- ii. The image inscriptions in Chamba are of great value and the oldest among them hail roughly to the start of AD 8th century. Their value lies in their assistance provided to the historian to collate, fill the gaps and at times even correct the genealogy mentioned in *Vanshavalis* as has been the case where they were used to rectify in the *Vanshawali* of Chamba, the chronology of succession the earliest four rulers of the state.
- iii. If we look at it from the perspective of history, the 'copper-plate title-deeds' are no less important. As was customary, they were issued while conferring land grants to temples and brahmans. Hutchison lauds the hill rulers of Chamba stating, "few rulers have been so generous in the bestowal of these gifts, as the former Rajas of Chamba"¹⁷. Presently about 150 such documents exist of which the oldest were can be ascribed to the reign of Raja Yugakara Varman. We can estimate the date of issue of this document to be at the most somewhere around AD 10th century. Despite being available in large numbers, we must understand that the total number was actually even larger, since many are now lost. We notice a disruption in the issuing of plates from A.D. 1080-1330 which might be attributed to the foreign invasions and consequent political disturbances. What is interesting is that from thereafter a continuity exists without any interruptions.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*

(C) Popular Tradition

Popular tradition is instrumental in bringing to light past events. Owing to this, we have been able to get hold of reliable and relevant information. From olden times, the hills have prevailing socio-cultural conditions which facilitate and give primacy to lore and tradition. Traditional lore here is surprisingly credible and important. The hills have had a long history of isolation from the plains. This was because these rugged terrains made both invasion and subsequent conquest impractical and impossible. While one dynasty succeeded another in the plains, and invasions were rampant leading to desolation and destruction, the 'hill principalities' enjoyed relative peace. This is most likely the reason for the comparatively few 'dynastic. In the words of as Denzil Ibbetson, "There exist in the hills, Rajput dynasties with pedigrees more ancient and unbroken than can be shown by any other royal families in the world."¹⁸ This claim of antiquity is not just limited to the royal families. Even Brahmans through their 'title deeds' claim in their possession of ancestral land for unbroken period of time, sometimes even a1000 years. Even tillers and farmers, in many cases, live and cultivate the land that their ancestors have done since ancient times. Families even older than these are found in the hills. These are the *Ranas* and *Thakurs* who were petty chiefs and had ruled these lands independently in the past before the advent of the Rajas.

Critique

We note that most epigraphical records have one feature in common and that is their religious affiliations and purpose. Such purpose is explicitly stated in the inscriptions themselves. The inscriptions that record consecration of idols, images and temples it becomes even more obvious. The land donation to religious institutions mentioned in copper plates exudes nature of noble acts, assessed to inflate the 'religious merit' of the grantor. This also can be witness in the fountain slabs that are erected in the memory of ancestors for their beatitude in afterlife. However, for historians, it is this religious nature of these inscriptions which is problematic and highlights the limitations of these records. We realise that in reality, they were not written with the intension of commemorating historical events and it is incidental that any reference to a historical event occurs. While for the local history, they are of enormous value but however they do not assist us in solving the problems pertaining to Indian history. It is the chronology of these historical and epigraphic records that comes across as the biggest problem. The older the document, more likely it is for them to lack any date of their issue. We hence have to rely majorly on paleo-archaeological evidence. It is only by the AD 11th century that we notice the use of a 'recognized' era. Known by different names like *Loka Kaala* (popular era) *Saptarshi Kaala* (era of Seven Sages), *Shastra Sambat*, *Pahari Sambat*, *Kachcha Sambat*, etc. Dealing with the *Shastra Samvat* can be rather tricky. However, we are obliged to the extensive research done by Professor Keilhorn on the *Sapta Rishi* period. In his work, he points out how one can calculate any given year and find out its corresponding year in the present century. For a Shaka year we add 46 to the given year and 81 for a Vikram year. There is an inscription in the town of Chamba which is dated *Vikram Samvat 1717*, *Shaka Samvat 1582* *Shastra Sambat 86*. It pertains to the month of *Vaisakha* and *dinank* (date) 13 *Mesh Sankranti*. It

¹⁸ Ibbetson, D (1916) *Panjab Castes*. Lahore: Government Printing Press p. 65.

corresponds to Wednesday 28th of March AD1660. What is sad is the fact that in Chamba, inscriptions especially those of pre-Muslim period, only have date from only one era either the *Vikram* or *Shaka* era and sometimes the regnal year. It sometimes becomes hard to assess whether the mentioned year is regnal or *Shastra* year. It can however be helpful if the day is also mentioned along with the date, so that effort can be made to ascertain the exact date or the closest dates within that period otherwise historian has to seek collation in external sources.

Conclusion

While it is true that the religious character of these sources limits their value as historical evidence, yet what cannot be denied is that, it is because of this very character and sacred affiliations that they have been preserved against 'wilful damage'. The defaced and damaged inscriptions are a work of natural agents. The *Rajatarangini* is full of information belonging to AD11th and 12th centuries, which is also the epoch ascribed to majority of the Chamba inscriptions. Thus, these inanimate stone slabs and metal plates have been brought to life due to Kalhana's Chronicle. They too in return, are instrumental in establishing the truthfulness of 'the great Chronicle of Kashmir'. It is interesting to note that in Punjab, only Chamba provides evidence of 'copper plate grants' pertaining to the pre-Muslim period. The fact that and documents issued by a single line of successive rulers for a time period of almost thousand years exist in Chamba is unique not just in Punjab hills but rather entire India. They are of historical importance because each one of them mentions the Raja's name who made the grants accompanied by the names of the father and mother. While the plates from 10th and 11th centuries only give the regnal year of the Raja, from Ad 1330, we find that only the date of issue is mentioned in the *Shastra* era, or sometimes also in *Vikrama* or *Shaka* era. Some plates have other historically significant details.

Denzil Ibbetson also establishes the antiquity of the pedigree of hills rulers. When we think of these hills, we paint a picture of peace and tranquillity, of their subtle charm and romance. The conservative nature of the people of the hills, their devout attachment to their lineage, hereditary chiefs, and native land gives us all the prerequisites of a place that fosters love for traditional lore. The hills of Punjab have an air favourable for transmission of folklore and culture with astounding veracity of detail till posterity. However, recent influences "threaten to revolutionize the social life of the hills".¹⁹ Though there is not much one can do to prevent such changes, which are only natural with the course of time, instead of any indulgence in vain lament, the historian must record, try to preserve and treasure the jewels of the past which could soon be washed away by the waves of time and changing social influences.

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The very seeds of inspiration for venturing into the study of the Himalayan history and culture were sown by my grandfather Mr. Satya Prakash Thakur, who through his valuable insights and anecdotes captured my fascination. Hence, he, by the virtue of his valuable contributions to this research, has become the foremost recipient of my acknowledgement. Another history enthusiast who has been highly instrumental in the

¹⁹ Stokes, V. (2012) *Vanishing Cultures as of Himachal: The Example of Ilaqa Kotgarh*. Vidhanmala.

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