Interplay of Brahmanic and Buddhist Traditions in Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*

Dr. Ajeet Kumar
Associate Professor
Department of History
Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007

Abstract;This article explores the interweaving of Brahmanic and Buddhist traditions in *Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī* (12th century CE), a pioneering historical chronicle from Kashmir. Written in Sanskrit and composed within the framework of *mahākāvya*, the text offers a complex vision of kingship, morality, and religious identity. While Kalhaṇa's Brahmanical background informs his aesthetic and ethical ideals, his narrative does not exclude or diminish Kashmir's Buddhist legacy. Through nuanced character sketches, references to monasteries and moral codes, and depictions of syncretic rulers, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* emerges as a product of ideological negotiation and cultural accommodation. The article argues that Kalhaṇa's work is both a record of dynastic history and a reflective literary construction of Kashmir's composite religious landscape.

Keywords

Kalhaṇa; *Rājataraṅgiṇī*; Kashmir; Brahmanism; Buddhism; religious syncretism; Sanskrit historiography; medieval India; cultural memory.

1. Introduction

Kalhaṇa, a 12th-century Kashmiri historian, occupies a unique place in the historical tradition of early India through his seminal work, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* (River of Kings). Composed in Sanskrit around 1148–1150 CE, this chronicle is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest and most sustained efforts to write history in a critical and narrative form in the Indian subcontinent.[i] Unlike Puranic genealogies or mythic accounts, Kalhaṇa sought to document the dynastic history of Kashmir with a deliberate attempt at

chronological continuity and rational inquiry, though still deeply embedded in the religious and cultural values of his time.

One of the defining features of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is the centrality of religious traditions in shaping its narrative structure and moral judgments. As a Brahmin, Kalhaṇa was steeped in Brahmanic culture, but he wrote in a region and period marked by a complex interplay of Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Śaiva traditions.[ii] These religious elements are not simply incidental or decorative but are woven into the texture of political and moral commentary, shaping perceptions of legitimacy, virtue, and decline. His depictions of rulers often hinge upon their patronage of temples, behavior toward religious communities, or adherence to dharmic ideals.

This paper seeks to explore a central question: How are Brahmanic and Buddhist elements are represented and interwoven in Kalhaṇa's chronicle? Addressing this question involves analyzing Kalhaṇa's religious worldview and examining how he narrates political events through the lens of sacred geography, moral cosmology, and sectarian affiliations. Such an inquiry also engages broader historiographical debates on the relationship between religion and history-writing in early India.[iii]

2. Text and Historiography

Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī is not merely a chronicle of political events but a richly layered literary text that reflects Kashmir's complex religious and cultural history. To fully grasp how Kalhaṇa represents Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions or constructs syncretic

ideals of kingship, it is essential to examine how the Rājataraṅgiṇī itself has been framed, translated, and interpreted in historiographical discourse. The ways in which the text has been understood by successive generations of scholars help illuminate the ideological and intellectual negotiations embedded within its form and content.

The use of Rājataraṅgiṇī in Persian works by Haidar Malik in the early 13th century already indicated the work's perceived historical value. However, it was not until the 19th century that European Orientalists like Harold Wilson began to classify it as the "only Sanskrit composition yet discovered, to which the title of history can with any propriety be applied."[iv] This praise, while appearing to elevate Kalhaṇa's status, was simultaneously a critique of the rest of Sanskrit literature, which was presumed to lack historical consciousness.[v]

Translations by J. C. Dutt (1879–1898) and Aurel Stein (1900) cemented Rājataraṅgiṇī's place in the colonial canon of Indian history. Dutt's translation emphasized its alignment with European ideals of history, while Stein's critical edition highlighted its chronological structure and use of sources.[vi] By contrast, Ranjit S. Pandit's nationalist translation (1935) deliberately recast Kalhaṇa as a chronicler of India's civilizational and ethical greatness, aligning his work with the larger cultural narrative of Indian unity.[vii]

These early readings, whether colonial or nationalist, tended to polarize Kalhaṇa's identity as either a regional Kashmiri chronicler or a pan-Indian voice. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, Kalhaṇa's work simultaneously affirms a Brahmanical moral order and

acknowledges Buddhist ethical values within a composite literary and religious culture, resisting such binary classifications.

Indologist critiques such as those by George Bühler and R. C. Majumdar took issue with Kalhaṇa's inclusion of mythical kings, reliance on karma, and poetic stylization, which they believed undermined the text's historical validity.[viii] A.L. Basham classified the text into three historiographical layers: legendary, semi-historical, and eyewitness-based, arguing that Kalhaṇa showed increasing historical awareness in the later cantos.[ix] Romila Thapar offered a more balanced interpretation, noting Kalhaṇa's shift from supernaturalism to analytical reasoning, thus recognizing his moral reflection without dismissing the literary mode.[x]

This historiographical tension resonates with the core theme of this article: Kalhaṇa did not separate religion from politics, poetry from history, or ethics from statecraft. Instead, he fused them using poetic devices not to obscure, but to moralize, critique, and elevate historical experience. This convergence of aesthetic, philosophical, and historical objectives explains why Kalhaṇa could value ahiṃsā in Buddhist rulers and dharma in Brahmanical ones, and why he could portray Kashmir as both a physical and ideological space of pluralism.

Recent scholars have moved beyond earlier empiricist critiques to examine the Rājataraṅgiṇī within its indigenous aesthetic and epistemological contexts. Shonaleeka Kaul has been instrumental in showing how Kalhaṇa's use of kāvya conventions,

intertextuality, and poetic imagination constructs history not as a set of facts, but as a field of ethical instruction and political reflection.[xi] For Kaul, Kalhaṇa's narrative does not simply describe Kashmir; it creates Kashmir—morally, ideologically, and aesthetically.[xii]

Lawrence McCrea and Walter Slaje have similarly argued for understanding the Rājataraṅgiṇī through Sanskrit poetics, particularly the dominance of śānta rasa (aesthetic of quiescence), which conveys Kalhaṇa's disillusionment with cyclical moral decline.[xiii] These reinterpretations validate the claim advanced in this article that Kalhaṇa's representation of religious traditions is inseparable from his broader attempt to encode a morally resonant and philosophically reflective history.

3. Historical and Cultural Background

The period between the 8th and 12th centuries CE in Kashmir was marked by a vibrant and complex religious landscape. Shaivism, particularly in its Trika and monistic forms, emerged as a dominant religious force during this time, not just spiritually but intellectually and politically. Alongside it, Vaishnavism retained a significant presence, while Buddhism, though in relative decline, continued to shape the cultural and religious ethos of the region. These traditions did not exist in isolation; instead, they frequently intersected, creating a dynamic space of religious syncretism and tension.[xiv]

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* offers a vivid account of this interplay of religious traditions. His work reveals a society where rulers extended patronage to diverse sects, donating

land to Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Buddhist institutions alike.[xv] This reflects not only the pluralism of the time but also the strategic use of religious patronage by kings to legitimize their rule and cultivate loyalty across sectarian lines.

The ruling dynasties of this period, such as the Karkotas and the Loharas, played a decisive role in shaping Kashmir's religious and cultural milieu. For example, King Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa (r. 8th century CE) is known for his wide-ranging military campaigns and his monumental temple constructions, many of which were dedicated to Shaiva deities.[xvi] Later rulers like Harsha (r. 1089–1101 CE) displayed a more eclectic religious orientation, even though his reign was marred by political instability and religious violence.[xvii]

Importantly, Kalhaṇa does not describe religious patronage merely as a record of pious donations; he weaves it into his broader ethical and political narrative. Religious institutions serve as indicators of a ruler's virtue or vice, and the prosperity or decline of temples and monastic establishments is tied to the ethical conduct of kings.[xviii] Thus, the religious landscape of Kashmir in this era becomes a crucial backdrop for understanding Kalhaṇa's conception of history as a moral and political discourse.

4. Brahmanic Tradition in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* offers a rich portrayal of the Brahmanic tradition as integral to the sociopolitical and moral fabric of early medieval Kashmir. The chronicle foregrounds Brahmanical rituals, temple patronage, and the influential roles of priests and learned

Brahmins, presenting them as central to the maintenance of *dharma* and the legitimization of kingship.

One of the most illustrative examples of Brahmanic patronage comes from the reign of King Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa, whose deeds are documented in Book IV of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*. Kalhaṇa describes Lalitāditya as a powerful conqueror and devout ruler who undertook extensive temple-building activities, especially in honor of Śiva. Among the many temples attributed to him is the monumental Martand temple, dedicated to the solar deity but closely aligned with the Brahmanic Shaiva tradition.[xix] This temple, built with exquisite architecture and Vedic symbolism, became a visual testament to the king's piety and his ambition to place Kashmir within a larger sacred geography.[xx]

Kalhaṇa links the king's greatness to his Brahmanical commitments: he is portrayed as a *dharmic* monarch whose patronage extended to Brahmins, priests, and learned scholars.[xxi] The king is repeatedly depicted performing Vedic rituals, giving land grants to Brahmins, and ensuring the protection of their rights and livelihoods. These acts serve both a spiritual and political function, reinforcing his legitimacy as a just and righteous ruler (*dharmarāja*).

Brahmins appear in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* not merely as passive recipients of royal generosity but as active participants in statecraft and ethics. They act as advisors, chroniclers, moral arbiters, and ritual specialists. Kalhaṇa, himself a Brahmin, demonstrates reverence for figures who uphold Vedic learning and moral integrity. The chronicler frequently uses

Brahmanic norms as a benchmark to evaluate the conduct of kings, often praising rulers who honored the Vedas and disparaging those who ignored or persecuted Brahmanical institutions.[xxii]

Beyond Lalitāditya, other rulers are also evaluated in terms of their engagement with Brahmanic ideals. Kings who neglect or violate Brahmanical values are often portrayed as unjust or tyrannical. The Lohara king Harsha, for instance, is condemned for his moral decay and sacrilegious behavior, contrasting sharply with earlier kings who supported Vedic institutions.[xxiii]

The *Rājataraṅgiṇī* thus constructs a sacred and political worldview where Brahmanism especially in its ritual, intellectual, and institutional dimensions is inseparable from legitimate kingship. The text employs this tradition not only to frame its historical narrative but also to deliver ethical instruction about the proper ordering of society and state.

5. Buddhist Presence and Depiction in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*

In the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, Kalhaṇa acknowledges the long-standing presence of Buddhism in Kashmir, albeit from the perspective of a Shaiva Brahmin. His references to Buddhist sites, figures, and ideals, though less central than Brahmanical elements, are nonetheless significant and largely respectful.

Monasteries, Monastic Figures, and Stupas

Kalhaṇa refers to several Buddhist viharas and monastic constructions commissioned by royal patrons. One of the most renowned is the Amṛtabhavana Vihāra, constructed by Queen Amṛtaprabhā, consort of King Meghavāhana. It is praised for its scale and beauty and reflects the queen's personal devotion to Buddhist ideals.[xxiv] Other royal women, such as Queen Yukadevi and Indradevi, also established Buddhist institutions, which indicates the active role of elite women in sustaining Buddhist religiosity.[xxv] These monasteries are embedded in Kalhaṇa's narrative not as marginal footnotes, but as evidence of a Kashmir where multiple religious traditions coexisted and received royal support.

Kalhaṇa also mentions stupas and other Buddhist relics in the Valley, though often in passing, suggesting both their ubiquity and his editorial distance from them. His presentation is neither antagonistic nor overly laudatory but suggests a world in which Buddhism remained a vital, though no longer dominant, religious option.

Kalhaṇa's Tone: Respectful but Peripheral

Although Kalhaṇa's Brahmanical sympathies are clear, he treats Buddhism with a measure of reverence. He refers to the Buddha as a compassionate figure and does not disparage Buddhist institutions or practices. However, Buddhist kings and themes receive less narrative space than their Brahmanical counterparts.[xxvi] Kalhaṇa's selection and structuring of material subtly prioritize Vedic and Shaiva traditions, but without outright

hostility toward Buddhism. His tone, especially in comparison to the harsh treatment of heterodox rulers like Harsha, is notably tempered.

Meghavāhana: The Buddhist King of Non-Violence

The most detailed portrayal of a Buddhist king in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is that of Meghavāhana, whose reign is described in Book III. Meghavāhana is remembered for a landmark royal edict banning the killing of animals across his kingdom, inspired by Buddhist ethics of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). He even compensated hunters for their losses to ensure compliance, which Kalhaṇa presents with approval, despite its non-Vedic foundation.[xxvii] This move closely mirrors the policies of Emperor Aśoka, whose edicts emphasized animal protection and moral governance grounded in *dhamma*.

Kalhaṇa narrates how Meghavāhana's moral authority extended beyond Kashmir, as he attempted to propagate his values in distant regions such as Sri Lanka. His commitment to dharma through action, especially in banning animal slaughter, positions him as a ruler of high ethical stature.[xxviii]

While Kalhaṇa does not explicitly valorize Meghavāhana as he does certain Brahmanical kings, he does not denigrate him either. Rather, Meghavāhana serves as a rare example in the text of how Buddhist ethics could shape legitimate kingship in early medieval Kashmir.

6. Kalhaṇa's Perspective and Religious Syncretism

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* emerges not only as a political chronicle but also as a sophisticated reflection of the religious diversity and intellectual ferment of 12th-century Kashmir. As a Brahmin author, Kalhaṇa's outlook is undeniably shaped by orthodox frameworks. However, his treatment of the past demonstrates a literary and historiographical effort to navigate, accommodate, and interpret a syncretic religious landscape, rather than to erase or marginalize it.

A Brahmin Historian in a Multireligious World

Kalhaṇa's caste identity and the intellectual traditions he inherits inform much of his philosophical orientation. His ideal of kingship is framed by *rajadharma*, moral authority, and social hierarchy.[xxix] Yet, he refrains from using his position to mount an exclusivist religious agenda. Rather than denigrating non-Brahmanical beliefs, Kalhaṇa uses selective silence, tonal restraint, and nuanced framing to acknowledge alternative traditions while emphasizing continuity with Vedic norms.

This is particularly evident in his stylistic choices. While the text invokes divine figures like Śiva and Viṣṇu with emotional intensity, Buddhist figures and sites are mentioned in a historical or ethical light, contributing to a textual hierarchy that privileges Brahmanical memory without outright exclusion.[xxx] Such strategies suggest not doctrinal intolerance, but a historically embedded cultural preference.

Selective Memorialization of the Buddhist Past

Kalhaṇa's historical vision includes recognition of Buddhist glory, particularly in earlier centuries, but his account subtly marks Buddhism as part of a bygone golden age rather than a living, authoritative presence in his own time. For instance, Buddhist kings and queens are praised for their piety and public works, yet they are rarely held up as paradigms of political wisdom in the same manner as Vedic-aligned rulers.[xxxi] This memorialization effectively absorbs Buddhism into a broader narrative of Kashmir's civilizational continuity, even as it tacitly repositions it as secondary in the moral-political order.

This temporal distancing mirrors Kalhaṇa's treatment of myth and epic as historical devices: credible, meaningful, and worthy of preservation, yet ultimately serving the poetic and moral architecture of his Brahmanical worldview.[xxxii]

Religious Pluralism through Political Legitimacy

What is striking in Kalhaṇa's method is how he weaves religious plurality into the fabric of legitimate kingship. He refrains from depicting sectarian conflict, focusing instead on a ruler's ability to preserve order and patronize multiple traditions. For example, kings such as Avantivarman and Ananta are praised not for rigid religious allegiance but for their moderation, learning, and administrative prudence.[xxxiii] Their religious tolerance is framed as a sign of wisdom and statecraft, rather than theological compromise.

Thus, syncretism in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is not celebrated rhetorically but practiced narratively, through representations of kings who balanced competing claims of religious

authority. Kalhaṇa's historiography subtly instructs that an enduring political order requires respect for Kashmir's plural religious heritage, even if his personal sympathies lie with the Brahmanical tradition.

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is not only a chronicle of kings but also a remarkable instance of literary synthesis, where poetic form, philosophical ideals, and religious values coalesce. It is written as a *mahākāvya* (classical Sanskrit court epic), a genre deeply embedded in Brahmanic aesthetics. Yet within this highly structured literary mode, Kalhaṇa subtly integrates ethical ideals associated with Buddhism, such as compassion, detachment, and non-violence, thereby enriching his moral vision of history.

7. Literary and Philosophical Integration

Sanskrit Poetic Conventions and Brahmanical Aesthetics

The *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is composed in strict accordance with the conventions of Sanskrit *kāvya*. Its use of metaphor (*rūpaka*), aesthetic flavor (*rasa*), and highly stylized language situates it within a classical Brahmanical literary lineage.[xxxiv] Kalhaṇa invokes traditional poetic goals—not just to ornament his narrative but to frame his historical judgments within the vocabulary of *dharma*, virtue, and ethical instruction.[xxxv]

Following the principles of Sanskrit *alaṃkāra-śāstra* (poetics), Kalhaṇa often emphasizes the *śānta rasa* the aesthetic of quiescence or dispassion especially in describing downfall and decay.[xxxvi] This mood, traditionally associated with renunciation and spiritual

detachment, aligns not only with Brahmanical ideals of *vairāgya* but also with Buddhist notions of impermanence (*anitya*) and the futility of desire. The blending of these values within a Brahmanic literary vehicle is a hallmark of Kalhaṇa's philosophical synthesis.

As Sheldon Pollock observes, classical Sanskrit literature was "a language of power," designed to articulate elite ideologies across religious traditions.[xxxvii] Kalhaṇa's work, while deeply Brahmanical in idiom, harnesses this cosmopolitan literary power to represent a plural moral world, one in which Buddhist ethics find voice through aesthetic form.

Buddhist Values Embedded in Character and Judgment

Though Buddhism does not dominate Kalhaṇa's ideological structure, Buddhist ethical themes are woven into character portrayals and moral commentary. The king Meghavāhana, for example, is not merely remembered for banning animal slaughter, but is described with ethical depth and moral clarity. His compassion is not presented in isolation but contrasted with the violence of later kings, thereby establishing it as a universal moral virtue.[xxxviii]

Kalhaṇa also uses non-violence (ahiṃsā) as a benchmark for ethical kingship, not in overt doctrinal terms, but through poetic and narrative framing. Kings who demonstrate unnecessary cruelty or oppression are condemned not only in political terms but with aesthetic and emotional intensity. In doing so, Kalhaṇa reflects the integration of Buddhist-inflected moral sentiment into a Brahmanical evaluative structure.

Thus, while the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* adheres formally to Brahmanical literary paradigms, its moral universe is capacious. Kalhaṇa's philosophical narrative allows Buddhist virtues to function within a broader, integrative ethical framework, expressed through the idiom of Sanskrit *kāvya*. His history, therefore, becomes a literary space where religious ideas intersect not polemically, but productively.

8 . Conclusion

Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* stands at the crossroads of a deeply transitional era in Kashmir's religious and political history. Composed in the 12th century CE, the text reflects a moment when Brahmanical revivalism, Buddhist heritage, and the emerging ethos of political pragmatism coexisted in a state of dynamic negotiation. Rather than suppressing this complexity, Kalhaṇa weaves it into the fabric of his narrative, offering a chronicle that is as much a literary and moral vision as it is a historical account.

As a Brahmin and court poet, Kalhaṇa's framework is undeniably shaped by Vedic norms, yet he does not erase the diverse religious currents of Kashmir's past. His respectful yet restrained treatment of Buddhism, his acknowledgment of syncretic rulers, and his appreciation for ethical values, regardless of their doctrinal origins, point to an author deeply engaged in ideological reconciliation. The *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, in this sense, functions not simply as a record of royal deeds, but as a mirror of religious pluralism, tempered by Kalhaṇa's philosophical preferences and poetic discipline.

In literary terms, Kalhaṇa draws upon classical Sanskrit poetic traditions to encode a moral universe that includes both Brahmanical ideals and Buddhist ethical themes. His subtle deployment of rasa, particularly *śānta* (tranquility), and his measured narrative tone contribute to a vision of history where aesthetics, ethics, and memory converge.

Kalhaṇa's enduring legacy lies in his ability to represent Kashmir's composite culture through a historically conscious yet ideologically inflected literary work. The *Rājataraṅgiṇī* thus serves not only as a pioneering historical text but as an imaginative expression of cultural integration, a document of Kashmir's past, and a reflection on how its multiple traditions could coexist, contend, and ultimately shape one another in narrative memory.

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[1] Kalhaṇa refers to donations made by kings to Buddhist, Shaiva, and Vaishnava institutions as documented through rock and copperplate inscriptions.

[1] Lalitāditya's temple-building projects and political ambitions are seen as attempts to embed his rule within a cosmic and sacred order.

[1] Harsha's regime is remembered for both its cultural patronage and episodes of persecution, reflecting the turbulence of the era.

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