

Kalhaṇa as a Historian: Historical Method in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*

Altaf Hussain Para

Associate Professor
Higher Education (J&K)

Abstract:

The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa occupies a distinctive position in the historiographical tradition of premodern India. Composed in Sanskrit around 1148–1150 CE, it presents a continuous narrative of the rulers of Kashmir from legendary antiquity to the author's own lifetime. Unlike many courtly chronicles that primarily celebrated royal achievements, Kalhaṇa sought to construct a historical narrative through the critical examination of earlier chronicles, inscriptions, genealogies, royal grants, coins, temple records, and local traditions. Although the work incorporates mythical accounts, moral reflections, and literary conventions characteristic of Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, it also reveals a conscious concern for chronology, causation, geographical precision, and the evaluation of conflicting evidence. This paper examines Kalhaṇa's historical method by analysing his conception of history, his use of sources, his treatment of chronology, and his understanding of historical causation. It argues that the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* should neither be regarded as a modern work of scientific history nor dismissed merely as literary poetry. Instead, it represents a sophisticated example of historical writing within the intellectual and literary conventions of twelfth-century Kashmir. By situating Kalhaṇa within the broader context of Indian historiography, the study demonstrates how his work combined literary expression with critical historical inquiry and established a model that influenced subsequent Sanskrit and Persian historical traditions in Kashmir.

Keywords: Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Kashmir, Historiography, Historical Method, Sanskrit Literature, Medieval India, Historical Sources.

Introduction

The question of whether ancient and medieval India possessed a genuine tradition of historical writing has long occupied historians of South Asia. Early European scholars often argued that Indian civilization produced relatively little historical writing in the sense understood by the Greco-Roman tradition, emphasizing instead religious philosophy, epic literature, and mythology. More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this view by demonstrating that historical consciousness in India assumed diverse literary forms shaped by regional traditions and intellectual contexts (Thapar, 2000). Among the surviving historical works of premodern India, Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* occupies a unique position. Composed in Sanskrit around 1148–1150 CE, the work presents a continuous account of the rulers of Kashmir from legendary antiquity to the reign of Jayasimha, Kalhaṇa's contemporary. Unlike royal panegyrics that primarily glorified reigning monarchs, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* attempts to reconstruct the political history of Kashmir through the careful use of earlier chronicles, inscriptions, genealogical records, royal grants, temple archives, coins, and local traditions (Stein, 1900/1979; Slaje, 2008). Kalhaṇa's importance extends

beyond the historical information preserved in his chronicle. In the introductory verses, he explicitly discusses the responsibilities of a historian and criticizes earlier writers for exaggeration and partiality. He argues that the historian should remain free from attachment (*rāga*) and hatred (*dveṣa*), thereby presenting events with fairness and restraint. Such observations indicate a conscious awareness of historical method that distinguishes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from many contemporary literary works (Stein, 1900/1979; Slaje, 2013).

Nevertheless, scholars continue to debate how Kalhaṇa should be understood. Earlier historians frequently described him as "India's first historian" because of his concern for chronology and his use of documentary evidence. More recent studies caution against imposing modern concepts of scientific history on a twelfth-century Sanskrit author whose work remained deeply embedded in the conventions of *kāvya* literature, moral philosophy, and religious cosmology (Thapar, 2000; Zutshi, 2011; Slaje, 2013). Rather than viewing these literary features as weaknesses, contemporary scholarship interprets them as integral to the historiographical practices of medieval Kashmir.

Historiography and Review of Scholarship

The historiography of Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* reflects broader debates concerning the nature of historical writing in premodern India. Since the nineteenth century, historians, Indologists, and literary scholars have examined whether the work should be understood primarily as a historical chronicle, a Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, or a unique synthesis of literary creativity and historical inquiry. These discussions have evolved considerably over time, moving from colonial assessments based on European models of historiography to more nuanced interpretations that recognize indigenous conceptions of the past and historical narration. The first comprehensive scholarly engagement with the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* was undertaken by Marc Aurel Stein, whose critical edition and English translation, published in 1900, remain foundational for modern scholarship. Stein regarded Kalhaṇa as an exceptional historian within the Indian tradition because of his concern for chronology, his use of documentary evidence, and his efforts to distinguish reliable traditions from legendary accounts. He observed that Kalhaṇa consulted inscriptions, land grants, temple records, genealogies, coins, and earlier chronicles while reconstructing Kashmir's political history. Although Stein acknowledged that the earlier books contain legendary material, he argued that the historical reliability of the narrative increases significantly from the fourth *tarāṅga* onwards, particularly for the Karkoṭa, Utpala, and Lohara dynasties (Stein, 1979 [1900]). Early twentieth-century historians largely accepted Stein's assessment. R. C. Majumdar considered the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* one of the finest examples of historical writing produced in premodern India. He emphasized Kalhaṇa's concern for chronological sequence, his attempts to verify conflicting traditions, and his refusal to indulge in indiscriminate royal praise. Similarly, A. L. Basham argued that Kalhaṇa displayed a historical attitude uncommon in contemporary Sanskrit literature. Basham observed that while the earlier portions of the text relied heavily upon traditional narratives, the later books were based increasingly on eyewitness testimony and documentary evidence, thereby demonstrating an awareness of historical method (Basham, 1961; Majumdar, 1961).

A significant shift in interpretation emerged with the work of Romila Thapar. Rather than asking whether Kalhaṇa satisfied modern standards of historical writing, Thapar situated the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* within the wider traditions of early Indian historiography. She argued that Indian historical narratives often assumed literary forms different from those of classical European historiography and should therefore be evaluated according to their own intellectual contexts. In *The Past Before Us*, she described the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* as a

narrative *kāvya* that consciously sought to preserve political memory while simultaneously employing literary conventions, moral reflections, and philosophical interpretations. According to Thapar (2000), Kalhaṇa's achievement lies not in anticipating modern positivist history but in developing an indigenous historical discourse that combined critical inquiry with literary expression. Subsequent scholarship has further refined this perspective. Walter Slaje has argued that the literary qualities of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* should not be regarded as obstacles to its historical value. Instead, he demonstrates that poetic composition and historical narration were complementary rather than contradictory within Sanskrit intellectual traditions. Slaje maintains that Kalhaṇa consciously employed literary devices to communicate political, ethical, and historical truths while simultaneously engaging in careful source criticism and chronological reconstruction (Slaje, 2008; Slaje, 2013). Rather than separating literature from history, Slaje interprets the text as an example of historiography expressed through the medium of classical Sanskrit poetry.

Recent scholarship by Chitrlekha Zutshi has expanded the discussion beyond Kalhaṇa himself to examine the reception and reinterpretation of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* across different historical periods. Zutshi demonstrates that the chronicle continued to shape Kashmir's historical consciousness through later Sanskrit continuations and Persian translations produced during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Rather than simply reproducing Kalhaṇa's narrative, these later historians selectively adapted it to address changing political and cultural contexts. Her work highlights the dynamic nature of historical tradition in Kashmir and shows that the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* functioned as a living historical text rather than a static chronicle (Zutshi, 2011, 2013). Another influential interpretation has been offered by Shonaleeka Kaul, who argues that Kalhaṇa's primary objective extended beyond recording political events. According to Kaul, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* constructs Kashmir as both a geographical territory and a moral-political landscape in which kingship, ethics, and regional identity are closely interconnected. Historical narration, therefore, serves not merely to document the past but also to articulate ideals of righteous governance and political legitimacy. This interpretation underscores the close relationship between historical memory and ethical instruction in medieval Kashmir. Not all scholars, however, have accepted the historical claims of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* without reservation. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, in their broader reflections on premodern South Asian historical narratives, caution against reading literary realism as equivalent to historical objectivity. They argue that narrative coherence and descriptive detail do not necessarily establish factual accuracy and emphasize that premodern historical texts frequently sought to convey moral and political meanings alongside empirical information. While their observations are not directed exclusively at Kalhaṇa, they encourage historians to distinguish carefully between literary representation and historical evidence.

Despite differences in interpretation, a broad scholarly consensus has emerged on several important points. First, Kalhaṇa consciously distinguished his work from conventional royal eulogies by emphasizing impartiality and careful use of sources. Second, his historical reliability varies across different sections of the text, with the later books generally regarded as more dependable than the legendary narratives of the opening *tarāṅgas*. Third, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* cannot be adequately understood if evaluated solely through modern concepts of scientific historiography; instead, it must be interpreted within the literary, intellectual, and political culture of twelfth-century Kashmir. Finally, scholars increasingly recognize that Kalhaṇa's enduring importance lies not only in preserving Kashmir's political history but also in demonstrating a sophisticated indigenous approach to historical narration that integrated documentary evidence, literary aesthetics, ethical reflection, and regional identity (Thapar, 2000; Slaje, 2013; Zutshi, 2013).

Research Gap

Although the existing scholarship has substantially advanced our understanding of the *Rājataranginī*, several issues remain insufficiently explored. Much of the earlier literature concentrated on determining whether Kalhaṇa should be regarded as India's "first historian," a debate that often relied upon comparisons with modern European historiography. More recent studies have shifted attention to literary form, political thought, and historical memory, yet relatively few have examined Kalhaṇa's historical method as an integrated framework combining source criticism, chronology, geographical knowledge, causal explanation, and ethical interpretation. Furthermore, many discussions address these elements individually rather than analysing how they collectively shaped Kalhaṇa's conception of historical writing. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of Kalhaṇa's historical methodology, situating it within the intellectual traditions of twelfth-century Kashmir while assessing its significance for the broader development of Indian historiography. Accordingly, this paper argues that the *Rājataranginī* should neither be celebrated uncritically as a modern historical work nor dismissed as merely a poetic chronicle. Instead, it represents a sophisticated example of premodern historical writing in which literary expression, critical engagement with sources, chronological organization, and ethical interpretation were consciously integrated. By examining Kalhaṇa's conception of history, his use of evidence, his treatment of chronology, and his methods of historical explanation, this study seeks to reassess his contribution to the historiography of medieval India.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative historical research methodology based primarily on textual analysis and historiographical interpretation. Since the objective is to examine Kalhaṇa's historical method rather than reconstruct specific historical events, the study relies on critical analysis of both primary and secondary sources.

The principal primary source is the *Rājataranginī*, composed by Kalhaṇa in the mid-twelfth century CE. The analysis primarily utilizes the critical English translation prepared by Stein (1979), while references are also made to the Sanskrit text wherever necessary to clarify important historiographical concepts and terminology. Particular attention is given to the introductory verses of the first *tarāṅga*, where Kalhaṇa explicitly discusses the responsibilities of the historian, the limitations of earlier chroniclers, and the principles that informed his own work (Kalhaṇa, 1979). The study also consults later Kashmiri historical chronicles, including Jonarāja's *Rājataranginī*, Śrīvara's continuation of the chronicle, and selected Persian histories of Kashmir where relevant. These texts provide valuable evidence for understanding the continuing influence of Kalhaṇa's historiographical tradition and the ways in which later historians adopted, modified, or expanded his historical framework (Zutshi, 2013). Secondary sources include modern scholarship on Indian historiography, Sanskrit historical literature, medieval Kashmir, and theories of historical writing. Particular emphasis has been placed on the works of Stein (1979), Thapar (2000), Slaje (2008, 2013), Zutshi (2011, 2013), Basham (1961), Majumdar (1961), and Kaul (2018), whose studies collectively represent the major scholarly approaches to Kalhaṇa and the *Rājataranginī*. These works are examined comparatively to identify areas of agreement, disagreement, and evolving interpretations regarding Kalhaṇa's historical method.

The analysis employs the historical-critical method, which involves evaluating the context, purpose, authorship, and reliability of historical sources while considering the broader intellectual traditions within which they were produced (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). Rather than treating the *Rājataranginī* solely as

either literature or history, the study recognizes it as a historical narrative that combines factual reporting with literary conventions characteristic of classical Sanskrit *kāvya*. Consequently, literary devices such as moral reflection, rhetorical embellishment, and mythological references are interpreted within their historical and cultural contexts instead of being viewed simply as deviations from modern historiographical practice. In addition, the study adopts a historiographical approach that emphasizes the historical evolution of methods used to record, interpret, and transmit knowledge about the past. This perspective allows Kalhaṇa's work to be evaluated according to the intellectual assumptions of twelfth-century Kashmir rather than through direct comparison with modern professional historiography. Such an approach avoids anachronistic judgments while enabling a balanced assessment of Kalhaṇa's originality and historical significance (Thapar, 2000; Slaje, 2013). The scope of the study is confined to Kalhaṇa's historical method and does not attempt a comprehensive political history of medieval Kashmir. Similarly, while questions concerning the historical accuracy of individual events are discussed where relevant, the principal focus remains on Kalhaṇa's approach to collecting evidence, organizing chronology, evaluating sources, and constructing historical narratives.

Historical Writing in Kashmir before Kalhaṇa

Understanding Kalhaṇa's historiographical achievement requires an appreciation of the historical traditions that preceded him. Although the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is widely regarded as the earliest extant continuous historical narrative from Kashmir, Kalhaṇa himself makes it clear that he was not writing in isolation. In the opening verses of his work, he acknowledges the existence of earlier chronicles and historical records that served as important sources for his own composition. These references demonstrate that the recording of political history in Kashmir had a longer tradition, even though most of these earlier works have not survived (Kalhaṇa, 1979). Kalhaṇa states that he consulted the works of at least eleven earlier authors who had written about the kings of Kashmir. Unfortunately, these chronicles have been lost, and our knowledge of them depends almost entirely upon Kalhaṇa's own testimony. Nevertheless, their existence indicates that historical writing had already become an established literary activity in Kashmir before the twelfth century. Unlike many other regions of early medieval India, where royal inscriptions and genealogies constitute the principal historical evidence, Kashmir appears to have developed a distinctive tradition of narrative historical composition extending over several centuries (Stein, 1979).

In addition to earlier chronicles, Kalhaṇa refers to numerous documentary materials that informed his historical reconstruction. These included royal charters (*śāsanas*), land grants, temple records, genealogies, inscriptions, coins, and administrative documents preserved in religious institutions. Such materials enabled him to compare different accounts, verify chronological details, and identify inconsistencies in earlier narratives. His references suggest that historical memory in Kashmir was preserved not only through oral traditions but also through a substantial body of written documentation maintained by royal officials, temples, and learned families (Stein, 1979; Slaje, 2008). Religious literature also played an important role in shaping historical consciousness before Kalhaṇa. Texts such as the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* preserved traditions concerning the origin of Kashmir, its sacred geography, local dynasties, pilgrimage centres, and cultural practices. Although these works were not historical chronicles in the modern sense, they contributed significantly to the construction of regional identity and collective memory. Kalhaṇa frequently drew upon such traditions while distinguishing between mythological narratives and events that he considered historically credible (Thapar, 2000). The intellectual environment

of Kashmir further encouraged the preservation of historical knowledge. Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, Kashmir emerged as one of the foremost centres of Sanskrit learning in South Asia. The region produced distinguished scholars in philosophy, aesthetics, poetics, grammar, historiography, and theology, including Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Kṣemendra, Bilhaṇa, and Somadeva. Their works demonstrate the remarkable literary and scholarly culture that flourished under successive dynasties and provided the intellectual milieu in which Kalhaṇa composed the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (Kaul, 2018).

The political conditions of twelfth-century Kashmir also influenced Kalhaṇa's historiographical enterprise. The decline of the Lohara dynasty, factional conflicts among feudal elites, and recurring struggles for royal succession generated widespread political instability. Writing in this context, Kalhaṇa sought not merely to preserve a record of kings but also to understand the causes of political success and failure. Historical narrative thus became a medium through which broader questions concerning kingship, morality, justice, and statecraft could be explored. His chronicle reflects a conviction that the rise and fall of rulers were shaped by both political decisions and ethical conduct, an idea deeply rooted in Sanskrit political thought (Kaul, 2018; Thapar, 2000). By the time Kalhaṇa began composing the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Kashmir already possessed a rich tradition of historical memory preserved through chronicles, administrative records, religious literature, and oral traditions. Kalhaṇa's originality lay not in inventing historical writing but in synthesizing these diverse materials into a coherent chronological narrative while subjecting them to a degree of critical scrutiny that distinguished his work from its predecessors. This synthesis represents one of the defining characteristics of his historical method and forms the basis for the discussion that follows.

Kalhaṇa's Concept of History and the Historian

Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is distinguished from most earlier Sanskrit literary compositions by its explicit reflection on the nature and purpose of historical writing. Unlike many court poets who confined themselves to praising their royal patrons, Kalhaṇa consciously articulated the responsibilities of the historian and explained the principles that guided his narrative. The introductory verses of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* reveal that he regarded historical writing as an intellectual discipline requiring careful evaluation of evidence, chronological coherence, and moral responsibility. His reflections demonstrate that he was not merely compiling earlier traditions but was consciously engaged in reconstructing the past through a critical examination of available sources (Kalhaṇa, 1979). One of the most frequently cited aspects of Kalhaṇa's historiographical method is his insistence on impartiality. In the opening verses, he criticizes writers whose narratives were distorted by personal loyalty, political patronage, or hostility toward particular rulers. He argues that genuine historical writing requires freedom from both attachment (*rāga*) and hatred (*dveṣa*), enabling the historian to present events with fairness and intellectual honesty (Kalhaṇa, 1979). This statement has often been interpreted as one of the earliest explicit articulations of historical objectivity in the Indian tradition (Stein, 1979).

However, Kalhaṇa's concept of impartiality should not be equated with the modern notion of value-free historical writing. His understanding of objectivity was grounded in the ethical ideals of Sanskrit intellectual culture rather than the positivist methodologies of nineteenth-century historiography. The historian's responsibility was not merely to record events accurately but also to evaluate political actions according to accepted moral principles, particularly those relating to *dharma*, justice, righteous kingship, and public welfare. Consequently, Kalhaṇa's narratives frequently contain ethical judgments regarding the virtues and failings of individual rulers. These evaluations were not intended to compromise historical accuracy but rather reflected the conviction that political history possessed an important moral dimension

(Thapar, 2000). Kalhaṇa's treatment of kings illustrates this balanced approach. He praises rulers who governed with justice, administrative competence, and concern for their subjects, while openly criticizing those who were cruel, corrupt, or incompetent. His criticism is directed not only at distant historical figures but also at rulers whose descendants continued to exercise political influence during his lifetime. Such independence distinguishes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from conventional royal panegyrics, where criticism of kings was generally avoided. Stein (1979) observed that Kalhaṇa neither idealized all rulers nor condemned them indiscriminately; instead, he attempted to assess each reign according to its political achievements, administrative conduct, and ethical character.

Another important feature of Kalhaṇa's historical thought is his concern for causation. Rather than presenting political events as isolated incidents, he consistently seeks to explain why kingdoms prospered or declined. In many cases, military defeats, administrative failures, succession disputes, and economic difficulties are attributed to identifiable political decisions made by rulers and ministers. At the same time, Kalhaṇa interprets history within the broader framework of Indian philosophical thought, where moral conduct, *karma*, and divine justice also influence historical outcomes. Thus, political causation in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* operates simultaneously at empirical and ethical levels (Kaul, 2018). This dual understanding of causation reflects the intellectual climate of twelfth-century Kashmir. Medieval Sanskrit scholars generally did not separate political history from ethical philosophy, and historical events were frequently interpreted as manifestations of moral order. Kalhaṇa therefore explains the fall of unjust rulers not only in terms of political mismanagement but also as the inevitable consequence of their violation of *dharma*. Modern readers should not interpret such explanations as evidence of historical naivety; rather, they represent the prevailing intellectual assumptions of the period within which historical experience and moral order were understood as interconnected (Thapar, 2000).

Kalhaṇa also demonstrates a notable awareness of the limitations of historical knowledge. He repeatedly acknowledges the difficulties involved in reconstructing distant events and recognizes that earlier traditions sometimes contain contradictions or exaggerations. Instead of accepting every available account uncritically, he compares multiple sources and occasionally rejects narratives that appear implausible or inconsistent with other evidence. Such remarks indicate that Kalhaṇa understood historical knowledge as provisional and dependent upon the quality of available evidence, an approach that distinguishes him from many earlier compilers of dynastic legends (Slaje, 2013). Equally significant is Kalhaṇa's conception of historical continuity. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* presents the history of Kashmir as a continuous sequence of dynastic change rather than as a collection of isolated biographies. Individual reigns are connected through patterns of political succession, administrative development, warfare, diplomacy, and social transformation. This chronological organization enables readers to observe long-term developments across several centuries, thereby creating a coherent historical narrative that extends beyond the achievements of individual kings (Majumdar, 1961).

The geographical dimension of Kalhaṇa's historical thinking further strengthens his historical method. Throughout the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, he demonstrates detailed familiarity with the physical landscape of Kashmir, including rivers, mountain passes, towns, temples, forts, and pilgrimage centres. Such geographical precision enhances the credibility of his narrative and frequently assists modern historians in identifying historical locations. Stein's extensive geographical annotations to the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* have shown that many of Kalhaṇa's descriptions correspond remarkably well with the actual topography of Kashmir, indicating that the author possessed first-hand knowledge of the region (Stein, 1979).

Kalhaṇa's historical writing is also characterized by an awareness of temporal change. Unlike mythological literature, where time often functions symbolically or cyclically, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* attempts to arrange events within a sequential chronological framework. Although chronological difficulties remain, particularly in the earlier sections dealing with legendary rulers, Kalhaṇa consistently strives to establish the order of dynasties, calculate the duration of reigns, and connect successive political developments. This concern for chronological continuity reflects one of the defining features of his historiographical method (Slaje, 2008). Nevertheless, Kalhaṇa never abandoned the literary conventions of Sanskrit *kāvya*. His historical narrative incorporates elaborate poetic descriptions, metaphors, similes, dramatic speeches, and religious symbolism. Rather than diminishing the historical value of the work, these literary elements reveal that history and literature were not viewed as mutually exclusive forms of knowledge within medieval Kashmir. As Slaje (2008) has argued, poetic expression served as the accepted medium through which historical truth could be communicated to educated audiences. Consequently, literary style should be interpreted as a feature of Kalhaṇa's historiography rather than as evidence against its historical purpose. Modern scholarship has increasingly emphasized that Kalhaṇa's originality lies in his successful integration of multiple intellectual traditions. He combined documentary evidence with oral memory, political narrative with ethical reflection, geographical observation with literary artistry, and chronological reconstruction with philosophical interpretation. This synthesis distinguishes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from both conventional court poetry and purely mythological narratives. While it does not conform to modern standards of empirical historiography, it represents a sophisticated historical method appropriate to the literary and intellectual conventions of twelfth-century Kashmir (Thapar, 2000; Slaje, 2013). Accordingly, Kalhaṇa should be understood neither as a modern historian born before his time nor as merely a court poet concerned with literary embellishment. His work reflects an indigenous conception of historiography in which critical inquiry, ethical evaluation, documentary evidence, and literary expression were consciously integrated into a coherent narrative of Kashmir's past. Recognizing this intellectual framework allows for a more balanced appreciation of his contribution to Indian historical thought and avoids the anachronistic tendency either to exaggerate or to diminish his historiographical achievement.

Kalhaṇa's Sources and Source Criticism

A defining feature of Kalhaṇa's historiographical method is his deliberate and systematic use of multiple sources. Unlike many contemporary Sanskrit authors who relied primarily upon literary traditions or royal patronage, Kalhaṇa explicitly states that he consulted numerous earlier records before composing the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. His preface reveals an awareness that historical writing required the careful collection, comparison, and evaluation of evidence. Although the standards of source criticism in the twelfth century differed significantly from those of modern historiography, Kalhaṇa's approach demonstrates a conscious effort to distinguish reliable information from legend, contradiction, and exaggeration (Kalhaṇa, 1979).

Earlier Chronicles

Kalhaṇa informs his readers that he examined the works of eleven earlier historians or chroniclers who had written about the kings of Kashmir. Unfortunately, none of these texts has survived, and knowledge of them depends almost entirely upon Kalhaṇa's own references. Among those mentioned are Suvrata, Kṣemendra, Helārāja, Nīla, Chavillākāra, and Padmamihira, although little is known about the precise nature or scope of their works (Stein, 1979). The existence of these lost chronicles is historically significant

because it indicates that Kashmir possessed an established tradition of recording political events long before the composition of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Kalhaṇa did not claim originality in preserving Kashmir's past; instead, he presented himself as a compiler and critic who sought to improve upon earlier narratives by resolving inconsistencies and correcting errors. This acknowledgement distinguishes him from many medieval authors who simply reproduced inherited traditions without discussing their sources (Thapar, 2000). Kalhaṇa's attitude toward these earlier chronicles was neither wholly accepting nor dismissive. He recognized that they differed in reliability and frequently contained conflicting accounts. Rather than adopting a single authority uncritically, he compared different narratives before deciding which version appeared most plausible. This comparative method represents one of the earliest examples of historical source evaluation in Sanskrit historiography (Slaje, 2013).

Royal Charters and Administrative Documents

Among the documentary materials consulted by Kalhaṇa were royal charters (*śāsanas*), land grants, and official administrative records. Such documents provided valuable information regarding dynastic succession, grants to religious institutions, taxation, territorial administration, and royal patronage. Their use reflects Kalhaṇa's understanding that documentary evidence possessed greater authority than unsupported tradition. Royal charters were particularly useful for establishing the names of rulers, the sequence of dynasties, and the political geography of medieval Kashmir. Although Kalhaṇa does not reproduce these documents verbatim, his references indicate that he relied upon them to verify chronological details and administrative information. Stein (1979) regarded this documentary foundation as one of the strongest indications of Kalhaṇa's historical method. The consultation of administrative records also demonstrates that medieval Kashmir maintained an organized bureaucratic system in which official documents were preserved over successive generations. Such archival practices made it possible for Kalhaṇa to access written evidence extending well beyond his own lifetime, thereby strengthening the historical basis of his narrative.

Inscriptions and Epigraphic Evidence

Kalhaṇa also employed inscriptions as historical sources. Epigraphic records were widely used throughout early medieval India to commemorate royal achievements, religious donations, temple construction, and land grants. Because inscriptions were engraved on durable materials such as stone and copper plates, they often preserved information more accurately than oral traditions. Although relatively few inscriptions are quoted directly in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, Kalhaṇa's references indicate that he consulted them to verify genealogical and political information. Modern historians have confirmed that several details preserved in the chronicle correspond closely with surviving inscriptions from Kashmir and neighbouring regions, particularly for the later dynasties (Stein, 1979; Kaul, 2018). Kalhaṇa's use of inscriptions reflects an appreciation of documentary evidence that distinguishes his work from purely literary narratives. While he did not employ epigraphy in the systematic manner expected of modern historians, he recognized its value in corroborating historical traditions.

Genealogies and Royal Lineages

Royal genealogies constituted another important source for Kalhaṇa's reconstruction of Kashmir's political history. Genealogical records were commonly maintained by royal households and religious institutions to preserve dynastic legitimacy and succession. Such records enabled Kalhaṇa to establish chronological

continuity across successive ruling families. At the same time, he appears to have recognized the limitations of genealogical traditions. Royal genealogies often exaggerated the antiquity of dynasties or omitted politically inconvenient rulers. Consequently, Kalhaṇa compared genealogical information with other documentary sources whenever possible rather than accepting hereditary traditions without question (Thapar, 2000). His treatment of genealogies illustrates an important feature of his historiographical method: no single category of evidence was regarded as entirely sufficient. Historical reconstruction required the combination of multiple sources whose strengths and weaknesses could be evaluated comparatively.

Temple Records and Religious Institutions

Temples functioned not only as centres of worship but also as repositories of historical memory. Many maintained records concerning royal donations, construction activities, land grants, festivals, and administrative arrangements. Kalhaṇa frequently refers to temples, monasteries, and sacred institutions throughout the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, indicating that they preserved valuable historical information. The close relationship between kingship and religious patronage in medieval Kashmir meant that temple archives often contained reliable evidence concerning political history. Donations recorded by religious institutions could be used to establish the reigns of particular rulers, identify administrative officials, and trace patterns of royal patronage. Kalhaṇa's consultation of such materials demonstrates his recognition that historical evidence could be preserved outside royal courts (Kaul, 2018).

Oral Traditions and Collective Memory

Despite his reliance on written documentation, Kalhaṇa did not ignore oral traditions. Like many medieval historians, he recognized that collective memory preserved valuable information concerning local events, important personalities, sacred places, and political conflicts. Oral narratives were particularly significant for the earliest periods of Kashmir's history, where written evidence was relatively scarce. However, Kalhaṇa did not treat oral traditions as automatically reliable. In several instances, he expresses reservations regarding popular legends that lacked corroborating evidence or conflicted with established chronology. This cautious attitude suggests that he regarded oral testimony as an important but secondary source that required verification through comparison with written records (Slaje, 2013). His approach resembles what modern historians describe as source triangulation—the practice of comparing different categories of evidence before reaching historical conclusions. Although Kalhaṇa did not formulate such a methodology explicitly, his narrative demonstrates an intuitive awareness of its importance.

Eyewitness Observation

The historical reliability of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* increases substantially in its later books because Kalhaṇa increasingly relied upon contemporary observation and eyewitness testimony. The events of the eleventh and twelfth centuries occurred either during his own lifetime or within living memory, enabling him to supplement documentary evidence with direct knowledge of political developments. Kalhaṇa belonged to a learned Brahman family closely connected with the royal administration. His father, Champaka, served under King Harṣa, giving Kalhaṇa access to elite political circles and administrative information (Stein, 1979). Although there is no evidence that Kalhaṇa himself held high political office, his social background undoubtedly facilitated access to official records, courtly traditions, and informed witnesses. Modern historians generally regard the later sections of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, especially the final two *tarāṅgas*, as

considerably more reliable than the earlier legendary narratives precisely because they draw upon contemporary evidence and personal observation (Majumdar, 1961).

Source Criticism and Historical Judgment

The most remarkable aspect of Kalhaṇa's historiography is not simply the diversity of sources he consulted but the critical manner in which he evaluated them. Throughout the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, he compares conflicting traditions, questions improbable narratives, identifies chronological inconsistencies, and occasionally rejects stories that he considers unreliable. This critical attitude should not be overstated. Kalhaṇa did not apply systematic rules of evidence comparable to modern historical methodology, nor did he consistently distinguish between myth and history according to contemporary standards. Legendary narratives continue to occupy an important place, particularly in the earlier books. Nevertheless, his willingness to compare multiple sources, acknowledge uncertainty, and prefer documentary evidence wherever possible represents a significant historiographical advance within the context of twelfth-century Sanskrit scholarship (Thapar, 2000; Slaje, 2013). His method demonstrates that historical knowledge, in his view, was not produced through unquestioning acceptance of tradition but through careful intellectual inquiry. The historian's task was to examine available evidence critically, reconcile contradictions where possible, and present the most credible reconstruction of the past. Such principles explain why the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* has continued to occupy a unique position within the historical literature of premodern South Asia.

Critical Observation

Although Kalhaṇa's source criticism was remarkably advanced for its time, it remained constrained by the intellectual conventions of medieval India. He accepted many legendary traditions that cannot be historically verified and interpreted political events through moral and religious frameworks. Yet these limitations should not obscure his genuine contribution. His systematic use of multiple categories of evidence, comparative evaluation of sources, and explicit concern for historical credibility distinguish the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from most other Sanskrit historical narratives and justify its enduring importance in the historiography of South Asia.

Chronology, Historical Accuracy, and the Construction of Time

One of the most distinctive features of Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is its sustained concern with chronology. Unlike many Sanskrit literary works that narrate events without attempting to establish a continuous temporal framework, Kalhaṇa sought to arrange the history of Kashmir as a sequential account of successive dynasties and rulers. His effort to organize political events within a coherent chronological structure reflects a historical consciousness that distinguishes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from royal panegyrics, epic literature, and Purāṇic genealogies. Although modern historians have identified numerous chronological inconsistencies, particularly in the earlier sections of the work, Kalhaṇa's attempt to establish a continuous historical timeline represents a significant methodological achievement within the context of twelfth-century Indian historiography (Stein, 1979; Thapar, 2000).

The Concept of Historical Time

Kalhaṇa conceived history as a continuous process extending from the legendary origins of Kashmir to his own lifetime. This approach is evident in the very structure of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, which is divided into eight *tarāṅgas* ("waves"), each narrating successive phases of Kashmir's political history. Rather than

presenting isolated biographies of rulers, Kalhaṇa linked reigns through chronological succession, thereby creating a narrative of historical continuity. This organization allowed him to trace patterns of political stability, dynastic transition, administrative change, and moral decline across several centuries (Kalhaṇa, 1979). Unlike the cyclical conception of time commonly associated with Purāṇic literature, Kalhaṇa's historical narrative exhibits a predominantly linear progression. Although he accepted traditional cosmological ideas regarding cycles of time, the events described in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* unfold in a chronological sequence in which one reign follows another through identifiable political transitions. This linear arrangement demonstrates that Kalhaṇa distinguished historical chronology from sacred cosmology, even while incorporating mythological traditions into the earlier portions of his narrative (Thapar, 2000).

Dynastic Organization as a Chronological Framework

Kalhaṇa organized the history of Kashmir primarily through dynastic succession. Each ruling family occupies a distinct position within the broader narrative, allowing readers to follow political developments across changing regimes. The reign of each monarch is generally accompanied by information concerning accession, major political events, military campaigns, religious patronage, administrative measures, and the circumstances surrounding the ruler's death. This dynastic framework provides a degree of chronological coherence rarely found in earlier Sanskrit historical literature. Even when precise dates are unavailable, Kalhaṇa consistently attempts to establish the relative order of rulers and the duration of their reigns. Such chronological sequencing enabled him to construct a connected narrative rather than a collection of independent historical episodes (Majumdar, 1961). The organization of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* also reflects Kalhaṇa's understanding that political institutions evolve over time. Successive dynasties inherit administrative systems, territorial boundaries, and political challenges from their predecessors. Consequently, historical change is presented as a cumulative process rather than as a series of disconnected events.

Chronological Challenges in the Early Books

Despite Kalhaṇa's concern for chronological order, the earliest sections of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* present significant difficulties for modern historians. The first three *tarāṅgas* combine legendary rulers, epic traditions, local myths, and historical memory into a single narrative extending back many centuries before reliable documentary evidence becomes available. Many of the reign lengths assigned to early rulers appear excessively long, and the cumulative chronology produces dates that cannot be reconciled with archaeological or epigraphic evidence. For example, the association of early Kashmiri rulers with figures from the *Mahābhārata* reflects the incorporation of pan-Indian epic traditions into regional historical memory rather than empirically verifiable political history (Stein, 1979). Modern scholarship generally regards these legendary sections as historically valuable not because they provide precise factual information, but because they preserve traditions concerning the cultural identity, political imagination, and collective memory of early Kashmir (Kaul, 2018). Consequently, historians increasingly interpret the opening books as sources for historical consciousness rather than as strictly chronological records.

Increasing Historical Reliability

The historical reliability of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* improves considerably from approximately the seventh century CE onward, particularly with the rise of the Karkoṭa dynasty. During this period, Kalhaṇa increasingly relied upon documentary evidence, inscriptions, administrative records, temple archives, and

earlier chronicles that appear to have been more historically reliable than the traditions available for earlier centuries. The reign of Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa (c. 724–760 CE) marks an important transition in the narrative. Although debates continue regarding the extent of Lalitāditya's military conquests, many political events described by Kalhaṇa correspond broadly with independent evidence derived from inscriptions, numismatics, Chinese sources, and archaeological investigations (Stein, 1979; Wink, 2002). Similarly, the accounts of the Utpala and Lohara dynasties are generally regarded as considerably more reliable because Kalhaṇa had access to better documentary materials and lived relatively close to the events he described. The final books of the *Rājataranginī*, dealing with the eleventh and twelfth centuries, are often considered among the most trustworthy indigenous historical narratives produced in medieval India (Hasan, 1959).

Calculation of Reigns and Chronological Precision

Kalhaṇa made a consistent effort to calculate the duration of individual reigns and arrange rulers within an orderly chronological framework. Although some reign lengths remain uncertain or internally inconsistent, his repeated attempts to calculate years of rule demonstrate an unusual concern for temporal precision. Stein (1979) observed that Kalhaṇa frequently compared different chronological traditions before selecting what he considered the most plausible sequence. In several cases, he openly acknowledged uncertainty regarding particular rulers or conflicting historical traditions. Such admissions reveal an important aspect of his historical method: rather than concealing gaps in historical knowledge, he occasionally recognized the limitations of available evidence. This willingness to acknowledge uncertainty distinguishes Kalhaṇa from many medieval chroniclers whose narratives present historical traditions with unquestioned certainty. His recognition that chronology required critical evaluation reflects an emerging awareness of historical methodology.

Chronology and Historical Causation

Kalhaṇa's chronological framework serves purposes beyond merely establishing dates. By arranging political events in sequential order, he seeks to demonstrate relationships between causes and consequences. Administrative failures are shown leading to political instability; dynastic conflicts produce civil wars; economic exploitation generates public dissatisfaction; and military weakness encourages foreign invasions. Chronology therefore becomes an analytical tool rather than simply a method of organizing information. Readers are encouraged to understand political developments as interconnected processes unfolding through time. This conception of historical continuity enables Kalhaṇa to identify recurring patterns in the rise and decline of kingdoms while illustrating the consequences of political decisions made by successive rulers (Thapar, 2000).

Modern Evaluation of Kalhaṇa's Chronology

Modern historians generally agree that Kalhaṇa's chronology must be approached critically. His earlier chronology cannot be accepted literally because it incorporates legendary traditions, inflated reign lengths, and mythical genealogies. At the same time, dismissing the entire work because of these early inconsistencies would ignore the considerable historical value of its later sections. Stein's critical edition demonstrated that many events described from the seventh century onward correspond closely with independent historical evidence, while subsequent archaeological discoveries have confirmed numerous geographical, political, and architectural details preserved in the *Rājataranginī* (Stein, 1979). Walter Slaje

(2013) similarly argues that Kalhaṇa's chronology should be evaluated according to the evidentiary resources available to a twelfth-century historian rather than by the standards of modern archival scholarship. Romila Thapar (2000) further cautions against reducing Kalhaṇa's achievement to questions of chronological accuracy alone. In her view, the importance of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* lies equally in its conception of historical continuity, political explanation, and critical engagement with earlier traditions. Chronology constitutes one component of a broader historiographical method rather than its sole defining characteristic.

Assessment

Kalhaṇa's chronological system reflects both the strengths and limitations of premodern Indian historiography. His reconstruction of the earliest history of Kashmir remains intertwined with legend, mythology, and regional tradition, making it difficult to establish precise historical dates. Nevertheless, his determination to organize political events within a continuous temporal framework, calculate dynastic succession, compare conflicting chronological traditions, and acknowledge historical uncertainty represents a significant methodological advance over many earlier Sanskrit narratives. Rather than judging Kalhaṇa solely by modern chronological standards, his achievement should be understood in relation to the intellectual environment in which he worked. His construction of historical time provided the structural foundation for one of the most comprehensive indigenous historical narratives produced in medieval South Asia. It enabled him to transform diverse traditions, documentary evidence, and collective memory into a coherent account of Kashmir's political past, thereby establishing a model that profoundly influenced subsequent historical writing in the region (Slaje, 2013; Zutshi, 2013).

History and Literature: The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* as Historical Narrative

One of the central questions in the study of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* concerns the relationship between history and literature. Since Kalhaṇa composed his work in polished Sanskrit verse, employing the conventions of *mahākāvya*, scholars have long debated whether it should be regarded primarily as a literary masterpiece or as a historical chronicle. Early colonial scholars often viewed its poetic form as incompatible with historical reliability, assuming that literary embellishment necessarily undermined factual accuracy. More recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that such a distinction reflects modern disciplinary assumptions rather than the intellectual traditions of medieval India (Thapar, 2000; Slaje, 2013). In twelfth-century Kashmir, history and literature were not considered mutually exclusive modes of representing the past. Sanskrit literary culture valued aesthetic expression (*alāṅkāra*), rhetorical elegance, and moral reflection alongside factual narration. Consequently, a historical work was expected not only to preserve political events but also to communicate ethical ideals, demonstrate literary excellence, and instruct readers through examples drawn from the past. Kalhaṇa therefore composed the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* according to the conventions of classical Sanskrit poetry while simultaneously seeking to reconstruct the political history of Kashmir (Kaul, 2018). The literary character of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is evident in its language and structure. Written almost entirely in verse, the chronicle employs metaphors, similes, elaborate descriptions of landscapes, dramatic speeches, and poetic imagery typical of Sanskrit *mahākāvya*. Rivers, mountains, seasons, cities, and royal courts are frequently described in vivid aesthetic detail. Such passages enhance the literary quality of the narrative and reflect the sophisticated poetic culture that flourished in Kashmir during the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Stein, 1979).

Kalhana also incorporates dramatic dialogue to illuminate the personalities and motivations of historical figures. Kings, ministers, queens, and military commanders frequently speak in carefully constructed speeches that explain political decisions or express ethical concerns. These speeches undoubtedly contain literary reconstruction rather than verbatim historical records. Nevertheless, they serve an important historiographical function by conveying the political reasoning and moral dilemmas associated with particular events. Similar literary techniques were employed by historians in ancient Greece and Rome, including Thucydides and Livy, suggesting that rhetorical reconstruction has long formed part of historical writing in many civilizations (Thapar, 2000). Descriptions of battles provide another illustration of Kalhana's literary method. Military campaigns are often narrated through heroic imagery, vivid metaphors, and dramatic scenes intended to engage readers emotionally. Yet beneath these literary embellishments, Kalhana generally preserves valuable information regarding political alliances, military strategy, territorial disputes, and dynastic conflict. Modern historians therefore distinguish between the literary form of these narratives and the historical information they contain. The presence of poetic language does not necessarily invalidate the underlying historical content (Majumdar, 1961). The influence of Sanskrit poetics is particularly evident in Kalhana's portrayal of kingship. Ideal rulers are described using conventional literary motifs that emphasize courage, generosity, wisdom, and devotion to *dharma*. Conversely, tyrannical rulers are characterized through imagery associated with greed, arrogance, and moral decline. Such portrayals reflect established conventions of political literature rather than purely objective biographical description. Nevertheless, Kalhana does not idealize every ruler indiscriminately. Even kings whom he praises are criticized when their actions violate accepted standards of justice or responsible governance. This balance distinguishes his work from courtly panegyrics whose primary purpose was royal glorification (Stein, 1979).

Religious symbolism likewise occupies an important place within the *Rājataranginī*. Divine intervention, omens, dreams, and astrological predictions occasionally accompany significant political events. Modern readers may regard such elements as legendary, yet within the intellectual world of medieval Kashmir they represented meaningful explanations of historical experience. Political authority was understood as operating within a broader cosmic and moral order, and supernatural motifs reinforced this worldview rather than functioning merely as literary ornamentation (Kaul, 2018). At the same time, Kalhana frequently demonstrates remarkable restraint in his use of literary imagination. Unlike many court poets who freely exaggerated the achievements of their patrons, he repeatedly attempts to reconcile poetic expression with historical plausibility. He rarely attributes impossible military victories to rulers and often acknowledges political failures, administrative corruption, and dynastic decline. His willingness to criticize kings, describe defeats, and admit uncertainty regarding disputed events suggests that literary elegance did not override his commitment to historical credibility (Slaje, 2013). Walter Slaje argues that modern scholarship has often misunderstood the literary character of the *Rājataranginī* by assuming that poetry and historiography are inherently incompatible. According to Slaje (2008), Sanskrit historical writing developed within a literary culture in which poetic composition constituted the normal medium for communicating knowledge. The aesthetic form of the text therefore reflects contemporary intellectual conventions rather than an absence of historical purpose. Evaluating Kalhana according to modern distinctions between literature and history risks imposing anachronistic standards upon a medieval author. Romila Thapar similarly contends that the *Rājataranginī* should be understood as a historical narrative shaped by the literary traditions of its time. She argues that the work combines historical memory, political explanation, ethical reflection, and poetic expression within a single narrative framework. Rather than

asking whether it is history or literature, Thapar suggests examining how literary techniques contribute to the construction of historical meaning (Thapar, 2000). From this perspective, aesthetic form becomes an integral component of historiography rather than an obstacle to historical understanding. The literary qualities of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* also contributed significantly to its preservation and transmission. Because the work was composed in elegant Sanskrit verse, it could be memorized, recited, copied, and appreciated by generations of scholars long after the political circumstances of its composition had changed. Its enduring popularity encouraged later historians such as Jonarāja, Śrīvara, and Prajyabhaṭṭa to continue Kalhaṇa's chronicle, thereby creating an almost continuous historical tradition extending over several centuries (Zutshi, 2013). Modern interdisciplinary research increasingly recognizes that historical narratives are shaped not only by factual evidence but also by narrative structure, language, and literary representation. From this perspective, Kalhaṇa appears remarkably sophisticated. He organized complex historical information into a coherent narrative while employing literary techniques that enhanced clarity, moral reflection, and reader engagement. His achievement demonstrates that historical writing and literary creativity can complement rather than exclude one another. In assessing the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, therefore, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to choose between history and literature. The work belongs to a historiographical tradition in which historical inquiry was expressed through the medium of Sanskrit *kāvya*. Its literary character reflects the conventions of its age, while its sustained concern for chronology, documentary evidence, political analysis, and critical evaluation of sources establishes its importance as one of the most accomplished works of historical writing produced in premodern India. Appreciating this dual character allows a more balanced understanding of Kalhaṇa's contribution to both Sanskrit literature and Indian historiography.

Objectivity, Bias, and Moral Judgment in Kalhaṇa's Historiography

Among the most frequently discussed aspects of Kalhaṇa's historiography is his claim to impartiality. In the opening verses of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, he distinguishes his work from earlier historical accounts that, in his view, had been influenced by personal loyalty, political patronage, or hostility toward particular rulers. He declares that the historian should remain free from *rāga* (attachment or favoritism) and *dveṣa* (hatred or prejudice), thereby enabling an honest narration of past events (Kalhaṇa, 1979). This statement has attracted considerable scholarly attention because it represents one of the earliest explicit reflections on the ethical responsibilities of a historian in the Sanskrit tradition. Marc Aurel Stein regarded this declaration as evidence of Kalhaṇa's exceptional historical consciousness. According to Stein (1979), Kalhaṇa consciously attempted to distance himself from the conventional role of a court poet whose principal duty was to glorify his royal patron. Instead, he sought to evaluate rulers according to their conduct and achievements rather than their political status. This commitment to fairness explains why the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* contains both praise and criticism of numerous kings, including rulers who belonged to dynasties still remembered during Kalhaṇa's lifetime. Modern scholarship, however, cautions against interpreting Kalhaṇa's concept of impartiality through the lens of nineteenth-century positivist historiography. Historical objectivity, as understood in contemporary academic practice, generally emphasizes empirical verification, methodological transparency, and the separation of descriptive analysis from moral evaluation. Kalhaṇa operated within a very different intellectual framework. His objective was not to produce a value-neutral account of the past but to narrate history truthfully while assessing political actions according to accepted ethical principles rooted in *dharma* and responsible kingship (Thapar, 2000). Consequently, moral judgment occupies a central place in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*. Throughout the narrative,

rulers are evaluated according to qualities such as justice, generosity, courage, administrative competence, respect for religious institutions, and concern for the welfare of their subjects. Kings who upheld these ideals are praised, whereas those who abused power, imposed oppressive taxation, encouraged corruption, or neglected public responsibilities are criticized. Such evaluations were not intended as rhetorical ornamentation but reflected Kalhaṇa's conviction that political authority carried profound moral obligations (Kaul, 2018).

A notable example of Kalhaṇa's balanced approach is his treatment of King Harṣa (r. 1089–1101 CE). Although Harṣa initially appears as an energetic and capable ruler, Kalhaṇa does not hesitate to describe his later reign as one characterized by financial exploitation, administrative disorder, temple plundering, and political instability. Rather than presenting Harṣa as either entirely virtuous or entirely corrupt, Kalhaṇa portrays his reign as a process of moral and political decline resulting from poor governance and misguided policies (Kalhaṇa, 1979). This nuanced portrayal suggests that Kalhaṇa sought to understand political failure through historical explanation rather than simple condemnation. Similarly, Kalhaṇa praises rulers who demonstrated administrative wisdom and military competence but remains willing to acknowledge their shortcomings when necessary. His evaluations therefore avoid the extremes of uncritical glorification and indiscriminate criticism. This balance distinguishes the *Rājataranginī* from royal eulogies (*praśastis*), where the ruler's virtues were typically exaggerated and failures omitted. In Kalhaṇa's narrative, praise is earned through conduct rather than conferred automatically by royal status (Majumdar, 1961). Another important dimension of Kalhaṇa's historical judgment concerns political causation. He consistently argues that the fortunes of kingdoms depend not merely upon military strength or economic prosperity but also upon the moral conduct of rulers. Greed, injustice, factionalism, and administrative corruption repeatedly appear as causes of political decline, while wisdom, moderation, and justice contribute to stability and prosperity. Such interpretations reflect the close relationship between ethics and politics in classical Indian political thought, where the legitimacy of kingship depended upon adherence to *dharma* (Thapar, 2000).

Nevertheless, Kalhaṇa's moral framework does not prevent him from recognizing the complexity of political events. He frequently acknowledges that capable rulers may face unforeseen difficulties and that political success cannot always be explained solely through personal virtue. Court intrigues, regional rebellions, natural disasters, foreign invasions, and succession disputes also play important roles in shaping historical outcomes. His explanations therefore combine ethical evaluation with careful attention to political circumstances, producing a more nuanced account than is often assumed (Slaje, 2013). Kalhaṇa also displays an awareness of the dangers posed by political patronage to historical writing. Unlike many poets who composed works under direct royal sponsorship, he repeatedly emphasizes his intellectual independence. Although his family maintained connections with the royal court—his father Champaka served under King Harṣa—Kalhaṇa does not allow these associations to determine his historical judgments. His criticism of rulers connected with his own political environment suggests a conscious effort to maintain scholarly integrity despite potential social pressures (Stein, 1979). From a modern perspective, however, it would be inaccurate to describe Kalhaṇa as completely free from bias. Like every historian, he wrote within a particular social, cultural, and religious context. As a learned Kashmiri Brahman, his narrative naturally reflects the values of Sanskrit intellectual culture. Religious institutions associated with Brahmanical traditions often receive greater attention than other communities, and his understanding of legitimate kingship is deeply influenced by classical Sanskrit political philosophy. These

cultural perspectives shaped his interpretation of historical events, even when he attempted to narrate them impartially (Kaul, 2018).

Furthermore, Kalhaṇa's acceptance of certain legendary traditions and supernatural explanations illustrates the intellectual assumptions of his age. Dreams, omens, divine intervention, and karmic consequences occasionally appear alongside political analysis. Modern historians generally regard these elements as expressions of medieval historical consciousness rather than empirical explanations. Their presence should not be interpreted simply as evidence of credulity but as reflections of a worldview in which moral, religious, and political realities were understood as interconnected (Thapar, 2000). Recent historiography increasingly recognizes that complete objectivity is difficult to achieve in any historical tradition. Contemporary historians acknowledge that every historical narrative is influenced by the author's questions, available sources, intellectual framework, and cultural assumptions. In this respect, Kalhaṇa's explicit acknowledgment of the need to avoid *rāga* and *dveṣa* acquires renewed significance. Rather than claiming absolute neutrality, he articulates an ethical ideal of intellectual fairness that remains relevant to historical scholarship today (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). Walter Slaje (2013) argues that Kalhaṇa's importance lies not in anticipating modern concepts of scientific objectivity but in recognizing that historical writing demands critical distance from political interests. His willingness to compare sources, acknowledge uncertainty, criticize rulers, and evaluate evidence demonstrates an awareness that the historian bears responsibility to the historical record rather than merely to political authority. Although his methods differ substantially from those employed by modern professional historians, the underlying commitment to fairness and intellectual honesty remains one of the defining characteristics of his work. In evaluating Kalhaṇa's historiography, it is therefore essential to distinguish between ethical impartiality and methodological neutrality. Kalhaṇa did not seek to eliminate moral judgment from historical writing; rather, he believed that historical truth required both factual accuracy and ethical evaluation. His criticism of rulers was grounded in accepted principles of justice and responsible governance rather than personal hostility. At the same time, his narrative demonstrates a sustained effort to avoid deliberate distortion arising from political loyalty or personal prejudice. This combination of ethical reflection, critical inquiry, and balanced political assessment constitutes one of the most distinctive features of the *Rājataranginī* and explains its enduring reputation as one of the finest historical works produced in premodern South Asia.

Kalhaṇa's Contribution to Indian Historiography

Kalhaṇa occupies a distinctive position in the history of Indian historiography because he consciously transformed diverse historical materials into a coherent narrative of regional political history. Although historical traditions existed in India long before the twelfth century in the form of genealogies, inscriptions, Purāṇic narratives, royal eulogies, Buddhist chronicles, and regional records, the *Rājataranginī* represents one of the earliest surviving attempts to produce a continuous and critically organized account of a kingdom from its legendary origins to the author's own lifetime (Thapar, 2000). Its significance lies not merely in its antiquity but in the methodological awareness that informs its composition. One of Kalhaṇa's most enduring contributions was his recognition that historical writing should be based upon the careful examination of multiple categories of evidence. His explicit reference to earlier chronicles, inscriptions, royal charters, genealogies, temple records, coins, and oral traditions demonstrates an understanding that no single source could provide a complete account of the past. Instead, historical reconstruction required the comparison and evaluation of diverse materials, an approach that anticipated fundamental principles of historical inquiry, even though it was practiced within the intellectual framework of medieval Kashmir

(Stein, 1979; Slaje, 2013). Equally important was Kalhaṇa's insistence upon chronological continuity. Earlier Indian historical traditions often preserved valuable information concerning rulers, dynasties, and political events but rarely attempted to organize them into an uninterrupted historical sequence. By arranging successive reigns within a connected chronological framework, Kalhaṇa transformed scattered traditions into a continuous political narrative. This chronological structure enabled him to analyse long-term patterns of dynastic change, political conflict, administrative development, and state formation across several centuries (Majumdar, 1961).

Kalhaṇa also expanded the scope of historical writing beyond the celebration of individual rulers. Court poetry and royal inscriptions generally emphasized military victories, religious patronage, and royal generosity while minimizing political failures or administrative shortcomings. The *Rājataranginī*, by contrast, presents a more comprehensive account of political life. It records palace intrigues, succession disputes, economic crises, natural calamities, conspiracies, rebellions, and administrative failures alongside military achievements and acts of royal patronage. Such breadth provides a more complex understanding of the functioning of the medieval Kashmiri state than is available in most contemporary historical sources (Hasan, 1959). Another notable contribution of Kalhaṇa lies in his conception of the historian's ethical responsibility. His declaration that the historian should remain free from *rāga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (hatred) established an intellectual ideal of fairness that distinguishes his work from conventional royal panegyrics. Although Kalhaṇa did not advocate value-neutral history in the modern sense, he recognized that political loyalty and personal prejudice could distort historical representation. His commitment to balanced evaluation strengthened the credibility of his narrative and contributed to the enduring authority of the *Rājataranginī* within the historical tradition of Kashmir (Kalhaṇa, 1979; Stein, 1979). Kalhaṇa's influence extended well beyond his own lifetime. His work established the foundation of a distinctive Kashmiri historiographical tradition that was continued by later chroniclers. Jonarāja extended the narrative into the fifteenth century, followed by Śrīvara, Prajyabhaṭṭa, and Śuka, whose combined works provide an almost continuous historical record of Kashmir over several centuries. This remarkable continuity is unusual in premodern South Asia and illustrates the lasting authority of Kalhaṇa's historiographical model (Zutshi, 2013).

The influence of the *Rājataranginī* was not confined to Sanskrit historiography. During the Sultanate and Mughal periods, Persian historians drew extensively upon Kalhaṇa's chronicle while composing new histories of Kashmir. Although these later works adapted the narrative to different political, religious, and linguistic contexts, they retained Kalhaṇa's basic chronological framework and many of his historical traditions. This process of translation and reinterpretation ensured that the *Rājataranginī* remained central to Kashmir's historical memory across changing dynasties and cultural environments (Zutshi, 2011). Modern historical research has likewise demonstrated the continuing value of Kalhaṇa's work. Archaeological excavations, numismatic discoveries, epigraphic evidence, and comparative textual studies have confirmed many aspects of his geographical descriptions, dynastic succession, and political narratives for the later historical periods. Although numerous details remain subject to scholarly debate, especially regarding the early legendary sections, historians continue to regard the *Rājataranginī* as an indispensable primary source for reconstructing the political and cultural history of early medieval Kashmir (Kaul, 2018). At the same time, a balanced assessment requires recognition of the limitations of Kalhaṇa's historiography. The opening books of the *Rājataranginī* incorporate legendary traditions that cannot be verified through independent evidence. Chronological inconsistencies, exaggerated reign lengths, supernatural episodes, and mythical genealogies complicate efforts to reconstruct the earliest

history of Kashmir. Furthermore, Kalhaṇa's perspective reflects the social and intellectual assumptions of an educated twelfth-century Brahman, influencing his understanding of kingship, religion, and political legitimacy. These features remind modern readers that the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is both a historical source and a cultural product shaped by its own time (Thapar, 2000).

Another limitation concerns the scope of Kalhaṇa's historical interests. His primary focus is political history, particularly the actions of kings, ministers, military leaders, and members of the royal court. Although the chronicle occasionally refers to merchants, artisans, religious communities, women, and rural populations, these groups rarely occupy the centre of the narrative. Consequently, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* provides only limited insight into the social and economic history of medieval Kashmir when compared with its rich political detail (Hasan, 1959). Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish Kalhaṇa's historiographical significance. Rather, they reflect the conventions and priorities of historical writing in his own intellectual milieu. As Romila Thapar (2000) has emphasized, evaluating Kalhaṇa solely by the standards of modern professional historiography risks overlooking the originality of his contribution within the context of premodern India. His work should instead be understood as an indigenous historical tradition that combined literary artistry, documentary evidence, ethical reflection, and chronological organization in a manner unparalleled in contemporary Sanskrit literature. Recent scholarship has moved beyond the earlier tendency either to celebrate Kalhaṇa as "India's first historian" or to dismiss him as merely a poet. Instead, historians increasingly recognize the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* as a sophisticated example of historical narrative that reflects the methodological possibilities available within twelfth-century Kashmir. Its value lies not in conforming to modern academic standards but in demonstrating that historical inquiry, critical evaluation of evidence, and sustained reflection on the past formed an integral part of the intellectual traditions of medieval South Asia (Slaje, 2013). In this sense, Kalhaṇa's greatest contribution was methodological rather than merely documentary. He demonstrated that the historian should compare sources, question inherited traditions, organize events chronologically, explain political change, and write with fairness rather than political expediency. Although his methods differed from those employed by modern historians, these principles established a durable model for historical writing in Kashmir and secured the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* a unique place in the historiographical heritage of India.

Conclusion

Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* occupies a unique place in the historiographical tradition of South Asia because it demonstrates a conscious attempt to record, interpret, and evaluate the political history of Kashmir within a coherent chronological framework. Composed in the twelfth century CE, the work transcends the conventional boundaries of royal panegyric and literary poetry by combining historical inquiry with the aesthetic conventions of classical Sanskrit *kāvya*. Although Kalhaṇa wrote within the intellectual and cultural assumptions of his own age, his reflections on the responsibilities of the historian, his careful use of multiple sources, and his concern for chronological continuity distinguish the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* from most surviving historical narratives of early medieval India. The present study has demonstrated that Kalhaṇa's historiographical method rested upon several interconnected principles. First, he consciously employed a wide range of historical materials, including earlier chronicles, royal charters, inscriptions, genealogies, temple records, coins, and oral traditions. Rather than relying exclusively upon any single category of evidence, he compared different accounts and attempted to reconcile contradictions wherever possible. This comparative approach illustrates an awareness that historical knowledge should be constructed through the critical examination of available evidence rather than through the unquestioning repetition of

inherited traditions. Second, Kalhaṇa displayed a sustained concern for chronology. Although the earliest sections of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* incorporate legendary traditions and present chronological problems that cannot always be reconciled with archaeological or epigraphic evidence, the later books reveal a determined effort to organize historical events within a continuous temporal sequence. His chronological framework enabled him to explain dynastic succession, political transformation, and administrative change over several centuries, thereby producing one of the earliest continuous regional histories in South Asia.

Third, the study has shown that Kalhaṇa's conception of historical objectivity differed significantly from modern positivist historiography. His declaration that the historian should remain free from *rāga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (hatred) reflected an ethical ideal of fairness rather than a claim to complete value-neutrality. Historical writing, in Kalhaṇa's understanding, required both factual accuracy and moral responsibility. Consequently, he praised rulers who governed with justice and administrative competence while criticizing those whose actions contributed to political instability, oppression, or social disorder. Such evaluations were rooted in the normative ideals of *dharma* and righteous kingship that informed medieval Indian political thought. The paper has also demonstrated that the literary character of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* should not be regarded as diminishing its historical significance. Kalhaṇa employed the conventions of Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, including poetic imagery, rhetorical speeches, dramatic description, and moral reflection, because these represented the accepted literary medium of scholarly expression in his intellectual environment. Modern distinctions between literature and history cannot be imposed uncritically upon a twelfth-century Sanskrit text. Instead, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* should be understood as a historical narrative in which literary form and historical inquiry function together to preserve and interpret the past. At the same time, the study recognizes important limitations within Kalhaṇa's historiography. The legendary narratives of the opening books, the inclusion of supernatural motifs, and occasional chronological inconsistencies require careful critical evaluation. Moreover, the work primarily reflects the perspectives of elite political society and provides comparatively less information concerning broader social, economic, and cultural developments. These limitations, however, should be interpreted within the context of medieval historiographical conventions rather than as evidence of methodological failure. Like all historical works, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* was shaped by the intellectual assumptions, literary traditions, and cultural values of its time. One of Kalhaṇa's most enduring achievements was the establishment of a historiographical tradition that continued long after his lifetime. Later chroniclers such as Jonarāja, Śrīvara, Prajyabhaṭṭa, and Śuka extended his narrative, creating an almost continuous record of Kashmir's political history over several centuries. Persian historians of the Sultanate and Mughal periods also engaged with the historical framework established by the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, ensuring that Kalhaṇa's influence extended across linguistic, religious, and political boundaries (Zutshi, 2011, 2013). This remarkable continuity demonstrates that his work served not merely as a historical source but as the foundation of Kashmir's historical memory. From the perspective of modern historical scholarship, Kalhaṇa's greatest contribution lies not in anticipating contemporary academic historiography but in demonstrating that systematic historical inquiry formed an important component of India's intellectual heritage. His work illustrates that premodern Indian scholars were capable of collecting documentary evidence, comparing conflicting traditions, organizing historical narratives chronologically, and reflecting critically upon the responsibilities of the historian. While his methods naturally differed from those employed by modern professional historians, they nonetheless reveal a sophisticated understanding of historical writing within the possibilities and limitations of twelfth-century Kashmir. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* remains one of the most

significant historical texts produced in premodern South Asia. Its value extends beyond the reconstruction of Kashmir's political history to include its methodological reflections on evidence, chronology, historical judgment, and the ethical responsibilities of the historian. A balanced reading neither idealizes Kalhaṇa as a modern historian nor dismisses his work as merely literary composition. Instead, it recognizes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* as a remarkable synthesis of historical inquiry and literary artistry that continues to inform the study of Indian historiography, medieval Kashmir, and the wider traditions of historical writing in South Asia.

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