

STRĪRĀJYA-CONCEPT IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE

K. Vidyuta

[The word *strīrājya* is found first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. But it is rarely referred to in the Purāṇas, but there is an interpolation in the *Skandapurāṇa* containing a list of seventy-five countries in the Bhāratavarṣa, the fifty-seventh of which is called *strīrājya*. Vātsyāyana mentions a *strīrājya*, which Yaśodhara places to the west of Vaṅga. The *Agnipurāṇa* mentions it as a country in the west of India. The Sanskrit references to a *strīrājya* possibly refer to a real place (or) places. The notion of a country ruled by women might have been inspired by second-hand knowledge of the matriarchal customs (or) polyandrous practices found in various regions, north of India. This paper will strive to establish the fact that a *strīrājya* as mentioned in above texts and *Mahābhārata* existed and highlights the fact that women empowered as great rulers of this land, ruled and even fought battles.]

Introduction

Sanskrit literature abounds with accounts of kingdoms of women which are often described by the Sanskrit term *strīrājya*. The references to a *strīrājya* possibly indicate to a real place (or) places. The notion of a country ruled by women might have been inspired by the knowledge of the matriarchal customs (or) polyandrous practices found in various regions of North India.

I

The word *strīrājya* is found first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*), when the list of Kings who had attended the *Rajasūya yāga* conducted by Yudhiṣṭhira is narrated by Lord Kṛṣṇa:

हारहूणांश्च चीनांश्च तुषारान् सैन्वास्तथा ।

जागुडान् रामठान् मुण्डान् स्त्रीराज्यमथ तङ्गणान् ॥

केकयान् मालवांश्चैव तथा काश्मीरकानपि ॥

Here, the specific mention of the name *Strīrājya* along with Hāra, Hūna, Cina, Tuṣāra, Saidhava, Jāguḍa, Rāmaṭha, Muṇḍa, Taṅgaṇa, Kośala, Kekeya, Mālava and Kaśmīra is noteworthy since in the previous *śloka* it is simply stated that पश्चिमानि च राषाणि शातराः . . . । – “hundred of kings of the west” attended the *rājasūya*.

Again in the *Mbh* there is a reference to a *strīrājyādhipati* who along with other kings participated in the *svayamvara* of the Princess of Kaliṅga. It is further added, that these kings took to the southern direction, which indicates that *strīrājya* should have been in the **northern** India. Here again, the name *strīrājyādhipati* is specifically mentioned:

शृगालश्च महाराजः स्त्रीराज्याःपतिश्च यः ।

.....

एते चान्ये च बहवः दक्षिणां दिशमाश्रिताः ॥२

From the above two instances it could be surmised that *Strīrājya* was a prominent country to be made note of.

Note: The gender of *Strīrājyādhipati* is a question here. If the *Strīrājya* ruler is a Queen then the question arises why she attended the *svayamvara* of the Princess of Kaliṅga? If the ruler is a King, the question would be whether he was a mere consort of the ruling queen or whether he ruled over a kingdom of women alone?

In this connection it would be worthwhile to look into the language of Inscriptions. The ruling queens of a country are called by the epithet of *rājan* (or) *deva*. The inscriptions dealing with Diddā, Queen of Kashmir and Kākatīya Queen Rudrāmbā of Vārāṅgal, reflect this idea.

Kākatīya Rudrāmbā was called ‘Rudradeva Mahārāja’ in her epigraphs. The inscriptions preserved in Pratap Museum, Srinagar and another in Central Museum, Lahore carry the epithet of *rājan* for Diddā instead of *rājñī*. In the inscription preserved in Pratap Museum, she is styled as ‘Didda deva’ instead of ‘Diddā devī’. Hence the *strīrājyādhipati* mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, may refer to the ruler of *Strīrājya*, a Queen.

Note: The above two instances from inscriptions ascertains the eligibility of the *Strīrājyādhipati* to attend the *Rājasūya Yāga*.

II

The next reference is found in the *Bṛhat Samhitā*. In the chapter on *Kūrmavibhāga* division of the globe, Varāhamihira enlists the various countries that fall under the power of certain stars. This places *strīrājya* in the **north-western** direction along with Māṇḍavya, Tuṣāra, tāla, Hala, Madra, Aśmaka, Kulūttha, Halāḍa, etc., and says that they fall under the influence of the *Uttarāsāḍha nakṣatra*:

दिशी पश्चिमोत्तरस्यां माण्डव्यतुषारतालहलमद्राः ।
अश्मककुलुतहलडाः स्त्रीराज्यनृसिंहवखस्थाः ॥३

III

Vātsyāyana in his *Kāmasūtra*, while describing the peculiarities of women of various regions, mentions a *strīrājya* along with Kośala:

दृढप्रहणनयोगिन्यः खरवेगः एव अपद्रव्यप्रधानाः स्त्रीराज्ये कोशलायां च ॥४

But Yaśodhara, the commentator of *Kāmasūtra*, places it to the west of Vajravantadeśa – स्त्रीराज्य इति । वज्रवन्तदेशात्पश्चिमेन स्त्रीराज्यम् ।

IV

Again, *strīrājya* is mentioned in the *Skandapurāṇa* (Sk. P.) containing a list of seventy-five countries in the Bhāratavarṣa; the fifty-seventh of this list is *strīrājya* and is said to contain five lakh villages:

पञ्चलाक्षाश्च ग्रामाणां स्त्रीराज्यं परिकीर्तितम् ॥५

Mr. D.C. Sircar says that the *strīrājya* mentioned in the above Purāṇa might have been a “women-dominated state” in the **Himalayan region** and suggests the *Kumārī* cult of the Newars of the Kāthmaṇḍu valley contributed to that notion:

“It may be noted that, in every Bihal (vihāra) of the Newars of Nepal, a young girl (Kumārī) having no scar on her body is worshipped as the living form of Kālī (or) Durgā. There is also a similar Kumārī for the whole kingdom, who is periodically elected from among the Vanra (priest) community during the last night of the navarātri festival after a

trying test. The Newars believe that the valley of Nepal belongs to the Kumārī and therefore every year the king has to receive from her a fresh mandate for ruling the country. The Kumārī is replaced by another before she is found to be approaching her first menstruation.”⁶

V

Comparatively better information could be got from the historical *kāvya Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (RT) of Kalhana. While describing the *digvijaya* of Lalitāditya, a reference is made about *strīrājya*. Lalitāditya ruled Kashmir by around the 8th Century A.D. The author says that the Queen of *Strīrājya* trembled at the sight of the King, when he took to subduing the country:

स्त्रीराज्यदेव्यास्तस्याग्रे वीक्ष्य कम्पादिविक्रियाम् ॥⁷

Again the poet refers to the *strīrājya* being conquered by Lalitāditya and comments that it was a vast kingdom:

चित्रं जितवतस्तस्य स्त्रीराज्ये मण्डलं महत् ॥

In addition to this he says that Lalitāditya took away the *karnaśrīpaṭa* from the *strīrājya* and erected an image of Hari in its place:

कर्णश्रीपटमावध्य स्त्रीराज्यान्निर्गतं जितात् ॥

The *strīrājya* seems to have been once again conquered by King Jayāpīḍa of the same dynasty. Kalhana remarks that Jayāpīḍa having won the *strīrājya*, foolishly let it go from his control:

जडं मेने जयापीडं स्त्रीराज्यान्निर्गतं जितात् ॥⁸

Lalitāditya apparently goes from Kashmir to the Kāmbojas (eastern Afghanistan), then frightens the Tuhkhārās, defeats Mummuni, causes concern to the Bhauttas (Tibetans) and the Daradas, passes by a deserted Pragjyotiṣa, travels through the sea of sand - *bālukāmbudhi* and then arrives at the *Strīrājya*. From this it could be understood that *strīrājya* was a place to the **northeast** of India.

VI

The next work where the *strīrājya* is mentioned is in the *Jaimanīya aśvamedha parva* (JP.) (said to be dated between 1100-1200

A.D.)¹¹. This text enumerates the story of the Aśvamedha Parva of the *Mahābhārata*, where Arjuna on his journey all over the Bharatavarṣa following the *aśvamedha* horse enters a country devoid of male:

ततो दैववशाज्जातः पुनः स तुरगो ययौ ।

.....

स्त्रियश्च सन्ति गहनाः सुरूपा नवयौवनाः ।

राज्यं नारी च कुरुते न पुमांस्तत्र जीवति ॥¹²

Vettam Mani when talking about Pramīlā (as from the 21st and 22nd Chapter of *JP.*), the chief of *strīrājya* in the **Himālayas**, says as follows:

“The Pāṇḍavas conducted an aśvamedha yāga after the great battle. It was Arjuna who followed the sacrificial horse. Roaming about without anybody daring to tie it the horse reached strīrājya and Pramīlā tied the horse. Arjuna challenged her and in the battle Pramīlā defeated Arjuna. At that time there was a voice from heaven which said: ‘Arjuna, you will never be able to take back the horse after defeating Pramīlā. So if you want to save the sacrificial horse, enter into a truce with her and make her your wife.’ Arjuna took the advice and saved the horse after marrying Pramīlā.”¹³

Mr. M. Ramakrishna Bhatt, the translator of the *Bṛhat Samhitā* of Varāhamihira also places *Strīrājya* in the Himalayan region as:

“Strīrājya, a kingdom of women, was known to Yuan Chwang as an Amazonian kingdom in the Himālayan valley of the Sutlej. Dey states that it was ‘a country in the Himālaya immediately on the north of Brahmaputra, which has been identified with Garwal and Kumaun’. Atkinson tells us that a woman named Pinchu ruled over the Nu-wang tribe in Eastern Tibet, and the people in each successive reign chose a woman for their sovereign.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The above excerpts from various literature in Sanskrit, firmly establishes the fact that a kingdom called *strīrājya* existed in India and was ruled by women. Therefore, women in ancient India were empowered and were equal to men in valour. In cases like Pramīlā, we see that they were invincible and unconquerable even by great warriors like Arjuna.

Map showing the various locations of *strīrājya*:



Also *strīrājya* seems to have been variously located in the **Northwest, North and Northeastern** parts of India (as shown in the map above). Whether these kingdoms were always ruled by women or came to be called so when ruled by a Queen, is a question to be pondered upon. If it is the latter, then there were many queens, who ruled over different parts of India in different centuries. But such countries were not termed *strīrājya* even during their time. Hence it should be concluded that the kingdoms which were ruled by queens alone, probably matriarchal rule, came to be called as *strīrājya*.

References :

- ¹ *Mbh.*, Vana Parva, 51. 25-6
- ² *Mbh.*, Śānti Parva, 4. 7-8
- ³ *Bṛhat Samhitā*, XIV. 22
- ⁴ *Kāmasūtra*, II. 5. 27
- ⁵ *Sk. P.*, Māheśvara khaṇḍa, Ch. 39, 153
- ⁶ *Studies in Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, p. 261
- ⁷ *RT.*, IV. 173
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 587

⁹ *Ibid.*, 588

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 666

¹¹ *Studia Orientalia*, Vol. 85, pp. 389-406

¹² *JP.*, 21. 83-4

¹³ *The Puranic Encyclopaedia*, p. 601

¹⁴ *Brhat Samhitā*, p. 178

Bibliography :

1. *Brhat Samhitā* of Varāhamihira, Pt. I by Ramakrishna Bhat, Motilal Banarsidass Pub., Delhi, 2010.
2. *Kāmasūtram of Vātsyāyana*, ed. by Devadutta Sastri, Kashi Sanskrit Series No. 29, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varnasi, 1964.
3. *Mahābhārata* (6 vols.), Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1957.
4. *Puranic Encyclopaedia*, by Vettam Mani, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1996.
5. *Skanda Purāna* (in 8 volumes), Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series No. 111, Varanasi, 2003-2011.
6. Sircar, D.C. *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971.
7. Smith, W.L. 'The Jaminibhārata and its eastern vernacular versions', *Studia Orientalia*, ed. by the Finnish Oriental Society, Vol. 85, pp. 389-406, Helsinki, 1999.
8. *Śrījaiminīyāśvamedhaparva*, ed. by Ramadhar Sukla Sastri, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1995.
9. Stein, M. A. *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī – A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, Tr. with an Introduction, Commentary and Appendices, Vol. I, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1961.
10. *The Rājatarāṅgiṇī of Kalhana*, ed. by Durgaprasada, Vol. I, Bombay Sanskrit Series No. XLV, Government Central Book Depot, Bombay, 1892.