"SEEING" THE PAST:
TEXT AND QUESTIONS OF HISTORY IN THE *RĀJATARAṄGIṆĪ*

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ABSTRACT

Traditional scholarly opinion has regarded Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, the twelfth-century Sanskrit chronicle of Kashmiri kings, as a work of history. This essay proposes a reinvestigation of the nature of the iconic text from outside the shadow of that label. It first closely critiques the positivist "history hypothesis," exposing its internal contradictions over questions of chronology, causality, and objectivity as attributed to the text. It then argues that more than an empiricist historical account that modern historians like to believe it is—in the process bracketing out integral rhetorical, mythic, and didactic parts of the text—the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* should be viewed in totality for the *kāvya* (epic poem) that it is, which is to say, as representing a specific language practice that sought to produce meaning and articulated the poet's vision of the land and its lineages. The essay thus urges momentarily reclaiming the text from the hegemonic but troubled understanding of it as history—only to restore it ultimately to a more cohesive notion of historicality that is consistent with its contents. Toward this end, it highlights the concrete claim to epistemic authority that is asserted both by the genre of Sanskrit *kāvya* generally and by the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* in particular, and their conception of the poetic "production" of the past that bears a striking resonance with constructivist historiography. It then traces the intensely intertextual and value-laden nature of the epistemology that frames the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* into a narrative discourse on power and ethical governance. It is in its narrativity and discursivity—its meaningful representation of what constitutes "true" knowledge of time and human action—that the salience of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* may lie.

Keywords: Kalhaṇa, *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, history, *kāvya*, *kavi*, narrative, discourse, didactic, monarchy, ethical exemplars

For scholars of India, Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* needs no introduction. The twelfth-century narrative of the royal dynasties of Kashmir from the earliest times to the author's own time, composed in nearly 8,000 verses spread over eight *taraṅga*s (sections/books), is a *kāvya* or *prabandha*, that is, classic epic poetry in Sanskrit. It has been better known, however, as history rather than poetry—in fact, as the first work of history proper in all of Sanskrit literature, we are told—ever since it was (partially) translated into English in 1825 by H. H. Wilson.[1] Later, Georg Buhler and his pupil Marcus Aurel Stein, who produced its critical

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edition in 1892 followed by a full English translation,[2] were fatefully drawn to the significance of the text for similar reasons, namely, its overt deference to chronology, assigning dates in different eras for the ascension and end of every regime; its alleged quest for objectivity, mirrored in the poet's call to impartiality; and its display of causation, attributing events to explanations—features that made it, to their mind, stand out in a literary culture otherwise infamous for its alleged poverty of historical sense. Much later, in the 1960s, Indologists like A. L. Basham and R. C. Majumdar were saying the same things in praise of the text. This is a representative statement: "Even a modern historian should have little hesitation in ranking Kalhaṇa as a great historian . . . [for his] correct appreciation of *the true ideals and methods of history*" [emphasis added].[3] Such definitive statements reinforcing Wilson's early characterization became virtually canonical with regard to interpreting the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* for later generations of Indian historians.

There was just one problem with this glowing appraisal: all these scholars found themselves stumped by *other* aspects of the text that did *not* fit their idea of what history should be—aspects that they then had to disown and describe as "failings" and "imperfections." Thus Stein thought the rhetoric and didactic parts of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* that were in *kāvya* style were simply unconnected with the narrative proper, which was historical, whereas Buhler indicted the resort to legend and myth as rendering the chronology of a large part of the text "valueless" and its author suspect.[4] Following suit, despite christening Kalhaṇa "a great historian," Majumdar spoke of his "very defective" method consisting in the inclusion of mythical or legendary kings, "a blind faith in the Epics and Puranas," a belief in witchcraft and magic, explanation of events as due to the influence of fate "rather than to any rational cause," a general didactic tendency inspired by Hindu views of karma, and "mere display of poetical and rhetorical skill."[5] Based on this vantage point both he and Basham maintained that the first three *taraṅga*s were less credible than the last five. In 1983, following their lead, Romila Thapar taught us to distinguish between "earlier books," where supernatural causes and fate were important, and later ones that reflected, we are told, "the maturity of Kalhaṇa's historical thinking," a separation that continues to inform modern readings of the text. Thapar also dismissed Kalhaṇa's moralism and didacticism.[6]

Philologists and historians who dominated the study of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* thus ended up fragmenting it, setting up some parts of it against other parts, as it were, obfuscating rather than elucidating the nature of the text as a whole. Moreover, all aspects of figuration proper to a poetic discourse were deemed extraneous and

2. *Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī or Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, vol. I, ed. M. A. Stein (Sanskrit text with critical notes) [1892] (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1960). The first full English translation was by Yogesh Chunder Dutt, 1879–1887, but it was based on the uncritical Calcutta edition widely regarded subsequently as erroneous.

3. A. L. Basham, "The Kashmir Chronicle," in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, ed. C. H. Philips (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 58. R. C. Majumdar, "Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature," in Philips, ed., *Historians of India,* 14, 25.

4. Quoted by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit in *The River of Kings*: *Rājataraṅgiṇī, The Saga of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, transl. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit [1935, 1968] (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004), xv, 8, n. 21.

5. Majumdar, "Ideas of History," 22-24.

6. Romila Thapar, "Kalhaṇa," in *Historians of Medieval India*, ed. Mohibbul Hasan (New Delhi: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1983), 52-62.

detrimental to the essentially "historical" substance and intent of Kalhaṇa's enter-
prise that were presumed antithetical to the poetic. Interestingly, though entirely
inspired from modern, objectivist notions of history in the West, rather than from
any indigenous or ancient approaches to treating of the past, the underlying belief
in the opposition of "factual" (true) history and "fictive" (false) literature was
new even to nineteenth-century Europe, and belied the practice in classical (let
alone Indian) antiquity where history was considered but a form of fine literature
with no prejudice as to its truth value. The Rankean turn in European historiog-
raphy imprinted itself on world historians, additionally through the agency of
imperialists like James Mill, who as early as 1817 launched a scathing attack on
Indian literary and historical traditions for not measuring up to their European
counterparts. Positivism mingled with imperialism ended up downgrading and
delegitimizing indigenous narratives of the past.[7] An ironic product of the same
thinking was the isolating, essentializing, and exalting of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as a
unique exception in Sanskrit literature—at the cost, of course, of its rhetorical and
legendary features as traditional poetry. It is interesting to observe that this view
was maintained across the board by scholars of different ideological persuasions
ranging from orientalist to nationalist and Marxist.

What is more, notwithstanding a relatively recent surge of interest among
Western scholars in the text's literary qualities, the old history hypothesis has yet
to be comprehensively confronted, and remains the dominant paradigm through
which the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is taught in history departments across universities in
India. It therefore deserves to be reviewed here before any attempt can be made to
supplant it, especially because such a review will help clarify some of the conten-
tious but key aspects of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, such as the recourse to rhetoric, myth,
and didacticism, that facilitate, I argue, the emergence of an alternative, cohesive
perspective on its character and function.

THE HISTORY HYPOTHESIS SCRUTINIZED

A close look at both the main arguments of and objections to the history hypoth-
esis shows that though persuasive at first glance, they are easily refutable and
strangely turned on themselves. First is the ascribed merit of assigning dates and
sequence. Although there is no doubt that Kalhaṇa's punctilious dating of reigns is
remarkable, it is not altogether unprecedented, since *vaṃśāvalī*s or traditional royal
genealogies produced in Sanskrit and other Indian languages in the early medieval
period, not to mention the Puranic genealogical lists, did much the same in what
was obviously a long-standing, far-from-novel documenting practice.[8] Further, the
Rājataraṅgiṇī was not the first such chronologically ordered account, even within

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7. See Rama Mantena, "The Question of History in Precolonial India," *History and Theory* 46,
no. 3 (2007), 396-408. It is also true, however, as Sheldon Pollock has pointed out, that this miscon-
ception about the truth status of Indian narratives of the past can be seen as a subset of widespread
confusion regarding the multiple modes in which historical truth can be conveyed, a confusion that
can be discerned even among precolonial thinkers like Al beruni and Ferishta. Pollock, "Pretextures
of Time," *History and Theory* 46, no. 3 (2007), 365.

8. See Michael Witzel, "On Indian Historical Writing: The Role of *Vaṃśāvalī*s," *Journal of the
Japanese Association of South Asian Studies* 2 (1990), 1-57.

Kashmir, but apparently among the last few in a long local tradition (*āmnāya*) by its own testimony (RT I.16), a fact little commented upon.[9] Its uniqueness merely on account of its deference to sequential dating is therefore overstated.

That apart, placing a premium on linear dating of events ignores the fact that although all narratives necessarily manipulate time by rearranging it to configure a meaningful pattern, there can be different modes of configuring temporality in different times and cultures, and even within a single culture, including distinctly nonlinear modes.[10] Thus you have the influential cyclical concept of time contained in the Puranic system of *caturyuga* ("four ages"), which calibrated the entire spectrum from cosmic to anthropic time in a pattern of four recurring mega-periods (*kṛta, tretā, dvāpara,* and *kali yugas*) signifying ascent and decline, albeit of a moral kind. Instructively, apart from the many *Purāṇa*s, which are vast, encyclopedic texts produced in Sanskrit from the third century CE onwards into the second millennium CE, this was the understanding of time deployed also by the Indian Epics, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed from circa fifth century BCE to fifth century CE, which belong to that genre of Sanskrit literature known as *itihāsa* that is generally understood to stand for "history." As such, the *yuga*s may well be regarded as an old and culturally popular choice of mode for rendering time. It is no surprise, then, that Kalhaṇa himself uses the *kaliyuga* as the basis of the dates he ascribes to the early kings of Kashmir. Yet this has been regarded as unacceptable by scholars, a show of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s "blind faith in Epics and *Purana*s," and of its reliance on "legendary and fictive events," such as the *Mahābhārata* war that is traditionally believed to separate the *dvāpara* from the *kali yuga*.[11] Clearly operating here is a rather inconsistent logic that faults a text for invoking a well-established, if mythical, chronological system of its time and culture, even as it applauds it for its concern for chronology in the first place.

Underlying this conflicted evaluation of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is the premise that the mythical, much like the poetic, is always fictive and false, rather than a meaningful rendition of truth-values about the past. This is why mythical aspects of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, which tend to cluster in the "early" *taraṅga*s, have not been given their due because they have had the label of "narrow history" to contend with. After all, our disappointment with literary myths may have more to do with the particular, a priori nature of truth that historians have been searching for than with the kind of truth that the text deploying myth is interested in conveying. As Paul Veyne has perceptively observed, myth is not about the "real" as truth, but about *what was noble as truth*. Therefore the standard of truth in myths, and their value to the narratives that preserved them, derived from something other than the verifiable.[12] Myths in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* based on local Kashmiri legends (*katheyam*)

9. References to the verses of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* are given in parentheses. They refer to Pandit's translation, which is based on Stein's critical edition.

10. See Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

11. This is Buhler's criticism, seconded by Majumdar. Fascinatingly, Kalhaṇa even emends the traditional dating of the protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, to the *dvāpara* age, claiming mathematically that they belonged in the *kaliyuga*. RT I.50-51. This shows how seriously he took the *caturyuga* system.

12. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*, transl. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

about wrongdoing kings and their cities that were catastrophically destroyed by the anger of tutelary deities (*nāga*s), or about the origins of the land of Kashmir in an act of the great gods as told by the *Purāṇa*s—display precisely such a meaning and function in Kalhaṇa's ethicized political commentary.[13] The least that is warranted, then, is a shifting of the historian's gaze to align with that of the poet, particularly when the text encourages us to transcend the distinction, as we shall see. The inclusion of mythic traditions, whether from the Epics, the *Nīlamata Purāṇa* (Kashmir's regional *purāṇa*), or Kashmiri local legends, would be perfectly natural in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s own cultural context where those traditions were in wide circulation and were well regarded as authentic sources of hoary knowledge. Moreover, far from being a lapse in critical judgment, their inclusion served a purposive, didactic function that was critical in the text's scheme of things.

The other quality rather fondly ascribed to Kalhaṇa by historians seeking perhaps to mirror their aspirational self-image is that of objectivity or impartiality. This is supposed to be captured in the following much-cited verse from Kalhaṇa's preamble:

> *ślāghyaḥ sa eva guṇavān rāgadveṣabahiṣkṛtā |*
> *bhūtārthakathane yasya stheyasyeva sarasvatī ||* (RT I.7)

In Kalhaṇa's description of the talented poet's speech (*sarasvatī*) that is rid of attachment or aversion (*rāgadveṣabahiṣkṛtā*) when recounting past matters (*bhūtārthakathane*), modern scholars have read a manifesto for the ideal historian who supposedly renders his subject matter with dispassion and neutrality. This is premised, however, on a circular assumption that Kalhaṇa *is* referring to a historian at work; Majumdar explicitly says Kalhaṇa *asks the historian* to act in such manner.[14] In fact, the verse, read in context with the verses preceding it, is clearly about the *kavi*, the talented poet (*guṇavān*); there is no other referent in these stanzas. This has led Walter Slaje to argue that it can be read in consonance with the *kavi*'s premier project of generating a state of equipoise—the *śānta rasa* that Kalhaṇa professes (RT I.23)—through his composition, which, according to contemporary *kāvya* theory, required the poet himself to experience a similar poise and detachment (*vairāgya*).[15] The term *stheya/stheyasī*, which is used for the poet/the speech of the poet, could then refer to one who is calm and unwavering rather than impartial.

In any case, significantly, and in ironic disputation of his stated aesthetic dispassion, calm and detached are the last things Kalhaṇa is when narrating the good or evil deeds of Kashmiri kings and queens and the plethora of other actors the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* portrays. Kalhaṇa's deep personal involvement in the events and actions he narrates and, more important, passes judgment on and moralizes over, is stark from even a cursory perusal of his composition, and has been widely noted by scholars as a trademark cynicism. Indeed, there are passages in the text

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13. RT I. 25-27, 240-272. See Shonaleeka Kaul, "Of Saffron, Snow, and Spirituality: Glimpses of Cultural Geography in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*," in *Negotiating Cultural Identity: Landscapes in Early Medieval South Asian History*, ed. H. P. Ray and Madhavan Palat (Delhi: Routledge, forthcoming).

14. Majumdar, "Ideas of History," 21-22.

15. See Walter Slaje, "'In the Guise of Poetry': Kalhaṇa Reconsidered' in *Śāstrārambha: Inquiries into the Preamble in Sanskrit*, ed. W. Slaje (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), 224-226.

where this cynicism rises to the crescendo of unmistakable denunciation and contempt for certain dubious characters, expressed even in obscene or scatological terms, which is highly unusual in Sanskrit poetry (RT V.392, VI.157-158, VII.283). At such moments espousing ethics seems to have weighed more with Kalhaṇa than abiding by aesthetics. As we will see, this is no happenstance but a defining part of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s agenda.

The other trait approvingly attributed to the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* by the history hypothesis is its tendency to supply causes for most events or occurrences that it reports. Implicit in this favorable valuation of causation is the faith that it displays in rationality. Such an expectation of rationality is, however, immediately undercut in the case of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* via the common criticism, from the same historians, that Kalhaṇa frequently invoked fate and suchlike forces "rather than any rational cause." So it is not just commitment to causality that is being expected of Kalhaṇa but a particular brand of empirical rationality, failing which this supposedly historical trait loses meaning. Now, such an understanding of historical causality and its corollary, the criticism of fate and so on as explanations, overlooks the complexity of a traditional causal vision. Fate (*bhāgya*) in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is deployed in multiple contexts, in "earlier" and "later" *taraṅga*s alike. Inscrutable providence is seen as a causal device often in response to situations where the poet is obliged to explain the inexplicable, such as an illogical act by a protagonist, for example, king Jayāpīḍa's sudden change of character from an enlightened ruler to an oppressive one, which leaves Kalhaṇa with no answer but to invoke fate (RT IV.620). In such cases fate also functions as exclamation and not just explanation, serving the poet's complex expressive needs. Thus Harṣa's coup d'état and takeover of the kingdom literally overnight brings on a comparison with fate itself for the "amazing deed" (*mahādbhutaḥ kṛtaḥ*) he performed as only fate could (RT VII.867).

Most of all, fate, in the form of the fruits of karma in a past life, is used as a didactic device, a source of blessing or punishment according to good or bad deeds of individuals or Kashmiri society as a whole. Thus the death at long last of the cruel and tyrannical king Mihirakula is said to be "owing to the dawn of the merit of the subjects' good actions" (*prajāpuṇyodayaiḥ*), while the plunder of Kashmir under rapacious officials of queen Diddā is regarded as "the result of its accumulated evil actions (*duṣkṛtaiḥ*)" (RT I.325, VI.288). Thus karma and fate serve as an opportunity for Kalhaṇa to ethicize and add a moral accent, which is, I argue, his chief interest. On another plane, fate is also a particularly apposite device for a tale of time, since it resonates with a connectedness or continuity of the past and present, and as such is profoundly causal, if not apparently so.

Thus as we have seen, the history hypothesis pays compliments to Kalhaṇa with the right hand, only to take them back with the left. It credits the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* with qualities and faculties that are, in the first place, not central to the concerns of the text itself or of the literary culture to which it belongs, yet also critiques it for not quite living up to them. At the same time it suppresses, not to say undermines, such tendencies as are recurrent and clearly important to the textual scheme of things. I therefore urge reclaiming the poem from the hegemonic but troubled understanding of it as history—only perhaps to restore it ultimately to

a more integral notion of historicality that is sensitive to the literary, internally consistent, and true to the contents of the text rather than to externally levied criteria. One way to do this is to view the text as what it itself claims and proves to be, namely, a *kāvya*.[16]

THE LITERARY HYPOTHESIS

A different line of enquiry in the West has begun relatively recently to advocate the importance of the literary qualities of premodern Indian texts in ascertaining their historicality. Among the first to argue for giving credence to Sanskrit literature's "special modalities" for processing history was Sheldon Pollock. In a path-breaking piece, "Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India," he perceptively spoke of an "eccentricism" of the Sanskrit tradition that consisted in a cultivated indifference to or denial of historical referentiality in favor of a professed transcendence of discourse.[17] In his opening thoughts, Pollock also suggested the possibility of rethinking the question of historical consciousness in India on the basis of the then recent writings on narrative and temporality by Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, and David Carr, a goal that conforms to my own in this essay. However, returning to his main argument, despite the validity of the observation that some Sanskrit genres (including classical *kāvya*, as I too have argued elsewhere) try to escape limits of time and place, Pollock's theory, in attempting to explain Sanskrit literature's peculiarity, tends perhaps to restate its ahistoricity. Such an explanation is also not useful for decoding a text like the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* that is overtly referential to past matters and their chronology; it tends therefore to repeat the poem's isolation from its literary culture as professed by earlier historians.

Substituting genre (history or literature) with "texture" (history within literature), V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam famously argued in 2003 for the ability of some late medieval South Indian textual genres to deploy an internal differentiator in the form of a (shift to a) particular literary register or narrative style that, in its evocation of "factuality," was diagnostic of historical intent.[18] This initiated a new line of enquiry that was enthusiastically received in several quarters but also critiqued, especially by Pollock, for suggesting that literary style above all was capable of being a necessary and sufficient index of truth claims in premodern India.[19] Moreover, given the premium placed in this work on "direct, unadorned, straightforward" fact, the assertion elsewhere that "history was not a matter of verisimilitude *tout court*" and that realism made for weak historiography, betrayed a lack of clarity in their formulation on where the factual stood in relation to historical truth and representations of reality.[20]

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16. *Kāvya* is highly aesthetic poetry or prose (including drama) characterized by the use of indirect and figurative language (*vakrokti, alaṃkāra*) and the evocation of essentialized emotional states (*rasa*).

17. Sheldon Pollock, "Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 4 (1989), 603-610.

18. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (New York: Other Press, 2003).

19. See Pollock, "Pretextures of Time."

20. Narayana Rao *et al*., *Textures of Time*, 99, 259-260.

Stemming directly from this confusion was their summary dismissal of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as a work of history—astoundingly alleging "an absence of factuality and a reflective organization of materials into a readable understanding of the past" in the text.[21] Indeed if the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was shorn of all factuality, one wonders why the question of its historical status, which scholars have been considering for two hundred years now, should ever have arisen. As for the "absence of a reflective organization of materials," this essay will not only demonstrate this to be erroneous but argue that it is precisely in the poet's organizing vision that the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s historicality may lie.

Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam's contention, though difficult to accept, shows how the matter of whether the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is history or not is far from settled, and continues to engage scholars regardless of their attempting to distance themselves from it.[22] Ironically, working within their broad contours of privileging the search for a particular poetic style as a historical marker, Whitney Cox has recently arrived elegantly at a conclusion that is the very opposite of theirs, namely, that via the occurrence of a "terse, tense" narrative register, especially in the later parts of the text, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* does indeed reflect a historical consciousness.[23] The substance of this historicity, however, is articulated in an all-too-literary logic as "the ways that this kind of Sanskrit verse is able to capture the ebb and flow of the world's congenital instability by rendering itself dense and rich enough to capture something of it."[24] It suggests a merely formal mimesis as the substance of Kalhaṇa's engagement with history, and that too operating mostly in those parts of the text where the said "instability" is seen to heighten. This reading does not quite explain what the rest of the text not composed in Kalhaṇa's intensified register was meant to be doing—that is, what we are to make of truth claims made therein.

Perhaps more urgently, other Sanskritists such as Walter Slaje and Lawrence McCrea have returned to indigenous Sanskrit categories of generic analysis, like *rasa kāvya,* to gauge the nature and purpose of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*; but whereas the former sees the historical aspect as subservient and subordinate to aesthetic objectives, the latter argues for the reverse.[25] More on this below, but it is instructive to note here that simply substituting empiricist with aesthetic categories of enquiry into the historical character of the text has not resolved the picture, only complicated it.

Among the handful of early scholars who recognized the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as primarily a *kāvya,* such as Bernhard Kolver, the tendency was to infer Kalhaṇa's

21. *Ibid*., 256-260.

22. Shulman, in a preface to a recent forum on the text, writes: "Let us set aside at the outset the probably futile question of whether the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is or is not history." "Preface: Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*: What is it?," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 2 (2013), 127.

23. Whitney Cox, "Literary Register and Historical Consciousness in Kalhaṇa: A Hypothesis," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*,50, no. 2 (2013), 131-160.

24. *Ibid*.,159. Note, again, how Cox's conception of a historical register consisting in "dense and rich" verse contrasts with Narayana Rao *et al*.'s emphasis on a "direct, unadorned, straightforward . . . matter-of-fact tone" constituting historical texture.

25. Slaje, "In the Guise of Poetry," 207-244; Lawrence McCrea, "*Śānta rasa* in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*: History, Epic, and Moral Decay," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 2 (2013), 179-199.

subjectivity or less than historian-like qualities from the text's status and contents as a poem, in effect returning to the fallacy of a divide between the literary and the historical.[26] Slaje is perhaps the first to suggest a viable rapprochement between these two aspects of the text. In his brilliant analysis, albeit only of the preamble that states the poem's objectives, Slaje argues for the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s pursuit of aesthetic and ultimately soteriological, rather than historical, ends. In other words, true to the contemporary theoretical understanding of *kāvya*, the evocation of the *śānta rasa* or state of equipoise, which in turn would facilitate the attainment of *mokṣa* or liberation, was Kalhaṇa's main endeavor via the narration of the lives of Kashmir's kings past. So for Slaje, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s appeal to historical reality was a necessary means—but merely a means—to enhance, as only an appeal to verity can, the aesthetic effect.

Although I share Slaje's emphasis on regarding the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as a *kāvya* first, I differ from both him and McCrea by focusing instead on a different strand of *kāvya* poetics. I emphasize the genre's, as well as specifically the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s, self-understanding as not just a creative but a cognitive and discursive literary mode. At the heart of this mode lies the *kavi*'s claim to a privileged epistemic authority that cannot be ignored just because it is couched in convention. I not only highlight explicit statements of this epistemic claim in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, and the wider world of Sanskrit literary culture to which it belongs, all of which point toward a conception of what can only be called a brand of historical constructivism attributed to poetry. I also argue that the claim can be fully redeemed against the totality of the poet's vision both of the past and of what constitutes true knowledge of it. This vision lies in the epic composition read right through, not just in the preamble, and it exceeds an aesthetic intent.

Hence I proceed with an understanding of the integrity of the text, not bracketing out mythic and didactic portions that arguably constitute the bulk of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, but viewing as a unity Kalhaṇa's use of myth, moral, rhetoric, and history—ingredients all of his discourse on Kashmir's past and present. At the same time, I identify a variety of tendencies within the text that suggest that crucial aspects of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s discourse on Kashmir have lineages in literary and philosophical traditions other than *kāvya*, which together partake of a universal normativity and inscribe a collective epistemology.

IS THE *RĀJATARAṄGIṆĪ* A *KĀVYA*?

In the colophons of his work, Kalhaṇa designates himself as a *mahākavi* (great poet/composer of *mahākāvya*). He also pays full and handsome homage in his work to preeminent conventions of *kāvya* composition such as *rasa* (abstracted essence of emotions), *alaṃkāra* (figures of speech), and meter (he uses the classic *anuṣṭubha*). Moreover, his putative successor, Jonarāja, who composed a sequel

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26. This compulsion of having to choose between the label of history or poetry is seen in Bernhard Kolver, *Textkritische und philologische Untersuchungen zur Rājataraṅgiṇī des Kalhaṇa* (VOHD, Suppl. 12. Wiesbaden, 1971) as well as in Pandit, *The River of Kings*; Stein, *Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī*; Basham, "The Kashmir Chronicle"; and Mauriz Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 3, rev. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983).

to the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* in the fifteenth century, unequivocally described the original work as a *kāvya*.[27] In other words, there can be no doubt that for all contemporary purposes, Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was recognized as a *kāvya*.

For our purposes, however, this can be only a starting point, since *kāvya* is a complex category and the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as a *kāvya* is even more so, and if treated as a stable and given entity, will explain perhaps even less of the dynamics of Kalhaṇa's composition than the history hypothesis. A close reading of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* shows that it is not a simple text but what may be called a composite type. It is a *kāvya* in form and spirit but draws heavily on several other texts and textual traditions in content, slant, or perspective, and even form. Overall, this may be a situation marked by overlapping discourses and a self-reflexive, purposive intertextuality.

Some of this happens explicitly with Kalhaṇa citing up front a list of texts (*granthāḥ*), probably all in verse, that constitute his reference point: for instance, the works of Suvrata, Kṣemendra, Helarāja, Padmamihira, Chavillākara, apart from "eleven others" and, most important, the *Nīlamatapurāṇa*. These have been typically characterized by modern scholars as a historian's "sources." In fact they are better seen as intertexts since Kalhaṇa regards these as his "predecessors" (*purvāḥ*) (RT I.8) and positions himself as a legatee to their works, at once emending and commenting on them as well as extending their work on Kashmir to its logical and, according to Kalhaṇa, more competent conclusion (RT I.9-10).

Portentously, intertextuality also operates unannounced in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, for a number of Kalhaṇa's postures and propositions are informed by other, pan-Indian Sanskrit literatures such as *śāstra* (prescriptive treatises on statecraft and law)*, nīti* (political and moral parables), and *itihāsa* (narratives on the past), even as the basic fact of chronicling dynasties king by king is in the *vaṁśāvalī* (genealogy) tradition, as mentioned before.[28] Indeed the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* may be seen to migrate among these genres and *kāvya*.[29] Suffice it to sample but a few of the large number of examples of each type found across the text.

The invocation of *itihāsa* texts is easy to recognize since characters and incidents are directly named. Thus the lineage of Kashmiri kings who "with their wits led astray from rectitude perform impure acts in their hurry to achieve selfish ends" is traced, in a manner of speaking, to Epic precedents such as the chivalrous Rāma murdering Vālin deceitfully in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the righteous Yudhiṣṭhira conniving in the dishonest killing of his preceptor, Droṇa, in the *Mahābhārata* (RT VIII.2975-2977). Similarly, king Harṣa is compared to Duryodhana in being doomed to bring about the end of their respective dynasties (RT VII.1089). Moreover, an entire episode in the victory expedition of king Meghavāhana is patterned exactly on the legend of Rāma parting the waters of

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27. *Rājataraṅgiṇī of Jonarāja*, ed. Srikantha Kaul (Hoshiarpur: Woolner Indological Series 7, 1967), verse 26.

28. In following the *vaṁśāvalī* tradition, too, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was not the first among *kāvya*s but had at least one predecessor, namely, Kalidāsa's *Raghuvaṁśam*, a little noticed fact.

29. Indeed, McCrea has elegantly argued for seeing the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as an attempted work of *itihāsa* rather than *kāvya*. "*Śānta rasa* in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*." His interpretation, however, hinges on a somewhat forced separation of the "dispiriting" *śānta rasa* from the "affirming" or "upbeat" other *rasa*s of *kāvya,* which, he believes, made Kalhaṇa model his work on the *Mahābhārata* instead.

the ocean to reach Laṅkā, whereupon Vibhīṣaṇa, "the ruler of *rākṣasas*" comes out to meet Meghavāhana, "the ruler of men," just as he did for Rāma (RT III.68-74). In these and other easy mythic pointers to the Epics, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was obviously and astutely tapping the culturally validated political and ethical tropes and resonances of which these texts are a storehouse.

The primary intertextual echoes in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* are in the nature of moral or political maxims and exempla (*nīti*) that are reminiscent of Sanskrit texts on *rājadharma* (political philosophy) that circulated widely and enjoyed considerable influence, like the treatise on statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra* (composed fourth century BCE–second century CE), on the one hand, or the fablesque *Pañcatantra* (circa fifth century CE) and the anthology of wise stories and advice, the *Hitopadeśa* (circa twelfth century CE?), on the other. Here are a few random examples that give a taste of such quips, all of which either led into or out of episodes documented by the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* with a view to inducing a lesson or a comment from the anecdotes: "Where the king himself abducts the wives of subjects, who else indeed will punish transgressions of moral law (*dharma*)?" (RT IV.29). "The job of a statesman is to conserve renown; acquisition of dominion is secondary . . . For a living being, like camphor by its perfume, is measured by its reputation even after its body is destroyed" (RT VII.1435-1436). "Charity and courtesy win universal affection for the sovereign. Greed destroys both [affection and the sovereign]. Clouds reduce the glory . . . of a day in autumn to a mere reminiscence; so too greed in the case of kings" (RT V.189-190). "The unwise king who is devoid of discrimination and is unsophisticated like a brute beast, does not take long to be ruined" (RT VII.998). "Living in a sanctuary the Timi fish eats up its own species; the stork silently approaches and swallows the Timi; the hunter dwelling in the depth of the forest kills the stork. Each prevails over its victim by higher and higher skill in outwitting [others]" (RT V.305). "What other opportunity for a display of courage for the village jackal than to approach the lion's den when the lion is embattled with the elephant?" (RT VIII.765).[30] And so on and so forth.

My main point here is that the adoption by the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of injunctive perspective and matter from textual authorities or traditions of Sanskrit culture, of which we shall review more substantial evidence throughout the remainder of this essay, was crucial to the shaping as well as framing of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s own message and philosophy. This should alert us to the generic open-endedness and absorbancy of *kāvya*. Also, needless to say, once this intertextual location and lineage of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is recognized, it qualifies the uniqueness imputed to it by modern historians. Perhaps then, in an important sense, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* did not so much depart from Sanskrit literary traditions as, in effect, bring them together.

METAPOETRY AND EPISTEMIC INSIGHT

What allowed and indeed inspired the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* to perform this feat of literary virtuosity? The answer may be found in a consideration of the metapoetry

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30. As noted above (note 9), all translations in this essay are from Pandit, *The River of Kings*. In just a few places, however, I have taken the liberty of rearranging the syntax or substituting my choice of words for his to make it easier to read.

of *kāvya* generally and Kalhaṇa's poem specifically, which in fact confirms the characterization of the latter as a *kāvya*. *Kāvya* is essentially literature as art. However, as I have argued before, although *kāvya* may be distinguished by the highly aesthetic/ornamented form of figurative language it uses, its objectives went beyond the aesthetic.[31] Among its stated objectives was *upadeśa* or instruction, usually about *trivarga*, that is, *dharma- artha- kāma*, in other words the entire spectrum of human goals and activities divisible into piety, power, and pleasure. From Bharata in the second century, who used the term *upadeśa* and Bhāmaha in the fifth, who spoke of *vaicakṣaṇya* (understanding/expertise), to Bhoja in the eleventh century, who used the term *adhyeyam* (lesson), this contemplative-educative function of *kāvya* remained a constant refrain among rhetoricians.[32] Indeed, how seriously *kavi*s took this mandate is evidenced by the self-image projected by Kalhaṇa and other poets like Bilhaṇa and Ratnākara, not to mention influential theoreticians like Ānanadavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Mammaṭa, Ruyyaka, and Bhaṭṭa Tauta, all of whom belonged to Kashmir just like Kalhaṇa and were broadly his contemporaries. For this group of *littérateurs* and intellectuals and others from the wider world of Sanskrit rhetoric who comprised the intellectual context of the composition of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, the *kavi*'s special insight was an article of faith.

Thus the great Rājaśekhara in the tenth-century *Kavyamīmāṃsā* speaks of the power (*śakti*) of true poets lying in their divine sight (*divyadṛṣṭi*) that enables them to perceive that which no one before them has ever seen. He also likened poetic power to spiritual omniscience.[33] Similarly, the twelfth-century *Kāvyānuśāsana* of Hemacandra quotes the tenth-century Kashmiri rhetorician Bhaṭṭa Tauta, who was the famous Abhinavagupta's teacher, as saying:

None a poet (*kavi*) but also a seer (*ṛṣi*). A seer is so called because of his vision (*darśana*), which is knowledge of the true nature of entities and their varied states of being. And it is because of his vision of the truth that the seer is declared . . . a poet. The conventional meaning of the word poet, for its part, is derived from his capacity for vision (*darśana)* as well as his powers of description (*varṇana*).[34]

Kalhaṇa virtually echoes this when in his preamble, in a show of metadiscursive reflexiveness, he speaks of the talented *kavi* being able to truly see (*paśyet*) existences commonly known (*sarvasaṃvedyān bhāvān*) by virtue of his intu-

31. See Shonaleeka Kaul, *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010; New York: Seagull Books, 2011), Introduction.

32. For *upadeśa*, see *Nāṭyaśāstra*, ed. M. Ramakrishna Kavi (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1934), I, 111-113. For *vaicakṣaṇya*, see *Kāvyālaṅkāra of Bhāmaha*, ed. B. N. Sarma and Baladeva Upadhyaya (Benaras: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1928), I, 2. For *adhyeyam*, see *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa of Bhoja*, ed. V. Raghavan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Oriental Series 53, Harvard University Press, 1998), 596.

33. *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, ed. C. D. Dalal *et al*. (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1934), chapter 12, 62-63, 1.17-21, translated in Phyllis Granoff, "Sarasvati's Sons: Biographies of Poets in Medieval India," *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 49, no. 2 (1995), 364. The poetic-spiritual parallel Rājaśekhara claims is expressed thus: "Poets explore with their words that which *yogin*s see through the power of their religious accomplishments."

34. *Kāvyānuśāsana*, ed. Rasiklal C. Parikh and V. M. Kulkarni (Bombay: Sri Mahavira Jaina Vidyalaya, 1964), 432, translated in Sheldon Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.

ition and creative insight (*pratibhayā),* and how (somewhat circularly) this is an indication of the poet's divine sight (*divyadṛṣṭitva kaveḥ*) (RT I.5). He thus claims for the poet a special ontic access to the reality of things, an omniscience that extended to things past (*bhūtārtha*). As such, the world is stated to be in darkness without the illuminating work of the good poet (*satkavikṛtyam andham jagattvām vinā*) (RT I.47). Incidentally, this is repeated by his second successor Śrīvara, who calls *kāvya* the lamp (*kāvyadīpam*) that sheds light on past matters (*bhūtavastuprakāśakaḥ*).[35]

The deeds of kings in particular, Kalhaṇa insinuates, would be lost forever were it not for the poet who resurrects, vivifies, and embodies their glory (*yaśaḥ kāyaḥ*) through his words, a self-projection that is exactly found in Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* and implied in Ratnākara's *Haravijaya*.[36] Thus Kalhaṇa writes: "Renowned [and mighty] kings would not even be remembered without the favour of the poet's work (*anugraham kavikarmaṇe*) that is sublime and to which we offer salutations" (RT I.46).

There can be no doubt that in these statements we find a concrete assertion of the epistemic authority of poets. But that's not all. In a strikingly constructivist approach to the past and to the pursuit of its knowledge, the poet is understood to be not just the "knower" but even the "creator" of the past. Hence Kalhaṇa calls him *kavi-prajāpati* or *kavi-vedhas*, that is, poet- creator (RT I.4). He writes: "Who else is capable of making visible (*pratyakṣatām*) bygone times except the poet-creator who can make delightful productions (*ramyanirmāṇa*)?" It should be noted that Kalhaṇa is merely repeating the understanding and usage in Bāṇa, Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, and Kuntaka before him.[37] Here again, then, is Sanskrit *kāvya*'s belief in the poet's creative ability to make the unobservable past perceptible—the quintessentially historical function—and indeed a statement on the past itself so rendered as a construction or production (*nirmāṇa*).

Armed thus with complete authority over the past and over its "true" nature and meaning, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* proceeds to instruct the present. Via the numerous morals and lessons with which the bulk of this composition is constituted, some evoking resignation, others pragmatism, the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is molded into a commentary par excellence. Hence I believe the tendency to moralize is the leading thrust of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* and is not some superfluity, as Stein and Thapar suggested. And so, although Pollock, even as he argues for *kāvya* as a discourse of power, maintains that the didactic function was entirely subordinate to the aesthetic objective in *kāvya*,[38] I submit that on the evidence of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī,* the didactic is inseparable from the aesthetic; it is the combination that made *kāvya* so powerful a politico-literary phenomenon. And this is at the heart of the primary enterprise of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, namely, representation of Kashmir as

35. *Rājataraṅgiṇī of Śrīvara and Śuka*, ed. Srikanth Kaul (Hoshiarpur: Woolner Indological Series 8, 1966), I. 1, 4.

36. See also RT I.3, 45. Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* I. 26 (*pṛthvipateḥ santi na yasya pārśve kavīśvarās tasya kuto yaśāṃsi*). Ratnākara's *Haravijaya* VI.8 (*viśadaṃ bhavadbhir abhitanyatetarām abhitaḥ purāṇakavinā kṛtam yaśaḥ*). Slaje makes this observation: "In the Guise of Poetry," 216-217. An important difference remains that unlike the others, Kalhaṇa was not a court poet.

37. For details, see Slaje, "In the Guise of Poetry," 217-218.

38. Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture," 49-50.

a discursive political space mediated by an ethical paradigm, to which we now turn as the final part of my argument. We might note here that the coalescing of didactic and historical functions via poetry, articulated in no uncertain terms by Kalhaṇa, perhaps qualifies the formulation that in Sanskritic India "[history] is denied in favor of a model of 'truth' that accorded history no epistemological value."[39] As we shall see below, even as the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* projected a model of "truth" that conformed to Sanskritic traditions, it derived its truth from, and located it within, a referentially adduced historical past. Kalhaṇa's "truth" was thus both transcendent and contingent.

THE RIVER OF KINGS AS A FLOW OF EXEMPLARS

As I have elaborated elsewhere, governance and kingship in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* are evaluated according to certain moral principles with which Kalhaṇa frames his composition.[40] His ethicized commentary runs through the text, *unifying his account in a moral logic*. It is this unity of plan that characterizes the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as a political and indeed historical narrative. It has, however, hardly been noticed because most modern historians have tended to dissect the text rather than consume it whole. Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, for example, spectacularly missed this aspect and perhaps *raison d'être* of Kalhaṇa's work when they charged it with being a "pointillistic assembling of events" lacking a larger organizing or hermeneutical scheme.[41]

Kalhaṇa in fact declares in no uncertain terms the organizing principle of his vision by means of what can only be called an opening statement. In the first *taraṅga* he tells us:

From time to time, due to the spiritual merit of the subjects, kings appear who organize a kingdom that is sunk deep in disorder (*dūrotsannasya maṇḍalasya yojanam kriyate*). Those who are intent on harassment of their subjects (*prajāpīḍanam*) perish with their families; on the other hand, fortune waits on even the descendants of those who reinstate order where there is chaos. . . . this [is] the feature of each tale (*prativṛttāntam lakṣaṇam*) . . ." (RT I.187-189).

And indeed Kalhaṇa ensures this is borne out king after king in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*. He reiterates the point later in the fifth *taraṅga*: "The dynasty, fortune, life, wife, the very name of kings, in an instant goes to perdition for those who do evil to the subjects (*prajāvipriya*)" (RT V.211-213). And in a corollary he observes in the second *taraṅga*: "Who is Lord Indra, what is the Creator Brahma and what the wretched Yama, God of Death, to transgress the command of kings who are pledged to righteous conduct? . . . Single-minded application in protecting the subjects is the sacred duty of kings (*prajānupālanenanyakarmatā bhūbhṛtāṃ vratam*)" (RT II.47-48).

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39. Pollock, "Mīmāṃsā," 610.

40. I have discussed political morality as a subset of Kalhaṇa's rendition of Kashmir as a profoundly spiritual and ethical geography in "Kalhaṇa's Kashmir: Aspects of the Literary Production of Space in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*," *Indian Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (2013), 207-221.

41. Narayana Rao *et al*., *Textures of Time*, 259.

Ensuring these *śāstric* aims was a series of qualities: good conduct (*sadācāraḥ*), righteousness (*sat*), generosity/liberality (*dākṣiṇya*), discriminating intellect that could tell right from wrong (*sārāsāravicāra, kṛtyākṛtyaviveka*) and that encouraged men of merit, character, and learning, and the will to enforce justice (*dharma*) and absence of fear (*abhaya*) among the subjects.[42] Kalhaṇa thus lays out a highly prescriptive list of personal and political values that draw on a conception of moral order to which the king's commitment is expected. These values are plotted through a series of exemplars. This *schematic organization of the text articulating the poet's ethicized vision* is strikingly apparent when the text is viewed as the unity that it is and its didacticism and rhetoric are not dismissed.[43] It is here that the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* displays narrativization or the configuration of historical "facts" around a plot-structure that endows otherwise random data with a unified structure and meaning, thereby rising above mere seriality.[44] Narrativity in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* embodies the poet's vision of the past, endowing that past with culturally sanctioned meanings that etched a profound understanding of historicity in early India.

The ethical exemplars that Kalhaṇa identifies in Kashmir's past often occur in pairs, elucidating their comparative morality. Thus among the earliest you have king Vibhīṣaṇa II, insignificant in himself but on whom Kalhaṇa dwells at some length since the former, "through pursuit of the vice of sensuality (*vyadhādiviṣayadoṣa*)," "transgressing bounds of discretion," coveted the daughter of a *nāga* and thus became "the source of a series of misfortunes" for the people as the *nāga* wreaked devastating vengeance on the king and his entire realm (RT I.198, 250-265, 269-274). Kalhaṇa somberly comments: "Under the guise of protectors, such types of destroyers arise . . . now and then who unhesitatingly cause devastation [through] passionate lust" (RT I.269, 271).

As if in purposive contrast, Vibhīṣaṇa is succeeded by his son king Siddha, "that virtuous king" about whom, tellingly, nothing is said except that he "though in the midst of pleasures was not led into vice," "remained unblemished like the reflection of the moon in the mire," and "harnessed royal splendor through unfaltering moral principle (*rājaśrīḥ dharmeṇāvyabhicāriṇā*)" (RT I.276-285).

Another pair of exemplars begins with king Mihirakula "of violent deeds" who killed his subjects by the millions and the narration of whose wicked acts was "polluting for speech" (RT I.289-307). Instructively, he is followed to the throne by his son, one king Baka "the righteous," who brought law and order back to the land. Making the contrast explicit, Kalhaṇa says of him: "Born from the great

42. References in order of occurrence are RT VII.773, VIII.2663, VI.193, VII.998, VIII.122, 2034, V.204-05, I.350-358, III.131-145, 300-323.

43. Cox has spoken of "uncanny connections and resonances cutting across decades and even centuries" in the text. Cox, "Literary Register and Historical Consciousness," 157. In giving evidence of these, he confines himself to just a couple of episodes from two *taraṅga*s. Moreover, the import of his recognizing these connections is underdetermined since he avers elsewhere in the paper that Kalhaṇa is *not* "programmatic in his delineation of a wider historical structure" (155).

44. This understanding of history as narrative is after Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. See White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteent-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), which also provides a lucid explanation of Ricoeur's theories on historical and other refigurations of time.

oppressor (*atisaṃtāpadā*), he became the delight of the people (*janāhlādakaḥ*), like the pouring rain after a day of excessive heat . . ." (RT I.325-329).

Then comes king Candrāpīḍa in the fourth *taraṅga*, whom Kalhaṇa credits with mastery of law and justice and "virtues such as forgiveness and valour both that served [him] in equal measure like the seasons the garden of heaven" (RT IV.46-47, 52-60, 95-96). He was assassinated deceitfully after an all too brief reign at the behest of his brother who ascended the throne after him. This was Tārāpīḍa the terrible (*caṇḍaḥ*), as Kalhaṇa puts it, who inspired fear by repression, and met a fitting end also by assassination by those he had oppressed (RT IV.112-125).

And then in the seventh *taraṅga* there are kings Kalaśa and Harṣa, his son who, though he deposed his father, appears in just the same dark aspect as he. Although the former lived a long and lurid life of "vile acts" lost to debauchery (RT VII.277-316), Harṣa's career surpassed his father's in cruelty and wanton desecration, dissolving into dissipation marked by incestuous rapes and the naked pursuit of wealth by deadly persecution of his subjects (RT VII.961-1245). In their context, in the verse I quoted earlier that compares virtue with the lasting fragrance of camphor, Kalhaṇa emphasizes the need for a king to preserve a high reputation above all else, perhaps his main message.

In contrast to the conjoined exemplar of Kalaśa and Harṣa comes the reign of king Uccala who succeeded them and in whom Kalhaṇa's ethical and monarchical ideals seem to come together (RT VIII.49). This "high-souled/high-minded king (*mahātmanaḥ, manasvinaḥ*)," "beloved of the people," was "keen on favouring the weak and removing the misery of the inhabitants as a father of his sons." Free from greed (*nirlobha*), his indifference to riches was his great merit for Kalhaṇa, as was the "protection extended to the people by this beneficent king of ardent vitality" (RT VIII.48-122, 160).

<div align="center">CRITIQUE OF POWER</div>

Even as he laid down a model for kingship in Kashmir in this fashion, so acute is Kalhaṇa's didactic strain that, perhaps understandably, it trains its guns on monarchy itself. Thus though the text treats it as exalted, it also critiques monarchy as an inherently and inevitably unreliable and fickle institution. Incidentally, this is how several classical *kāvyas* have regarded kingship, in ways more or less obvious; though mirroring *śāstric* prescriptivism, this critique is very much *kāvya*'s own intervention in the discourse of *artha* and *rājadharma*.[45] The *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s dispiriting cynicism about the political life of Kashmir has been noted by McCrea but declared as a part of the text's "departure from the literary norms of the *mahākāvya*,"[46] thus overlooking the fact that such a function was an integral part of *kāvya*'s mandate, as I have argued.

This critique in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is usually in the form of hit-and-run quips. Here are just a few typical examples: "More difficult than the rising of a *vetāla* (ghost-in-a-corpse), or a jump down a precipice, or masticating poison, or

45. See Kaul, *Imagining the Urban,* chap. 4.
46. McCrea, "*Śānta-rasa* in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*," 198. See also footnote 29 above.

embracing a viper is, in truth, the service of royalty" (RT VIII.2187). "When sons, wives, friends, and servants are the objects of their suspicion, who knows whom these kings consider worthy of their confidence?" (RT VIII.1244). "Kings, when their purpose is served, have no recollection of benefit [done to them]. He who has aided his rise to a high place, the king cuts him down, like a woodcutter when he is coming down the branch of a tree by which he has gone up" (RT V.310-311). "First the stork and then the king is, in truth, sustained by perfidy" (RT V.321).

Building on this, Kalhaṇa offers something of a larger critique of power. This is sometimes from a humanist and sometimes an ascetic perspective; all told, it rounds off and both deepens and elevates the concern for the ethical and the discursive with which Kalhaṇa seeks to frame his meditative poem. Thus the following analogy drawing on the Epics at the death of the powerful king Uccala offers a corrective to the might of monarchy: "The lord of Lankā, conqueror of the three worlds, suffered a rout from lower animals [monkeys]; the lord of the Kurus, paramount among kings, received a kick on the head. Thus everyone has . . . a mischance stripping him of his exalted rank as if he were a commoner. Who indeed can afford to be high and mighty and, obsessed with oneself, persist in conceit?" (RT VIII.335). In a similar vein is the following resigned observation:

Lion-claws, which are the defensive armor of the forest . . . in due course come to pass hanging [as amulets] from the necks of infants. The ivory teeth of tuskers, their weapon of war, get bandied about by gamblers in a game of dice. An ascendant position is by no means assured to prowess. . . . Even the sun day after day undergoes vicissitudes ranging from fierceness to mildness; what stability can there then be in the faculties of living beings? (RT VIII. 828-830).

Then, in a moral and mortal take on power, Kalhaṇa has king Avantivarman soliloquize thus:

There is perhaps no man who, having been at first shown favor [by Royal Fortune, the sweetheart of kings], has later not been harassed by her, as by the friendship of the vulgar. . . . She, who is without affection, has never followed kings in death when they, without friends or provisions, are en route for the next world. . . . Gold vessels of the banquet and other articles collected in the treasury rooms—how is it that those kings who have departed for the next world [no longer] own them? . . . Torn from the necks of those [enemies] about to die . . . the necklaces, accursed and unholy, for whom are they an attraction? Predecessors have left the ornaments behind after defiling them with hot tears of anguish when about to die; while touching them, who does not have a qualm? (RT V.6-15)

Elsewhere in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* Kalhaṇa comments: "Despite efforts to control physical ills and mental worries, [and] even after realizing the transient nature of existence, fools do not give up ambition, seduced as they are by the attractions of treacherous fortune" (RT VI.146). But "on the same path of death is every individual plunging headlong. I am the slayer and he the slain—the notion of a difference [between the two] lasts but a short while. . . . He who but yesterday exults while slaying his foe, at the end sees an enemy gloating over him when he is himself about to be killed. How awful! Fie on this illusion!" (RT VIII.358-359).

The *Rājataraṅgiṇī*'s relentless recourse thus to the themes of mortality and evanescence of human life and action was not just a sardonic critique of vanity and

power but can be seen as a profound deposition on temporality itself and its ever-attendant quality, change. A recognition of this fundamentally historical character of time frames the text in that it begins, too, with describing itself as a balancing remedy, an antidote as it were, for kings who may be seized by change—prosperity or decline—across space and time (*nṛpāṇām ullāse hrāse vā deśakālayoḥ*) (RT I.21). A certain universality and inevitability, then, attach to the march of history in this vision, as also a convergence of transcendent and contingent truths.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that *kāvya* as a cognitive and discursive mode is ideal for the representation of the experience of historicality in a way that is both literal in what it asserts about specific events and figurative in what it suggests about the meaning of this experience. Literary imagination, insofar as it seeks to explicate and illuminate, is therefore a historical imagination. Literature does not merely reproduce the events it describes; "it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about them with different emotional valences."[47]

In the case of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, whether in his normative prescription of power or in his philosophical critique of it, Kalhaṇa lays out his vision of and for Kashmir—a totalizing overview of a long stretch of its history that becomes the organizing principle for his discourse on it. In emplotting Kashmir's past thus, he narrativizes it, and it is in narrativizing it that he historicizes it, by lending shape and meaning to a vast swath of time and the innumerable historical figures and events entailed by it. Subscribing to a value-laden epistemology that was intertextually derived, for Kalhaṇa writing history did not exhaust truth; moralizing reality was more the goal. Hence the didactic concerns of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* framed the dynastic narrative of Kashmir within the larger project of creating ethical monarchy and governance, evaluating every actor and episode on a politico-moral barometer for qualities such as justice, loyalty, high-mindedness, temperance, liberality, and concern for people's welfare. Over and above these, it sought to unveil the transcendent end of human life—the supreme ethic, detachment—not as a goal in itself but as a wider insight into the nature of change over time and as a means of putting in perspective the ultimate reality of all human action. "Seeing" the past, as only a *kavi* could, involved seeing and showing all these truths.

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47. This passage is indebted to White's statements on historical narrative, which are readily adaptable to *kāvya,* as I have tried to argue. See White, *The Content of the Form*, 177, and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 91.