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## Understanding History through Geographical Context: An Overview of Historical Texts

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### **Abstract:**

*In tracing the forgotten past to give a living history to the present, topography and landscape plays an equally important role like polity and society. As such, it has been an endeavour to understand the geographical features such as the mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans and the names of places embodied in the historical texts like Kālidāsa's Raghuvamśa, Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī and the Cheitharol Kumbaba. What is striking about the geographical features represented in these texts is the varied meanings and abstracts that they carry. While at one level, they symbolize human sentiments and temperaments; at another level, they depict the scene of the prevailing political affairs of the realm. Focussing on this, this paper seeks to examine the significance of geography in understanding the history of three different regions of the Indian subcontinent.*

**Key words:** Raghuvamśa, Rājatarāṅgiṇī, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, Oceans, Places Kings/Rulers

### **1. Introduction**

As much as the importance of history can be revealed from the prevailing condition of the society, polity or economy, the role of geography cannot be overlooked. Therefore, understanding the past through the geographical features described in the historical text has been an experience of drawing how the events and incidents of the past can be recounted from the topography of a given region. It is within this context that I will draw my attention to some of the very well known historical texts of India and examine the ways in which geographical elements are represented at the backdrop of narrating the account of the rulers/kings to understand the history of a particular region.

To briefly state about the importance of the texts, all the three texts are historical chronicles which throws significant light about the ancient rulers of the different parts of India. As such, Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, which narrates the account of the kings of Raghu's lineage deals with the central area of the Gaṅgā valley and is believed to have been composed around 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* on the other hand sheds light on the kings of Kashmir from the earliest time to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD giving us insight about the condition of a region of the northwestern part of the sub-continent. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* recounts the heroic feats of the early Meitei kings of Manipur (located in the north-east part of India) making us understand the formation of the Meitei confederacy by assimilating the different clan into the Meitei entity and its distinct cultural aspects from the 33AD till the early 18<sup>th</sup> century AD.

In spite of the fact that the texts recounts majorly about the kings, what is interesting is the significant role that geography and landscape played in understanding the rulers. To begin with, the geographical features described in the texts had carried certain meanings. As a result, the literal description of the mountains, rivers, oceans and other water bodies extends beyond its concrete form and meaning. In the *Raghuvamśa*, they represent the might and power of the kings as well as symbolise one's emotions and temperaments. For instance, when prince Aja fought with the warrior princes after princess Indumatī's Svayamvara, his indomitable spirit in facing the rebel princes is described as resembling the swollen waves of Śona river.<sup>1</sup> However, when king Dilīpa is experiencing the sorrow and sadness for not having a child, the mountain metaphor is used to describe the king's temperament. It is said that Dilīpa could not find happiness in wealth and fame in not having a progeny is compared to the bright and the dark face of the mountain Lokāloka. In the same way, the ocean and the lakes also represent the grandeur of the kings of the Raghus. The vastness and depth of the ocean apart from representing the power and the glory of the kings is also described as symbolizing their sentiments. King Daśaratha yearning for an issue is compared to the uncharted ocean.<sup>2</sup>

However, such symbolical representation of the geographical features seems to be absent in terms of describing the places. More often than not, the names of the places have neither allegorical remarks nor abstract meaning. They are described in their actual form and meaning according to the waves of the narration to give a geographical as well as a historical meaning.<sup>3</sup> But they are specifically mentioned in terms of the territorial entity of the kings. As in the case of the *Raghuvamśa*, the importance of geography and landscape is depicted in two different ways by Kalhaṇa in his *Rājataranṅiṇī*. At one level, Kalhaṇa refers to it in its literal meaning, whereas on the other he uses it as an allegory either to describe the success or failing of the kings of Kashmir. To show that geographical location is also one of the important factors in safeguarding the kingdom of Kashmir, Kalhaṇa portrayed the heights of the mountain as an arm to protect the land from the enemies.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the mountains and hills are also represented to eulogize the quality of the king. As such, Kalhaṇa glorify the character of king Jayasimha as having an impressive and pleasing quality like the mountain Meru which is considered to be accessible only to the virtuous person.<sup>5</sup>

Despite such significant representation, at times we also see the limit of the geographical features in symbolising the greatness and quality of the kings. The relevant description about the oceans in describing Lalitāditya's conquest can be mentioned here as a point. It is said that the vastness of the ocean appears to Lalitāditya as a small stream as he moved to conquer from the southern region towards the western region.<sup>6</sup> This shows that the power and fame of Lalitāditya exceed that of the vastness of the oceans.

Moving a little away from such imagery representation of the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rajataranṅini*, the other topographical feature such as the hills, rivers, lakes and places rarely find its expression in metaphorical terms but linked to some cultural significance. As a result, the places that appeared in the text were often linked with certain heroic feats of the kings of Manipur. For instance, Nganglou<sup>7</sup> was named so after the place was coloured red with the blood of king Taothingmang who ruled around the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD in a duel with Funal Telheiba of the Angom clan.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the present Moirangkhom<sup>9</sup> in Manipur was named after an incident where the chopped heads of the chiefs of the Moirang clan were heaped up as a mound during king Ningthoukhomba's time around the late 14<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Given this, we see that the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅiṇī* largely used metaphors either to represent human sentiments or to symbolize one's fame and power, but there is a complete absence of such description in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. The geographical features in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* are represented in its literal forms embodying certain cultural significance but they are not used as imagery in any of the instances.

Through the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅiṇī* one gets to know that the water bodies such as the rivers and the oceans symbolizes human sentiments and temperaments. However, it is interesting to note here that even within these imagery descriptions, the references are largely noticed in terms of describing the oceans. In the *Raghuvamśa*, Kālidāsa compared the oceans with the characteristics of the kings like Dilīpa, Aja, and Daśaratha etc. The significance of the ocean is emphasized in the *Raghuvamśa* when Kālidāsa used it to depict the character and intellect of the kings. The equal attitude of kindness and cruelty shown by king Dilīpa to his subjects embodied the meaning of the ocean giving shelter to both the gems and monsters of the sea whereas king Niṣāda is mentioned as having a profound mind which is as deep as the ocean.<sup>10</sup>

In the same way, Kalhaṇa portrayed the oceans in the form of 'passion' in relating to the incident of king Nara who fell in love with the wife of a brāhmaṇa. When king Nara saw the beautiful hand mark of Candralekhā, the wife of a Brāhmaṇa, his desire for Candralekhā which crossed the boundary of morality is described as resembling the overflowing waves of the sea when the moon rises.<sup>11</sup> Further, the *Rājataranṅiṇī* also mirrored the character of the kings through the references to oceans which mainly occurred in the case of king Jayasimha's personality. At one level Kalhaṇa described the ingenious mind of king Jayasimha as resembling the impervious ocean while at the other the nectar of the ocean is compared with his gratitude.

The rivers and lakes in the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅiṇī* also unfold other significant meanings suggesting an abstract idea. However, in terms of using it as a fictitious element, the references to rivers are relatively few as compared to the oceans. They are largely associated with sacredness and equated with female energy. Many of the rivers are described as pilgrim sites giving sanctity to the place. Unlike the metaphorical descriptions of the ocean which is expressed mostly in connection with the kings or ministers in both the texts, the rivers describing a character is limited not to men only as in the case of the oceans but also extends to women. In both the texts, the rivers symbolized both the feminine and masculine personalities. Of these, the treatment of women in the sense of the rivers appeared in connection with the description of the physical appearance of the queen or other women. In the *Raghuvamśa*, the Sarasvatī river in particular takes the form of queen Sudakṣiṇā comparing the stream of the Sarasvatī which flowed underneath the sand with the baby embedded inside the womb of Sudakṣiṇā.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the *Rājataranṅiṇī*, the river Gangā symbolizes queen

Vākpuṣṭā for her sanity, but the rise and fall of the rivers are visualized by Kalhaṇa as the frail character of queen Diddā despite being born in a noble family.<sup>13</sup>

Contrasting the generally accepted notions of the feminine identity of the rivers, the *Raghuvamśa* also associates them with the personality of men. Kālidāsa particularly draws the resemblance between the rhythmic flow of the rivers and the walking steps of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.<sup>14</sup> One such reference in the *Rājataranṅinī* was used by Kalhaṇa in describing the honest heart of king Jayasiṃha who is pure and spotless like the river Gaṅgā.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we see that Kālidāsa's and Kalhaṇa's attempt for using such a strategy in describing the water bodies was not to discern the characteristics of gender. Rather, it was done either to idealize their qualities or to capture the related instances narrated in the texts.

Even within this overall similar representation, differences emerged in references to water bodies. The *Rājataranṅinī* mentions references in four out of the eight taraṅgas or sections with a major description found occurring in the VIII or the last taraṅga. Comparatively, the *Raghuvamśa* even though had a larger number of cantos than the *Rājataranṅinī*, seems to have fewer references. Of the nineteen cantos, the *Raghuvamśa* has references in cantos I, II, III, VII, VIII, X, XVII and XVIII<sup>16</sup> which show an unequal frequency with respect to the number of its cantos. Regarding this, the *Rājataranṅinī* seem to maintain an equal distribution as half of its taraṅgas have references describing the rulers along figurative lines.

One could also notice a similar pattern in the case of depicting mountains. Mountains signify the ability and power of the kings as well as the territories of the neighbouring and far off rulers in both the texts.

But what is striking here is that even if the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī* contain a similar narration in depicting the mountains, the strategy which these two texts employed in allegorising them varies. While mountains symbolizing the might of kings are depicted in most part of the cantos in the *Raghuvamśa*, such references occurred only in the last taraṅga of the *Rājataranṅinī*. Yet, the other references to mountains in the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī* are described either in connection with divinity and wealth or marking the territorial space of the other rulers.

What lies within this fluctuating description of the mountains is the significance to link the three texts through their distinctive representation. It is through the description of the mountains in connection with gods or divinity that the distinctive geographical representation of the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* finds some parallel with the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī*. As in the case of the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī* which denotes the Himālaya or the Kailāsa as an abode of gods, the notions regarding the surrounding mountains of Manipur like Koubru, Thangching<sup>17</sup> as gods is found in the narration of the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Also, the concept of mountains indicating the territory of the neighbouring rulers occurred in all the three texts. To mention some of the instances, in the *Raghuvamśa* it is mentioned that Govardhana and Malaya mountains stand near the kingdoms of the kings of the Śūrasenas and the Pāṇḍus.<sup>18</sup> In the *Rājataranṅinī*, such instances are mentioned mostly with reference to the Lohara kingdom. Instead of referring to the Lohara as a 'Lohara territory',<sup>19</sup> it was identified by the surrounding hills and therefore referred as the Lohara hill. In the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, among the frequent references to hills indicating the principality of the nearby chiefs, the Langmaiching is one that is identified as the settlement area of the Senloi Langmai tribe.<sup>20</sup> To an extent, the regions outside the territories of the kings of Rāghus, Kashmir, and Manipur also figure as lands that had bilateral relationships. These were Vidarbha in the case of the kings of Rāghus, Prāgjyotiṣa (the present day Assam) for the kings of Kashmir and Assam and Myanmar for the kings of Manipur.

Except for the mountains, the representation of the other geographical features in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* moves far away from the description of the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī*. Thus, in contrast to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī* have portrayed the more 'human' side of the mighty kings in describing the geographical features. Nature becomes the carrier of the kings' feelings and temperaments in the *Raghuvamśa* and the *Rājataranṅinī* but nature was deified in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Nevertheless, the three texts are in some way or the other similar in terms of their literal description of the geographical features.

## 2. Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that through such geographical metaphors, the elements of land and water bodies significantly highlights the importance of past events represented at the backdrop of great kings and rulers. The height and might of the mountains, the flowing course of the rivers, the tranquillity of the lakes and the vastness of the oceans are used as metaphors in detail. On most occasions they are used as a metaphor to allegorize the qualities of the kings. As a result the geographical elements represented in the text changes its role in reference to specific presentations and vice versa. Thus, the transformation of geographical boundaries into abstract ideas of representing the prowess and achievements of the kings is seen in the narration of the texts. Rivers and lakes, hills and mountains, seas and oceans find expression in various shapes and forms. Therefore, representation of the topography in these texts

cannot be merely considered in its literal form. In the light of such representation, what suggests us is, as much as to polity and society, the importance of understanding histories lies very much within the given topography/geography.

### 3. References

1. G.R Nandargikar, The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, VII.36.
2. Ibid. X.3.
3. For instance, The Uttarakośalas, Ayodhyā and Sāketa are the same name of the kingdom of the Raghus which were used in different periods. In the same way, Mithilā represents the kingdom of Janaka, which is also known as Videha.
4. Ibid. I.31.
5. Ibid. VIII.2631, 3045.
6. Ibid. IV.157.
7. Saroj Nalini Arambam Parrart, The Court Chronicle of Manipur, The Cheitharon Kumpapa, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.23.
8. L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh. Cheitharol Kumbaba, Imphal: Manipur Sahitya Parishad, 2005, p.19.
9. G.R Nandargikar, The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, I.16, XVIII.4.
10. Ibid. I.253.
11. Ibid. III.9, VI.315.
12. M.A Stein, Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅginī vol-I, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, II.12.
13. G.R Nandargikar, The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, XI.8.
14. M.A Stein, Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅginī vol-I, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, VIII.2632.
15. The variation in the distribution of descriptions which is discussed here is only for the references that are used to describe either the character or sentiment of the kings, queens and other royalty in both the texts.
16. Bihari Nepam, The Cheitharol Kumbaba, The Royal Chronicle of Manipur, Guwahati: Spectrum, 2012, p.55.
17. G.R Nandargikar, The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, VI.176, 64.
18. M.A Stein, Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅginī vol-I, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, VII.703.
19. L. Ibungohal Singh and N Khelchandra Singh, Cheitharol Kumbaba. Imphal: Manipur Sahitya Parishad, 2005, p.5