

Society in Early Medieval Kashmir: A Study of Attire and Adornment

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Abstract:

The study aims to explore the social and cultural significance of attire and adornment in early medieval Kashmir. Attire and adornment were not just limited to aesthetics, but also reflected the cultural, social, and economic status of an individual. The study explores the material culture of both men and women during early medieval Kashmir, emphasising the differences in their dressing practices. The primary objective of the study is to investigate the role of attire and adornment in shaping the identity and social stratification of early medieval Kashmiri society with special reference to the Karkota period. Besides, it seeks to understand how clothing and ornamentation were used to denote gender, occupation, marital status, and religious affiliation. To achieve these objectives, the research draws on historical method, utilising primary and secondary sources like Rajatarangini, Nilmatapurana. The findings of the study suggest that attire and adornment played a significant role in shaping the identity and social structure of early medieval Kashmiri society. Clothing and ornaments served as markers of status and identity, and were also used to signal the wearer's religious and cultural affiliation.

Keywords: Kashmir, Material Culture, Attire, Adornment,

INTRODUCTION

Society in early medieval Kashmir was characterised by a complex mix of social, cultural, and religious influences. The

period witnessed the rise of various dynasties and empires that brought with them a diverse range of cultural practices. The society was stratified into various social classes, with dress and adornment playing a crucial role in marking social status and identity. The practice of dressing up was not only limited to the elite, but also extended to the common people, who used attire and adornment as a means of self-expression and social identification. Religion also played a significant role in shaping the attitudes and beliefs surrounding dress and adornment, with different faiths influencing sartorial practices in distinct ways. The society in early medieval Kashmir was rich in cultural, social, and religious influences, which were reflected in the material culture of dress and adornment.

The objectives of this study are to examine the material culture of dress and adornment in early medieval Kashmir, with special reference to Karkota period. The research seeks to identify the socio-cultural significance of dressing practices and to understand the role of attire and adornment in constructing identity and social status. The study also attempts to explore the gendered differences in dressing practices and evaluates the factors that influenced the evolution of sartorial practices during this period.

The study is significant in providing insights into the cultural and social dynamics of early medieval Kashmir, shedding light on the attitudes and beliefs surrounding attire and adornment, and how these practices shaped the social hierarchy of the period. By examining gendered differences in dressing practices, the study also provides a better understanding of the role of gender in early medieval Kashmiri society.

The methodology for the study involves a combination of historical, descriptive, and analytical research methodologies. Historical data from primary and secondary sources is collected and analysed to establish the cultural practices and identity of early medieval Kashmir society. Descriptive research involves the collection of data through observation, while analytical research involves the critical analysis of data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships between different variables. The study also includes an examination of artwork, sculptures, and other visual representations to provide a holistic understanding of sartorial practices during this period.

DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

Dress: Clothing is an essential aspect of human culture and can provide insight into the social, cultural and economic

dynamics of a society. The dress in early medieval Kashmir was an important marker of social status and identity, with different styles and materials being used to signify different levels of wealth and influence. The clothing of men and women during this period was characterised by an abundance of richly embroidered textiles and intricate designs, reflecting the skill and creativity of the Kashmiri craftsmen.

The Nilamata Purana records several terms for clothing such as *vastra*, *ambara*, *vasas*, *vasana*, and *samvita*.¹ Silk imported from China was referred to as *cinamuska*, while *Kambala* was the term for woollen blankets. The festival of snowfall is connected to the term *pravarna*, which also implies that the cloth provides protection against the cold, as mentioned in the Mahabharata.² The clothes were offered to deities such as Vishnu and Nila, and both men and women typically wore two garments, an upper and a lower one, in white or coloured fabric. New clothes were called *ahata*.³

The Kuttanimata Kavya provides detailed information about clothing in Kashmir, including the use of bed sheets.⁴ Dress and adornments were chosen according to the need of the time and climate, and were seen as a sign of refined taste.⁵ Different fabrics such as cotton, wool, China silk, and *patika* were used to make a variety of garments.⁶ Wealthy people wore clothes made from China silk and *patika*, enriched with golden work, while the poor often dressed in tattered clothes and used thick threads to join several pieces together.⁷ Their clothes were rough varieties of cotton textiles and were often stuffed with cotton.

According to Damodargupta, the brahmanical girdle (*mekhala*) was an important part of the dress of Brahmacharins, and it was replaced when damaged.⁸ Brahmanas of Kashmir wore both *mekhala* and *jenvi*. The former was worn around the waist, and the latter was worn over the left shoulder.⁹ The *katitra* or waistband was also an essential item of dress. Ascetics dressed in ochre-coloured garments and carried a staff.¹⁰

In early medieval Kashmir, women's dress varied depending on their social status and ethnicity. However, there were some common styles and elements that were present in most women's dress. It is evident that the traditional attire for women consisted of a two-piece outfit, comprising of an upper and lower garment, both unstitched. The lower garment was tied with a knot and is similar to the present-day dhoti, while

the upper garment was worn in the form of *uttariya* or a scarf.¹¹ According to Damodargupta, fashionable women preferred soft, clean, and perfumed clothes, especially Chinese silk, and enjoyed using coloured clothes dyed with saffron.¹² Kuttanimata Kavya mentions that *abhisarikas* wore black garments during the night to avoid detection, while elderly women preferred white clothes. Stitched garments were also fashionable, and Rajatarangini mentions two such items of clothing, *kancuka* and *varabana*. It also refers to a half-sleeved jacket resembling a modern choli and *palaka*, which ladies used to wear. These jackets, known as *kancukas*, extended to half the length of their arms.¹³ Kalhana notes that women in Kashmir wore short jackets or blouses with half sleeves and a long lower garment, possibly a sari, with the tail touching the ground.¹⁴ Alberuni describes a female dress called *kurtaka*, which was a short shirt with sleeves extending from shoulders to the middle of the body and had slashes on both sides.¹⁵ Rajatarangini also mentions two specific garments, *angaraksha* (upper) and *adharansuka* (lower), with the latter being synonymous with the modern dhoti, worn by all men. The flying scarves attached to the military dress may resemble *virapatta* or lapels of the dress mentioned by Kalhana.¹⁶

According to historical accounts, the attire of different classes of people in Kashmir during ancient times varied significantly. For instance Hunters and forest dwellers wore knickers, while servants and attendants wore dhotis and knickers, with a small cloth joined to the left half of the knickers falling between their legs. Businessmen wore *choga* (overcoats) and *kurta* (shirts) made of cotton, while the poor generally wore a linen cloth. According to Kshemendra, students from Bengal studying in Kashmir dressed in printed or embroidery silk and also made use of turbans.¹⁷ The turban of Kashmir was narrow, flat in shape, and made of white cloth.¹⁸ The common folk used the skins of black antelopes (*krasnajina*) and coarse woollen cloaks (*sthulakambala*), which were sometimes given as charity by the rich.¹⁹ In hilly regions and other cold places, people used blankets (*Kutha*)²⁰ and woollen cloaks (*pravara*). Rallaka and blankets were extensively used in the winter, but these were a luxury of only the rich.²¹

Ornaments: Ornaments played a significant role in the attire and adornment practices of early medieval Kashmir. The use of various types of ornaments, such as jewellery, was not only for adornment but also a means of expressing social status and identity. One of the popular forms of ornamentation in early medieval Kashmir was jewellery. Jewellery was worn by both

men and women and was often made from gold, silver, and precious stones. The use of jewellery was not limited to the upper-class section of society, as even the common masses wore jewellery made from less expensive materials, such as copper and brass. Ornaments held a significant place in the life of people in early medieval Kashmir. As per Nilamata Purana,²² women used to adorn themselves with various ornaments made of gold, silver, and precious stones. Necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and anklets were some of the commonly used ornaments. They also wore rings on their fingers, nose pins, and hairpins. The same sentiment is echoed by Alberuni,²³ who notes that the women of Kashmir were fond of ornaments and used to wear a lot of jewellery made of precious stones and metals.

Kalhana mentions that the men of Kashmir were also fond of ornaments. They used to wear ear studs and bracelets made of gold and precious stones. Moreover, they used to wear beaded necklaces and chains around their necks. The use of pearls in jewellery was also common among the people of Kashmir.²⁴ The people of early medieval Kashmir had a rich tradition of using ornaments made of precious metals and stones. These ornaments served as a symbol of wealth and status in the society.

According to Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, women had a deep affection for ornaments that lasted throughout their lives.²⁵ Among the various types of ornaments worn by these women, Kalhana specifically mentions anklets (*nupura*), necklaces (*hara*), wristlets (*kaiha*), armlets (*kanjura*), bracelets (*parihara*), and earrings (*kundala*).²⁶ Damodargupta also provides a plethora of references to necklaces worn by these women.²⁷ In fact, he takes pleasure in describing the different patterns of necklaces adorning the chests of women, including those with pierced pearls and those made up of one or more strands of pearls.²⁸ Damodargupta even refers to a necklace that was pierced from the inside, indicating the boring of pearls strung together.²⁹ The author also mentions the combination of *tarala* (central gem) with a pearl necklace.³⁰ Women in Kashmir wore a thread around their necks, which was joined together with various medicinal herbs and precious gems.³¹ Daily use of various types of ear adornments was also prevalent, including *kanakanadi*, which seems to be a palm-shaped small teardrop.³² In Kshemendra's works, ear ornaments are referred to as *tadi yuga* (a pair of *tadis*), which remained in vogue until the eleventh century CE.³³ Women in early medieval Kashmir also wore a special type of armlet

called *valaya kalapi*, which was made of gold and worn on the upper arm, with a peacock face and moon shape.³⁴ The use of ornaments by women in this period was not just a form of adornment but also a means of expressing their social status and identity. The different types of ornaments mentioned in various historical texts reflect the intricate and elaborate style of dressing prevalent in the society of the time. The use of precious gems and herbs in the thread worn around the neck also indicates the belief in the healing properties of such materials. The variety and types of necklaces mentioned in the texts, along with the intricate patterns and designs, suggest a level of craftsmanship and skill in jewellery-making. The use of armlets with unique designs, such as the peacock face and moon shape, further highlights the importance of symbolism in ornamentation. The use of ornaments played a significant role in the identity and cultural practices of women.

It is evident from historical texts that not only women but men also adorned themselves with various types of ornaments. *Kuttanimata Kavya*, written by Damodargupta, refers to *Chintanmani*, a servant of the king who was the son of an officer, and mentions that he wore a variety of ornaments, such as earrings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, and finger rings.³⁵ *Chintanmani* is also described as wearing two types of earrings, *dalavitaka* and *sisapatraka*.³⁶ The same source also mentions an attendant wearing a coarse and cheap *kacavartakamata* around his neck and holding a conch shell in his hands.³⁷ Similarly, *Rajatarangini* mentions that men in Kashmir used various ornaments like finger rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets.³⁸ *Alberuni* also mentions that men in Kashmir wore articles of female dress, used cosmetics, and wore earrings on their ears and toes.³⁹ Both males and females wore bracelets on their wrists, which were referred to as *valaya* and *kataka*.⁴⁰ The number of bracelets worn on the wrist was not fixed. Moreover, in the eleventh century CE, King Harsha introduced various types of jewellery, including *kataka* leafed tiaras (*svarnakatakapatranka*), pendants on the forehead (*tilaka*), and golden strings at the end of locks (*kisantavaddha hemopavilaka*).⁴¹ The use of ornaments by men was not only for adornment but also a means of expressing their social status and identity.

The use of ornaments by men was not limited to the royal court or the wealthy class. Rather, it was a common practice among men of different social classes. The variety of ornaments mentioned in the historical texts suggests that there was a thriving jewellery industry in Kashmir during that

period. The use of earrings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, and finger rings by men also indicates that ornamentation was not limited to any specific body part. The description of the attendant wearing a coarse and cheap necklace around his neck, along with the conch shell in his hands, suggests that ornaments were not just a means of displaying wealth but also a part of everyday attire for men. The introduction of new types of jewellery by King Harsha in the eleventh century CE further highlights the evolution of ornamentation practices in Kashmir over time. The use of ornaments by men played a significant role in the cultural practices and identity of the society.

HAIR STYLE

Hairstyles were an important aspect of cultural life in early medieval Kashmir. Historical texts mention various types of hairstyles worn by both men and women in the society. Women's hairstyles, in particular, were a significant part of their identity and social status. Both men and women paid great attention to arranging and decorating their hair in various ways. The upper-class section of the society, in particular, kept long hair that was tied with ribbons.⁴² At times, the hair was adorned with a bunch of cord fastened at one end. The common masses, on the other hand, used sirabasta (headcover) to cover their heads, while others kept long hair with a long piece of cloth covering three-fourths of the head.⁴³ Some even left one-fourth portion of the head bare and applied a saffron paste close to the ears.⁴⁴ In rural areas, both men and women arranged and decorated their hair with garlands of flowers, highlighting the importance of nature in everyday attire.⁴⁵ However, women devoted much more attention to hairdressing than men. They kept long hair styled in various ways. Damodargupta mentions three types of hairstyles for women.⁴⁶ One of the popular hairstyles among women in Kashmir during that time was the "veni" hairstyle. It was a twisted form of braid of hair that was described as long and uneven, dangling with the movement of the person.⁴⁷ This hairstyle was often adorned with various types of ornaments, such as flowers and hairpins. Another popular hairstyle for women was the "dhammilla" hairstyle. It involved tying the hair into a single knot over the head and enhancing it with a garland of flowers. Bilhana's Caura-Pancasika mentions that this hairstyle remained in vogue even in later times.⁴⁸ The "alak-avali" hairstyle was another popular hairstyle among women in early medieval Kashmir. It involved arranging the

hair in rows of spiral locks on the forehead.⁴⁹ This hairstyle was often adorned with various types of ornaments, such as flowers and pearls. The hairstyles worn by women were an important aspect of their attire and adornment practices. These hairstyles reflected the cultural practices and identity of the society and were often adorned with various types of ornaments, illustrating the importance of ornamentation in the society.

The importance of hair was not limited to the hairstyles alone. The colour, texture, and fragrance of the hair were also considered important aspects of beauty and adornment. Damodargupta, in his writings, compared the black hair of a woman to a swarm of bees and their curly locks to smoke, emphasising the importance of hair in the society.⁵⁰ The locks of hair were often knotted with a spray of flowers after having been scented by the smoke rising from the centre, adding to the beauty and fragrance of the hair. Similarly, Kalhana also speaks of the locks of hair being bound with flowers, emphasising the importance of nature in everyday attire.⁵¹ Kalhana, while referring to the musical concert at the court of Harsha, states that the beautiful white headdress of nobles and princes brought glamour to the party, indicating the significance of headwear in the society.⁵² Combs and mirrors played a crucial role in dressing of hair. The comb was an integral part of hairdressing and was used to style hair in different ways. The mirror was equally important, allowing people to see themselves and ensure that their hair and makeup were in place. The importance of hair reflects the cultural practices and identity of the society. The colour, texture, and fragrance of the hair, along with the use of flowers, headwear, combs, and mirrors, played a significant role in the attire and adornment practices of the society, signifying the importance of beauty and ornamentation in everyday life.

COSMETICS

In early medieval Kashmir, a beautiful body, good health, bright face, and proper limbs were considered as decorations in themselves, yet the use of ornaments and decoration was also important as it enhanced beauty. The Nilamata Purana, often advocates the use of ornaments for decorating the body, illustrating the importance of ornamentation in the society.⁵³ The use of garlands and perfumes was also considered important for the deities as well as for worshippers, and devotees were supposed to beautify themselves with

ornaments, cosmetics, and other things at the time of worship, such as different types of scents, perfumes, unguents, flowers, and garlands.⁵⁴ Various methods were prevalent for beautifying the body, such as rubbing the feet with emollient unguents (udvartana), anointing it with unguents (utsidas), and applying the sandal paste after bathing.⁵⁵ Many types of unguents were made from sandal, saffron, and musk.⁵⁶ Kumkuma and lodhra were used for the complexion, and alakata and red resin of trees were used for dyeing the lips, nails, and the soles of feet. The paste prepared from kesara was also applied to the body.⁵⁷ The people also used lac dye for reddening the feet and lips. The application of sindura or vermilion on the parting of the hair was a significant aspect of attire and adornment for married women, regardless of their status. This practice differentiated them from virgins and widows, who did not apply sindura or vermilion.⁵⁸ The use of ornaments, cosmetics, and other decoration methods reflects the cultural practices and identity of the society. The use of various types of scents, perfumes, unguents, flowers, and garlands, along with the practice of applying sindura or vermilion by married women, shows the importance of beauty and ornamentation in everyday life.

FOOTWEAR

Footwear was an important aspect of attire and adornment for both men and women. The use of leather shoes and wooden sandals has been mentioned in contemporary literature, reflecting the diversity in footwear choices. The higher sections of society were known to wear leather shoes, which were sometimes embroidered with silk, emphasising the importance of ornamentation in the society.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the shoes of poorer classes were made of grass, emphasising the economic disparity in the society.⁶⁰ Kshemendra, refers to a particular type of shoe known as the “peacock shoe” (mayuropanat), which was very popular during that time.⁶¹ The use of shoes to cover their feet was not limited to Kashmir alone. Alberuni, who visited India in the early medieval period, also tells us about the use of shoes by Indians to cover their feet, illustrating the widespread use of footwear in the society.⁶² The use of footwear in early Kashmir reflects the cultural practices and identity of the society. The diversity in footwear choices, from leather shoes to grass shoes, highlights the economic and social disparities in the society. The use of ornamentation and embellishments in footwear, such as

embroidery with silk, reflects the importance of ornamentation in everyday attire.

CONCLUSION

The attire and adornment practices in early medieval Kashmir played a significant role in the cultural practices and identity of the society. The use of different types of attire, ornaments, hairstyles, cosmetics, and footwear by both men and women in Kashmir suggests a thriving fashion industry and reflects the intricate and elaborate style of dressing prevalent in the society of the time. The use of ornaments was not just a form of adornment but also a means of expressing social status and identity. The study has explored the different types of attire, ornaments, hairstyles, cosmetics, and footwear used by men and women in early medieval Kashmir and the cultural significance of these practices. The study explored the evolution of ornamentation practices in Kashmir over time and how they played a crucial role in shaping the cultural practices and identity of the society. The study of attire and adornment practices in early medieval Kashmir provides valuable insights into the cultural practices and identity of the society and sheds light on the rich history of the region.

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