



# ECHOES FROM SHARADA DESH: RECLAIMING THE HINDU INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OF KASHMIR

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## ABSTRACT

*The Valley of Kashmir, earlier known as Sharada Desh, has been a mainstay of Hindu spiritual and intellectual traditions throughout history. This paper intends to look at the profound Hindu legacy of Kashmir from a few different angles, either too often neglected or too often glanced over in contemporary times, to underscore the historical importance of those quite sacred spaces in Kashmir, like the Sharada Peeth. Sharada Peeth once served as a leading center of Sanskrit learning. Its very presence served as a beacon to attract philosophers and grammarians from across the subcontinent to ancient Kashmir. Even today, its sunlight lingers on our civilization. The same is true of Kashmir Shaivism, particularly the Trika philosophy of thinkers like Abhinavagupta, whose presence still serves to draw otherwise diffracted strands of Indian intellectual life together. The significance of temples like the Martand Sun Temple and the Kheer Bhawani shrine in Kashmir as embodiments of the region's sacred geography is explored in further detail in the research. The paper studies the instabilities introduced by colonial and postcolonial occurrences, specifically the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, and examines the cultural roots of this largely unseen event. This study nurtures a more nuanced understanding of the complex history of Kashmir. It insists that a postcolonial theoretical perspective, merged with the intellectual frameworks of the place-based indigenous knowledge systems of the region, is vital for knowing and upholding the cultural heritage of Kashmir. The conclusion reviews revival initiatives directly tied to these heritage protection efforts.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kashmir, Hindu heritage, Sharada Peeth, Kashmir Shaivism, Abhinavagupta, sacred geography, cultural memory, postcolonial theory, indigenous epistemology, temple heritage.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Kashmir Valley, located in the center of the Himalayas, has always been both mythologically and historically recognized as Sharada Desh, the realm of the goddess of knowledge, Sharada. It is located at the unique and so far singular intersection of the sacred and the intellectual, producing some of the most philosophical and spiritual traditions that have persisted in India. However, this rich heritage and the legacy of the Shaivas of Kashmir have been, unfortunately, shadowed by political, religious, and cultural upheavals that have gone on over the last forty or so years. Using postcolonial and indigenous frameworks, this paper holds Kashmir as not just a geopolitical hotspot but as a significant civilizational landscape that was once central to the Indian Knowledge System and is now ignored in mainstream historical accounts of the region. The author pushes for a more inclusive and memory-focused approach to cultural heritage that acknowledges all sorts of losses, thematically central to the paper, and looks toward the kinds of revivals that are going on across a culturally significant Kashmir today.

## SHARADA PEETH: THE FORGOTTEN TEMPLE OF KNOWLEDGE

Sharada Peeth, located near present-day Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, ranked among the most revered temples and educational institutions in ancient India. It was

devoted to the goddess Sharada, who is synonymous with Saraswati, and it functioned as both a destination for pilgrimage and a university that attracted students and learned men throughout all of India. It is stated:

The Sharda Temple, located in the picturesque Neelum Valley, is a significant historical and cultural site. Positioned on the left bank of the Neelum River, at the meeting point of Madhumati and Neelum's ancient rivers, the temple is highly revered for its spiritual importance. (Khwaja)

Documents and writings from the medieval period, including Kalhana's Rajatarangini and numerous inscriptions, show that Sharada Peeth was operational by at least the 6th century CE. The specific curriculum is lost to time, but most conjecture that it upheld the sort of studies that other ancient universities did—Vedic texts, Paninian grammar, and Nyaya logic seem to have been predominantly featured in its hallways. Sharada's location near the crossroads of trade and pilgrimage also made it prime real estate for the intellectual elite that other ancient universities, such as Nalanda or Takshashila, seemed to be serving.

A series of invasions started with the Turkic attacks and intensified during the period of colonial rule, which took us into the protracted phase of modernity, which led to the deterioration



of this otherwise very important sacred geography. Today, Sharada Peeth exists as a ruin that is beyond the Line of Control. The geographical terrain in Kashmir is where the physical disorder of the shared civilizational heritage that we as a nation ought to possess manifests itself most starkly. It is a matter of concern:

The temple's decline not only signifies the loss of a significant historical site but also impacts the collective memory and cultural identity of the region. Urgent action is needed to protect and preserve this invaluable heritage for future generations. (Khwaja)

### KASHMIR SHAIVISM: PHILOSOPHICAL BRILLIANCE FROM THE HIMALAYAS

Among the most profound contributions of Kashmir to Hindu thought is Kashmir Shaivism, also known as Trika Shaivism:

Kashmir Shaivism derives its teachings from the sixty-four monistic Tantras, known as the Bhairava Tantras, the essence of which is called 'Trika Shaivism'. The word trika means "the threefold science of man and his world." In the idea of trika, there are three energies:

*parā* (supreme), *parāparā* (medium), and *aparā* (lowest).

These three primary energies represent the threefold activities of the world. In the thought of Trika, therefore, it is admitted that this whole universe and every action in it, whether spiritual, physical, or worldly, is existing in these three energies. (*Kashmir Shaivism*)

"Trika (Non-dual Shaivism of Kashmir) was born in Kashmir (IX A.D), a northern province of India" (Pradīpaka). This non-dualist philosophical tradition, originating between the 8th and 12th centuries, provides a perspective of metaphysics that stands on par with the complex teachings of Advaita Vedanta, yet also tends toward a more embodied and experiential spirituality.

The Shiva Sutras, which originate from what was disclosed to Vasugupta, form the foundation of Kashmir Shaivism. These Sutras were later organized into a coherent whole by scholars such as Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja. Kashmir Shaivism is rooted in the perspective that Parama Shiva is the ultimate, all-encompassing consciousness. Compared to classical Advaita, which emphasizes a no-saying (negation) leading to renunciation, the attitude fostered by Kashmir Shaivism is that the world is a divine and real expression of consciousness. Thus, the path to liberation (moksha) is not through withdrawal but is found in the awakening of one's inner divinity, which one accomplishes through practices such as spanda (vibrational awareness), pratyabhijna (recognition), and kula rituals.

Abhinavagupta (roughly 950–1020 CE), recognized as one of the most remarkable polymaths in India, shone as a philosopher, a musician, a yogi, and, not least, an aesthetician. His main work, the *Tantraloka*, ties together metaphysics, ritual, and soteriology in a neat package:

This comprehensive text is a key source of knowledge on the philosophy, rituals, and practices of Kashmir Shaivism, a

tradition of non-dualistic Tantric Shaivism. The *Tantrāloka*, meaning "Light on the Tantras," serves as an encyclopedic exposition of Tantric doctrines, integrating various aspects of the tradition into a cohesive and profound philosophical system. It was written in around the 10th century; however, it gained popularity again after the 19th century... At the core of the *Tantrāloka* is the philosophy of non-dualism. Abhinavagupta teaches that the individual self and the ultimate reality (Shiva) are fundamentally one. The apparent duality of the world is an illusion created by limited perception. ("Shri Tantraloka")

His ideas on "rasa" and aesthetic experience are central to Indian poetics and make Kashmir Shaivism a cultural as well as a spiritual phenomenon:

In *Abhinavabharati*, Abhinavagupta explains the essence of the Rasa theory of Bharata in addition to the theory of *Abhivyakti* propounded in Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*... Abhinavagupta extends the eight Rasas by adding the concept of the Santa Rasa, which he regards as the essence of all Rasas. It is this 9th Rasa which according to Abhinavagupta lets the Rasika attain the aesthetic detachment and savour the essences of all other Rasas and therefore the true aesthetic delight. The introduction of 9th Rasa integrates the concepts of Bharata's *Rasasutra* and Patanjali's Yoga theory – the detachment necessary to introspect inwards into the inherent state of freedom and bliss (aesthetic consciousness). (Mukhopadhyay)

Shaivism is a cultural as well as a spiritual phenomenon. Kashmir Shaivism possesses a wealth of knowledge but has been neglected by both colonial Indology and contemporary Indian academia until the last few years. This tradition must be revived to help reestablish a pluralistic, regionally informed perspective on Indian philosophy.

### SACRED GEOGRAPHY: TEMPLES, PILGRIMAGE, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

The sacred sites that symbolize Kashmir's rich Hindu heritage dot its spiritual landscape. From the icy cave of Amarnath to the vestiges of the Martand Sun Temple, these locations testify to a topography made not just of ancient rocks and minerals but also of the faith, myth, and cosmological belief that they—and the people who have inhabited them—hold sacred.

The Martand Sun Temple, constructed by King Lalitaditya in the 8th century CE, remains a stunning example of temple architecture in Kashmir. The temple incorporates features from Gandhara, Gupta, and local styles, representing a kind of cosmic order and the authority of royalty. Its destruction, ordered by Sultan Sikandar in the 15th century, initiated one of the most significant early assaults on Hindu heritage in Kashmir. About its destruction:

Indian plains had already been subjugated by Islam by the late 12th century, and Kashmir could not be left far behind. A particularly fanatical Sufi "saint," Sayyid



Muhammad Hamadani, arrived from central Asia and became the mentor of Sultan Sikandar. The Sufi was angry at the prevalent Hindu culture in Kashmir and started influencing the Sultan for implementing Sharia. Soon, the Sultan was on an “Islamification” mission, and his rule saw the unprecedented persecution of Hindus and the destruction of temples. (Agarwal)

Amarnath, the cave temple connected with Shiva's celestial performance and the revelation of eternal life, remains a prime site for pilgrimages. Similarly, the Kheer Bhawani temple, dedicated to Ragnya Devi and beloved by the Kashmiri Pandit community, provides a window into the deep emotional and spiritual devotion of that community to the region.

These valued places go beyond sheer historical avowals and stand as potent icons of cultural memory. The yearly pilgrimages to Amarnath and the revival of the Kheer Bhawani pilgrimage, undertaken by today's displaced community, are evidence of how exiled groups, along with spiritual organizations, work tirelessly to reaffirm their ancient ties to the Valley.

### COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL DISRUPTIONS

To grasp why Kashmir's Hindu legacy is fading, we must look at the last thousand years of social and political upheaval. Starting with the 14th-century Islamization under the Shah Mir dynasty, and then through the Afghan and Mughal conquests, Kashmir has seen one overwhelming power after another, each leaving behind a ruined mix of temples, texts, and authority.

The gap between Kashmir and the Indian intellectual core widened during the British colonial era, which favored the depiction of Kashmir as a princely state—and a geopolitical battleground—to be resolved by diplomacy and the plotting of great-power strategies, rather than as a center of actual cultural revival. The rulers of Dogra often attached more significance to allegiance with the empire than to the conservation of heritage.

The most disastrous disturbance took place in 1990, when rising militancy and increasing violence led to the exodus of more than 300,000 Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley. This migration not only tore apart a community but also shattered centuries of rituals, daily religious practices, temple worship, and the oral traditions that had long defined the identity of Kashmiri Pandits:

The collective memory is essential in shaping identity and ensuring continuity for communities, particularly when they find themselves away from their ancestral homeland. Cultural memory helped Kashmiri Pandits during their exile, helping them maintain their shared experiences, cultural traditions, and emotional connections to their homeland, despite being physically separated. (Joshi and Dave 4)

Many temples were destroyed, encroached upon, or physically abandoned without custodians watching over them. The community suffered a psychological blow from this loss, the impact of which we are still feeling today. Community memory

often persists solely through the mediums of narratives told by the diaspora, documentary films, or literary fiction.

### CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL AND THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE

The Hindu heritage of Kashmir is being reclaimed and safeguarded. This revival has many aspects:

1. Cultural and religious pilgrimages have returned, notably to Kheer Bhawani and Amarnath, with security conditions that are reminiscent of the post-9/11 era—but which, in the viewing of many, are far more favorable than a total pilgrimage ban. And, despite the sometimes-draconian security conditions, not only has the Kheer Bhawani and Amarnath pilgrimage resumed, but it also has resumed under conditions that permit tolerable conditions of human rights.
2. The academic study of Kashmir Shaivism has intensified, resulting in fresh translations and interpretations of key texts like the Tantraloka, Shiva Sutras, and Spanda Karikas.
3. Initiatives to digitally store and record have been launched to document temples lost to time, oral traditions, and rare manuscripts that once thrived in this area.
4. Including calls for pilgrimages to Sharada Peeth to be permitted again, political recognition has been an essential part of public discourse.

Still, some critics see these moves as politically motivated and as stirring up communal divisions. Though these concerns are challenging to address and are easy to dismiss, that should not stop us from naming the concerns and emphasizing, often, where necessary, that restoration of heritage and reclamation of historical justice is a legitimate endeavor. Religious restoration should not be framed as a politically or nationally motivated initiative but as an essential civilizational healing process that restores respect for the shared cultural and historical significance of places of worship where the make-shift has replaced what was once proper.

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PLURALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Kashmir's Hindu heritage is not just a static remnant of history; rather, it is a vivid, albeit choked, continuance of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural Pink Tank traditions. From the academic performances at Sharada Peeth to the profound wisdom of Abhinavagupta; from the parts of Martand left behind to the rent songs of displaced Pandits, this continuum deserves acknowledgment and reintegration into the larger narrative of India's history.

This paper argues that a thorough acknowledgment of Kashmir's past is essential for any serious deliberation about its future to take place. It is far too easy to revert to political slogans on either side of the line of control. Far easier than doing the archival work, the philosophical thinking, and the cultural empathy necessary to



reach a deeper and more lasting understanding of the people, the place, and their intertwined fortunes.

This research shifts the conversation about Kashmir away from the dominant narrative that pictures the region as a problematic flashpoint. Drawing on indigenous knowledge systems and postcolonial analysis, it finds Kashmir to be not just a rich storehouse of civilizational wisdom, but also a place where multiple, often-neglected voices can and should be heard. Remembrance of Kashmir's Hindu past—reasserted here as an act of not just inclusion, but also of necessary course correction—may well be key to peace in the place called Kashmir.

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