

Śarda Temple and the Stone Temples of Kashmir in Perspective: A Review Note

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Abstract

The current paper is aimed at reviewing the research on a partially ruined historic building in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. For being in a remote area, deep in the Neelum Valley (Kīśan Gāṅga of Nīlamata Purāṇa), the site is not well known among the scholars. A few studies have been made on the worth of the building. This deductive model is posed to explore the research potential of the building, the history of the region also placing it on the table for comparisons within the epistemology of art historians.

Keywords: Kashmir, Hindu Temple, Stone Temples, Śarda Temple, Śarda Devi

Introduction

The Hinduism was the main religion of Kashmir since the known period. Originally no doubt it was the *Ophite* or snake worship (Wilson 1825: 84), but this is a part of the Hindu ritual, and the *Nagas* are included in the orthodox pantheon: the adoration of Śiva was soon engrafted upon this, even if the two rites were not originally identified. Kashmir has been the part of Kuṣanas' Empire in the second cent. C.E. However, the country has been under Buddhism's dominance as early as in the Aśokan period as it is mentioned even in the *Singhalese* chronicle, *Mahāvamsa* (Foucher 1914:119). It is evident also from their coinage (Rapson 1966: 1-55) and literature. The famous Chinese monk, Xuanzang, who travelled all of India, enlightens us with a deliberate status of Buddhism in 7th century Kashmir. C.E (Beal 1884: 148-162; Watter 1904: 225-257). He explains that, in the beginning of the seventh century, Kashmir had established a predominant influence up to Taxila (Wilson 1860: 117). The real story began far earlier, when the Kuṣana king Kaniśka held fourth Buddhist council to codify the *Saravāstivādan* sect (Basham 1959: 266) in Kashmir. It ultimately connects Kashmir with Gandhāra and also provided a logical opportunity to interact with Buddhist

Gandhāra. Therefore under Kuṣāna rule, Kashmir got its Buddhist traditions which are directly linked to Gandhāra (Kak R.C. 1933: 50), particularly in material culture. The influence further extended till *Mihiragula* (d 542 CE), a Huṇa king who took control of Gandhāra and the valley of Kashmir (Caroe 1965: 84) and Buddhism started declining. In this new Brahmanical phase in Kashmir's history, from where the roots of Kashmiri School of Temple Architecture can be originated.

Historic References

British explorer has been in Kashmir since the early 1800s. Mahārāja Raṅjīt Singh conquered Kashmir in July 1819. On the consequences of the Anglo-Sikh War, Kashmir was ceded over to Mahārāja Gulāb Singh in a separate treaty on March 1946 (Grewal 2008: 124). During Sikh reign, it was easy for British to visit and study the area. They left us with their travelogues like Moorcroft & Trebec (1841) and Vigne (1842). Many explorer, archaeologists, philologists, zoologists, linguists, botanists visited and published their notes on the very travel in the 19th century, for example Schonberg (1853), Torrens (1862), Younghusband (1909) and Bellew (1875).

It was initially the effort of Professor Bühler (1877) who gathered a huge bulk of Sanskrit Manuscripts from Kashmir. His translations of the same, helped to incorporate sacred history of the area as well as culture, art and traditions.

Stein (1900) elaborated all these studies in his monumental work "*Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅginī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*". Here, he not only translated the famous Kashmiri chronicle *Rājatarāṅginī* of Pandita Kalhaṇa, but also explained it into a scholarly fashion. He tried to locate every place mentioned in it and included special notes on archaeological remains found there. He included Sanskrit writings in his descriptions of architecture, art, philosophy, religion, etc.

Studies on the Architecture

The first ever standardised architectural study was made by Cunningham (1848) by focusing the temples of Kashmir. He documented almost every aspect of the major stone temples of Kashmir. Same study was followed by Cowie (1867) as the continuation of

his predecessor.

Lawrence (1895) discussed the constructional procedures of the Kashmiri temples. He is very much obsessed by the columns of this style and even calls it as *Araiostlye* after *ΑΡΑΙΟΣΤΥΛΕ* of Herodotus (Lawrence 1895: 164).

Stein (1900) also gave measurements and other features of the ancient buildings included in *Rājatarāṅginī*. A Kashmiri Pandita, Ram Chandra Kak (1933) documented most of the major monuments of Kashmir. Percy Brown (1959) outlines the architectural traditions of early Kashmir in a systematic way. One important work in this regard is that of the Krishna Deva (1988). Debala Mitra (1993) focuses on the major temples of Kashmir. i.e. *Pandrethan, Avantipur and Martand*.

Śārda: A Goddess, A Place and A Script

The name *Śārda* (*Shārda*) (Ahmad & Bano 1984:197) or more precisely *Śāradā* of Sanskrit is quite familiar in the treatises on the history of Kashmir. *Śāradā* is a famous Hindu goddess particularly venerated in Kashmir (Ray 1969: 184) as well as a script (Dani 1986:113). Abdur Rahman (1979: 237) originates the word ‘*Śāradā*’ as an abbreviation of *Śāradākṣarāṇī*, meaning ‘letters sacred to *Śāradā* or Sarasvatī’- the Hindu goddess of learning. Stein, referring to *Māhātmya*, describes other incarnations of the same deity as *Nārada*, *Vāgdevī* or *Sarasvatī*. He quotes the mentions from *Māhātmyas* about *Śakti* (Stein 1900: 281), which is considered as energy of a god personified in the female form (Basham 1959; Shah 2013: 337-351).

Kalhaṇa refers to her as seen in the form of a swan in a lake (Stein 1900: 8) while Basham (1959) say that *Sarasvatī*, consort of *Brahmā*, is the patron of music, art and letters. Apart from Rig Vedic River, *Sarasvatī* in later Vedas is a hypostatic deity. She is often presented as fair lady holding lute and a book and attended by a swan. She is also, traditionally proven, inventor of Sanskrit language, *Devanāgrī* Script (Basham 1959: 318-19) and in due course worshiped by students, writers and musicians (Kak S. 2014:18).

The *Śāradā* script has been prevailing for number of Sanskrit works of ancient India. It

was originally the Mathuran Style of Brahmi, which influenced the northern states under Guptas and lead to *Śāradā* in Chamba and Kashmir (Dani 1986:113). Abdur Rahman (1979: 238) argues for two possible origins of the name for *Śāradā* Script. One, on the account of many terms in some ancient works, associating *Śāradā* to Kashmir, it seems that it was not the name of script. However, it was given to primary script of Kashmir for being in the peak time for the veneration of the goddess of learning and words. Secondly, he, referring to Elmslie's view that it was taken to Kashmir by Shāradah Nandan, poses that it was possibly brought from Udabhāṇḍapura (Hund). He also gave the name *Śāradā prima facie*, giving the impression that it was developed in Kashmir (Rahman 1979: 238). It is to be investigated whether the goddess and the script were originated from Kashmir or not, yet Kashmiri *Panditas* have a huge respect and reverence for them than other Hindus.

Nīlamata Purāna and Māhātmya

Earliest reference of this site can be found in the *Purānas*. The famous Nīlamata Purāna of Kashmir is an ancient Sanskrit work dealing with the *Tīrathas* (sacred places, *peeth* is also an alternative Hindi word), rituals and ceremonials of Kashmir (Kumari 1988: ii). It may possibly be taken as guidebook of the sacred places. It consists of a bulk of Māhātmyas, the stories and myths associated to very *tīrathas*.

Stein (1900) also gave a detailed account of the '*Śāradā Māhātmya*'. It tells the myth that how a non-Barahman *rishi*, *Muni Śāṇḍilya*, son of Mātāṅga, worshiped the goddess Śāradā so hard that she appeared to him. This place is identified by Stein as 'Guś' (currently in Indian Occupied Kashmir). She promised him to show her real form, *Śakti* [*sic*]. He worshipped more and got divine advice to reach *Śāradā* forest for the purpose. He bathes in the Kṛṣṇanaga spring near modern Darṅgā and half of his body became golden. On the way he saw god Gaṇeśa on the eastern side of a hill. It can easily be identified by the Kiśan Ghatī near modern *Śārda* village. At the end goddess revealed herself in her triple form of *Śāradā*, *Nārada* or *Sarasvatī* and *Vāgdevi* over the sacred place and invited him to her abode. He was then preparing for a ritual and took water from '*Mahāsindhu*'. Half of this water turned into honey and became a stream, the *Madhumatī* Stream. Since then, the Bathing on the confluence of *Sindhu* (Neelum River

or *Kiṣaṅgaṅā*) and Madhumatī assures the complete remission of sins. Stein comments that further this *Māhātmya* elaborates the proceedings of the pilgrimage (Stein 1900: 179-83).

This deity is also elaborated by Ved Kumari (1988: 165) in contrast with Durgā where she points out that how confusing, both the deities are represented in the *Nīlamata*. For example; there are references to worship of books, in the *Nīlamata Purāna*, inside the Durgā temple (*Nilamata*: V 789). Whereas it is clear that *Śāradā* is the deity, venerated for the knowledge and learning (Kumari 1988: 165). On the other hand ‘*Śāradā Māhātmya*’ (vv. 88sq), suggests the offering of meat to *Śāradā* (Stein 1900: 281). Offering meat in worship is something which is not popular in the *Śivites* and the *Viśnites* alike.

Kalhaṇa’s Rājatarāṅginī & Jonrāja

In the famous chronicle of Kashmir (Kalla 1996:137-150), Kalhaṇa also referred this place as the seat of great veneration to Hindus. Being a Pandita scholar, he started his work with praising different gods with particular emphasis on *Śāradā*. Here, he called her other forms and spotted her residence (Book I, verse 35)’

“*There the goddess Sarasvatī herself is seen in the form a swan in a lake situated on the summit of the Bheḍa-hill which is sanctified by the Gaṅgā-source*” [sic] (Stein 1900: 8, I-35).

He elaborated further by discussing a deity as well as her practical manifestation, and an abode of the goddess. He refers (Book 4, verse 322-336) to an event in Lalitaditya Muktapida’s rule (713-55). It was an issue caused by the deceptive visit posed as a religious visit, a *Yātra* of *Śāradā*’s temple by the men of the king of Gauda (Bengāl) (Stein 1900: 151-52). These people wanted to retaliate the murder of their king by Lalitaditya Muktapida. They destroyed the temple of Prehasapura and was eliminated by the royal army. Here, he indirectly pointed out that this place would have been visited by the people from as far as Bengāl.

In Kalhaṇa’s own time, a group of rebel princes were besieged in the upper *Kiṣaṅgaṅā*

Valley. In this connection, he gave a detailed account in his eighth book.

He further mentioned in Book 8th, in the reign of Jayasinha (1128-49 CE), three princes, namely Loṭhana, Vighraharāja and Bhoja rebelled against the king. They tried to make alliances and to setup a coup in their favour. The royal army responded with forceful pursuit of the rebelled princes who fled and took refuge in ‘Śiraḥśilā Castle’ in the upper *Kiṣangaṅgā* Valley. There are fragmentary remains of the same near Śarda town.

He further mentioned (Book VIII: Verses 2556-2706) the location of Śiraḥśilā castle is little downstream from the temple of *Śāradā*. The royal army arrived in pursuit of rebels and settled the camp along the temple of *Śāradā* (Stein 1900: 207-213). It is evidenced that the place where Stein allocated *Śiraḥśilā* Castle, is not enough to house a castle and the camp for a siege without getting menaced by the archers of the besieged. As per Kalhaṇa, the current place of the *Śarda* Archaeological complex is ultimately convinces for having the open space where military setup temporary village. Apart from the military campaign, it was also an opportunity for him to praise the goddess by referring the participant of this siege to visit this place to pay homage to the associated goddess. In book VIII, verse 2556 he referred to a military official’s (Sust Chander) visit of the temple.

He discussed this place as a temple and never gone through the very details of its structure.

Jonrāja also mentioned the arrival of King Zain-ul-Abideen on the site at the time of “*Śāradā Astamī*” in 1422 CE. King got angry for the deity as she did not appeared to him in personal. However, he argues, that he slept in the court of the temple where she came in his dream (Stein 1900: 287).

Muslim Historians and the Site

Albīrūnī, a famous Muslim scholar visited India during the Mahmud of Ghaṣi’s invasion. He wrote detailed account on India. His assessment of religious beliefs, deities and symbols not hindered for the idol of *Śāradā*. He mentioned the importance of *Śāradā* and the existence of a wooden deity along with other famous idols of India. He also proposed

the location of the temple of Śāradā, toward the northern side 2 or 3 day travel from the capital of Kashmir (Sachau 2007:133). Estimate of his comment about this site is that it is a religious learning establishment with a deity as an epicentre of the activities like it does in the temples.

Abu-ul-Fazal al-Mubarik wrote the famous account of '*The Ain I Akbari*' in Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign. He mentioned of a stone temple along the bank of *Padmati* (Madhumati) dedicated to the goddess Durgā (Blochmann 1869: 365-66).

Another set of chronicles by Muslim historians were also produced. Their contents mostly revolve around sultanate period of Kashmir. One of them by Pir Gulam Hassan Shah, '*Tarikh-i-Hassan*' refers to some of the historic earthquakes. His work helps to determine the destruction of Kashmir temples. He translated some of the earlier works in his history and hence he acknowledged the authority of his predecessors (Bilham & Bali 2013: 8).

Śarda: An Archaeological Heritage

Architectural remains of this ancient complex can be found in the village of Śarda, Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu & Kashmir. This is a fascinating architectural tourist destination. They praise the architecture of this site for sheer scale of the stone blocks piled up elegantly. On the other hand locals are also boast to have such historic monuments related to their glorious past.

Most of the 19th century scholars had identified it as a Hindu Temple or a learning centre as mentioned in different historic sources (see above).

The site in the 19th century

British studied almost every part of India. Even though this site is in a remote area, yet it has been mentioned by some scholars of repute. More detailed work is that of military officials, Maj. Bates's confidential document, a gazetteer of Kashmir (Bates 1883). It was meant to be used for the political and military purposes. In this he sketched a detailed account of this structure.

According to Bates (1883: 338-40), the main cella was mounted by a shingle roof on the orders of Colonel Gondu, the *Ziladar* of Muzaffarabad. He mentioned one *lingham* in the northern wall's niche. He speaks of a chimney above the niche just beside the postern in the eastern wall. Currently, it is a niche just like in other walls with open top.

Bate noted a coping which extended in the case of eastern wall, as a pyramidal shape. The only information inside the cella, coming through him, is that there was a huge rough stone slab in it. Raja of *Karnao* (Karnah), Mansrur Khan was told to have disturbed this stone while in his unsuccessful hunt for treasures.

Marc Aurél Stein (1900) not only translated the famous Sanskrit work of Kalhaṇa but also took over and annotated the work of Professor Bühler. He prepared a catalogue of *Māhātmya* and translated them.

He explored, incorporated and mapped the places mentioned by Kalhaṇa. Shrine of *Śāradā* and *Śīraḥśilā* castle's architectural map was plotted by him. He assessed every architectural feature and declared the *Śārda* Archaeological Complex as the Kalhaṇa's Temple of *Śāradā*.

In a note by him in his famous '*Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅginī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*', he explained the architectural features and allotted the identity to this site as a Hindu Temple, a *tīrathas*. However he did not indulged himself into the architectural styles of the temples of Kashmir.

Some modern researchers and history students are also attracted toward this heritage complex. They tried to identify them with all their best.

Dr. Khurram Qadir (1993) of National Institute of Cultural and Historic Research (NICHHR) has elaborated the historic references and architectural details. He also assessed the locals' perception of the ruin. He associated the local sayings of '*Mai Śārda*' and '*Mai Narda* (a trans-river peak known as *Nārda* Peak among the locals)'. Both the names are loosely used by the current population of the area with ambiguity. He also explained the architectural styles and compared it to the temples of the Kashmir valley (Qader 1993: 17-27).

A local author of the book on *Śarda* Archaeological Complex, Khawaja Abdul Ghani (2009) has tried to line up the available sources on the subject. He also went into the historic details. Apart from this he added a good deal of the material culture found from the area.

More interesting studies were done by the geologist Roger Bilham (2009; 2010; 2013) on the seismic patterns of this area and its influence on the stone temples of Kashmir. These set of studies are very much helpful in reconstructing the autopsy of the destruction of stone temples.

Local Perception of the Site

People of the area are boasting to claim the *Śarda* Archaeological Complex as their intellectual heritage; an academic institution. They present their own interpretation of the site.

The local interpretations are best represented by Abdul Ghani (2009). Two of them are as under.

There were two sisters, *Śarda* and *Narda* (*Narāda*) ruling the world. One day *Narda* (to whom they point to the north of this site toward the Narda Peak) saw from her abode in a lake of *Narda* Peak toward the *Śarda*'s abode, she got stunned that her sister is dead and all the giants are fleeing and abandoning her dead body. She became furious and summoned all of them and orders to make tomb for her (Ghani 2009: 50).

There was a giant who loved a princes (varies). When she desired a palace here, he started working and the roof was incomplete when the *Azān* for morning Prayer commenced the end of his turn. And hence roof is not there till this day.

Generally, locals say that in this place a script (the *Śāradā* script) was introduced which spread to all of the India. It was a learning centre, a university. Huge number of students studied in this place (personal comm.).

Conclusion

Śarda Temple is an archaeological complex, a ruined structure in modern village *Śarda* of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Most of the scholars identified it conventionally as a Hindu Temple, one mentioned for goddess *Śāradā*. Local population has different views about the *Śarda* archaeological complex, some peoples consider it as a fairy palace, others say that it is a university of ancient time where learned people established *Śāradā* script.

The styles of its architecture is that of Kashmiri School (Cunningham 1848: 241-327; Cowei 1867: 91-123; Fergusson 1891: 279-297; Kak 1933: 10-15; Brown 1956: 154-161; Fisher, R. E. 1982: 46-53; Mitra 1983:1-7). This allows the scholars to look for expansion and links of contemporary Kashmir to Dardistan and Upper Kaghan Valley.

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Figures

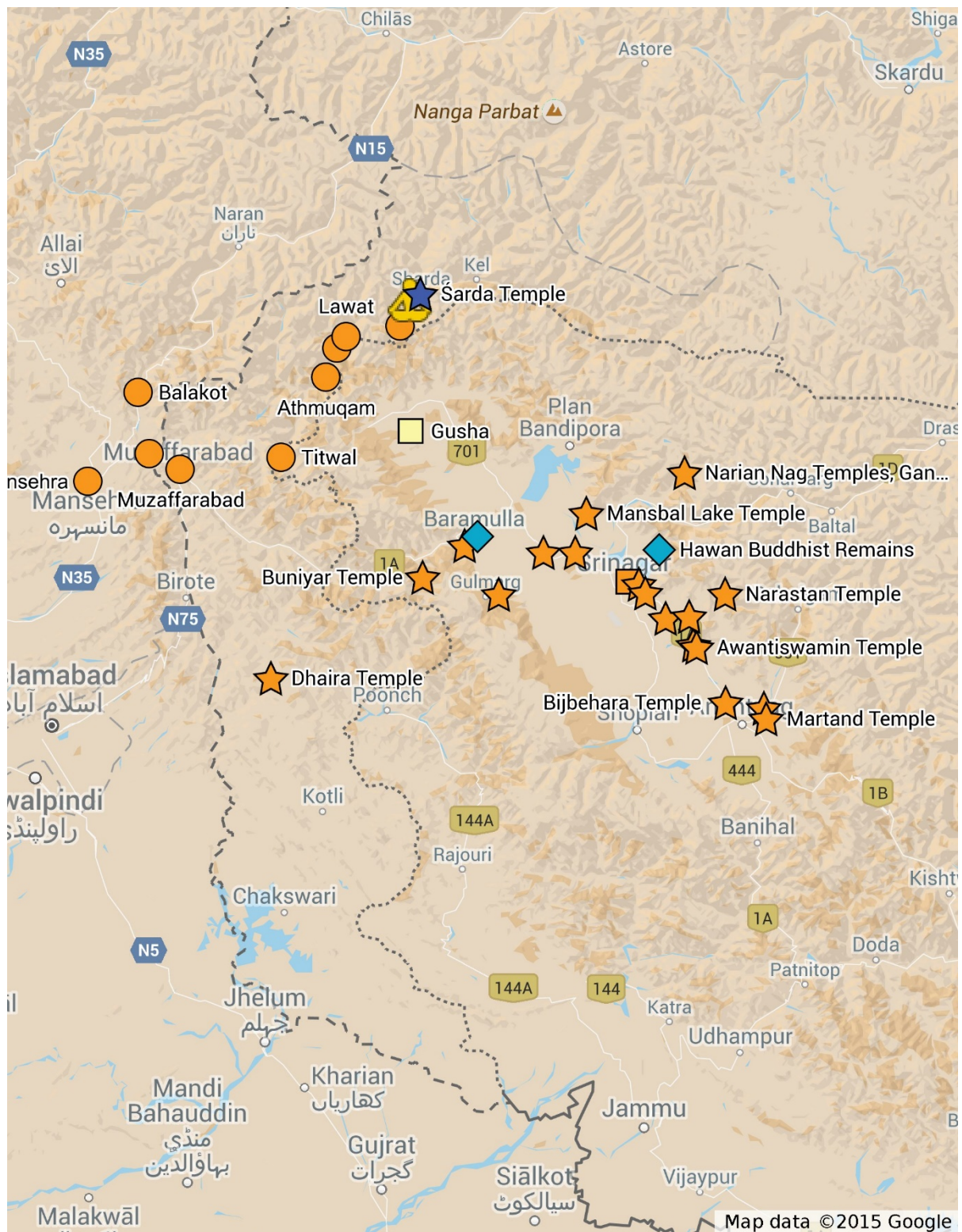


Figure 1. Google plotting of the Stone Temples of Kashmir (Courtesy Google)



Figure 2. Śarda Temple (Photo by Authors)



Figure 3. Martand Temple, built by Lalitaditya Muktapida (After Fisher 1982: 52)



Figure 4. Pandrethan Temple near Śrinagar, 10th cent. CE (After Fisher 1982: 52)