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## WATER MANAGEMENT IN ANCIENT KASHMIR, THE CONTRIBUTION OF SUYYA

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### ABSTRACT

**G**eographical determinism is predominant in Kashmir history and the inhabitants have always demonstrated acumen to harness the challenging topography to the requirements of their day to day life. In the long history of such challenges there emerged individuals like Suyya who left indelible mark on the memory of the people and earned the epithet of annapati- lord of the food- by his contribution. Who was this Suyya and how he gave fresh life to the people by evolving a unique water management system for strengthening the agricultural sector of the state and combating the curse of hunger by judicious resource utilization? This is an inspiring theme of Kashmir history. Revisiting it, is rewarding. This paper seeks to



discuss this historic figure of ancient Kashmir and highlight his contribution in water management system. It needs to be added here that water is an important component of Kashmir history which has tremendously impacted socio-economic life of people.

**KEYWORDS:** Water. Food. Vitasta. Floods. Hunger.

### INTRODUCTION:

Regional history of Kashmir is promising in providing such narratives wherein apparently a subaltern person demonstrated yeoman's abilities and brought out masses

from the deep morass of hopelessness and hardships. Here is one such story. However before going through this rewarding story of an ordinary person, let us have a brief overview of the times he was born in.

During 9th century AD Avantivarman, a scion of Utpala dynasty ruled Kashmir for 28 years from 855-883 AD. His reign was characterized by peaceful conditions, economic prosperity, pious foundations, suppression of feudal class of Damaras who caused a lot trouble to state, patronage to learning, prohibition of killing of birds and above all he was free of

jealousy. <sup>1</sup> Rajatarangini describes him as "full of judgment and wisdom". <sup>2</sup> "When Avantivarman obtained the sovereign power, after uprooting his enemies", writes Kalhana, "he made, O wonder, the body of the virtuous feel thrilled on account of his great deeds." <sup>3</sup>

However the throne that Avantivarman put on his head was full of thorns. He came to power at a time when Kashmir had suffered centuries of lawlessness. After Lalitaditya, Karkota dynasty saw no commanding ruler. Expansion apart, they didn't even preserve what Lalitaditya had achieved and left behind. With the result the long spell of political instability eroded the very foundations of social institutions and paralyzed economic structures in Kashmir. Thus lamenting on the situation Kalhana writes, "under the feeble kings,

whose reigns were marred by court controversies",<sup>4</sup> who were "sensuous"<sup>5</sup> and "destroyer of subjects"<sup>6</sup> "the country was, just [as before], overtaken by disastrous floods"<sup>7</sup> and "in the famine-stricken land one khari of rice (dhanya) was bought for ten hundred and fifty dinnaras".<sup>8</sup> So when Avantivarman became king, "flood calamity" was the main theme of public "conversation".<sup>9</sup> So much so that king was desperately looking for any possible solution and fondly welcomed the ideas floated in this direction. "Then through the merit of Avantivarman", says Kalhana, 'there descended to the earth the Lord of Food (annapati) himself, [in the person of] the illustrious Suyya, to give fresh life to the people'.<sup>10</sup>

## I. WHO WAS SUYYA?

Suyya's origin is shrouded in mystery. It is not clearly known who were the parents of this wise man and in which part of Kashmir he was born or brought up. He is a character that resembles with legendary figures of world history who were abandoned after birth for various reasons and latter they rose to prominence by talent & trials. Whatever little is known about him proves that he had 'brilliant intellect' and sufficient 'knowledge'. The contribution that he made and the deeds that he committed made the world wonder. Given his heroic feats which seem beyond human capability it is surmised that he was not born from a (women's) womb.

What we know through our sources is that "once a woman, Suyya by name, belonging to the menial class of chandala, found when sweeping up a dust heap on the road, a fresh earthen vessel fitted with a cover. Rising the cover she saw lying in it a handsome babe, which had eyes like lotus leaves and was sucking fingers". She was overtaken by the innocence of the babe and developed sympathy toward him. She thought in her mind that "some unfortunate mother must have exposed this lovely (boy)." With out defiling the children by her touch, she arranged for his keep in the house of a shudra nurse, and brought him up. Taking the name of Suyya, he grew into an intelligent youth, and having learnt his letters, became a teacher of small boys in the house of some house holder.<sup>11</sup>

The conditions in which Suyya was born and brought up made him different than others who grew up in normal conditions. He had no inheritors. He was alone. He grew up as an orphan. These testing circumstances had due impact on his personality. He became socially sensitive and developed altruistic qualities, cared more for others than self. Thus he sacrificed his whole life for social cause. There is no evidence that he even married. So before his public posture he had attained the required social recognition which is must for great initiatives. By his character he had endeared himself to the virtuous and showed a brilliant intellect and men of sense kept around him in assemblies.<sup>12</sup>

The times Suyya lived in were hard. Whatever peasants cultivated that was destroyed by floods. When the helpless people were complaining in their conversation of the flood calamity, Suyya came forward. He said: "I have got the knowledge for preventing these floods but what can I do with out means?"<sup>13</sup> It is said that when the king heard through his spies that Suyya was saying these words persistently, he was surprised. The king then brought him in the court and questioned him about his plans. He calmly replied in the royal presence that "I have got the knowledge" to solve the problem of floods. "There upon the lord of the earth", writes Kalhana, "though his courtiers declared him (Suyya) crazy, was anxious to test that knowledge, and placed his own treasures at his disposal."<sup>14</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here that Suyya's confidence was grounded on certain solid foundations. He was well conversant with his country. He seems to be keen to devise plans to ameliorate the conditions of the people. He knew the land of his birth closely and possessed sufficient insights to address the issues with required solutions. He was rational in outlook. In a fatalistic, conservative and reactionary social setup he believed in causation of events and demonstrated a proactive approach to set the things right.

## ii. Suyya's operations

Suyya launched a multifaceted strategy to end the crises caused by recurrent floods. His strategy had four main aspects:

First, ensuring the smooth passage of water out of Kashmir;

Second, construction of embankment on the shores of Mahapadma Lake;

Third, constructing dams on both side of river Vitasta and;

Finally, shifting the confluence of two important rivers of Kashmir-Sindu and Vitasta.

For the solution of the first problem he used public money. He took many pots full of money from the treasury and embarking on a boat, proceeded in haste to Madavaraja. After dropping there a pot full of money, at a village called Nandaka, which was submerged in the flood, he hurriedly turned back.<sup>15</sup> Though the councilors said that (Suyya) is surely only a madman but the king, when he heard this account, became interested in watching the end of his plans. On reaching Yaksadda village in Kramaraja area, he threw money into the river. There were the rocks which had rolled down from the mountains lining both river banks, had compressed the Vitasta and made its waters turn backward (in whirls).<sup>16</sup> The famine hit villagers jumped into the river and anxiously searched for the money. In this manner they dragged out the rocks from the river and thus cleared the bed of the river Vitasta. After he had in this manner artfully drained off that water for two or three days, he had the Vitasta dammed up in one place by workmen. The whole river was blocked up by Suyya for seven days by a wonderful work by the construction of a stone dam.<sup>17</sup> After having the river bed cleared at the bottom, and stone walls constructed to protect it against rocks which might roll down, he removed the dam. Then after stream flowing to the ocean, set out on its course in haste, as if eagerly longing for the sea after its detention.<sup>18</sup> Wherever, he knew inundation breaches to occur during disastrous floods there he constructed new beds for the Vitasta for smooth passage of water.<sup>19</sup>

What is interesting about this plan is that he did not provide relief in terms of cash or compensation. Nor he advised the ruler to apply baggar. In both case it would have created a bad legacy. Compensation would have caused laxity and forced labour would have caused mistrust between court and common man. So he devised a far better policy which aimed at strengthening the infrastructure and creating opportunities for employment. For that purpose he empowered the people to be self dependent and capitalize the land available to them. The operation was interesting and involved masses fondly because the dividends encouraged the masses to apply efforts and earn as much as possible. Besides it might have attracted people from other parts of the valley for prospective gains. That was another beauty of this plan.

By this way Suyya tremendously increased the scope of agriculture in Kashmir. He made the lower areas not only worth habitation but worth cultivation also. It was in fact second largest land reclamation project in the history of agriculture in Kashmir, figuring second after terracing. The areas he reclaimed were more crucial because of its vastness and easy availability of water.

### iii. Shifting the confluence of river Sindh and Jehlum

Suyya was resolute to regulate the rivers of Kashmir. In this connection a massive plan for land reclamation and flood protection conceived and carried out by him was the shifting of the confluence of two important rivers of Kashmir namely Vitasta and Sindh. It was a marvelous engineering feat of connecting rivers for reclaiming land and minimizing the chances of flood. To quote Kalhana, "the two great rivers, the Sindhu and Vitasta, flowing to the left and right of Trigrimi have to this day in the vicinity of the city their confluence which Suyya first planned and which will last to the end of the world."<sup>20</sup> The previous river beds existed till the times of Kalhana in the middle of the 12th century when he was engaged in the preparation of his work Rajatarangini. "To this day", writes Kalhana, "even there are seen, growing on the banks of the former river beds, old trees which bear the marks of the ropes fastened to them by the (nisadas) boatmen".<sup>21</sup>

After constructing stone embankments for seven yognas along the river Vitasta, he dammed in the waters of the Mahapadma lake. With this arrangement river Vitasta flowed rapidly on her way from the basin of the Mahapadma Lake, like an arrow from the bow.<sup>22</sup>

### iv. New settlements

Another marvelous facet of his scheme was that he introduced a novel pattern of settlement in the flood prone lower areas around Walur Lake that were reclaimed with his efforts. Kalhana writes with all praise that having thus raised the land from the waters; he founded various villages, which were filled with a multitude of people. Keeping out the water by means of circular dykes, he gave to these villages the appearance of round bowl



(kunda) and they were amply provided with all kinds of food stuff. The people called those villages by the name of kundala.<sup>23</sup>

#### v. Irrigation works

Suyya was the master architect of all irrigation schemes during Avantivarmans rule. Owing to the wonderful results of his work he has rightly been referred by Kalhana as the “lord of food” (anapati).<sup>24</sup> Prior to his reign only a few canals had been constructed but he made the optimum use of the available water resources and founded a number of canals. Kalhana has beautifully depicts this process. “He made”, writes Kalhana, “different streams with their waves which are [like] the quivering tongues [of snakes]] move about according to his will, just as conjurer [does with] the snakes”.<sup>25</sup> In fact he did much more. He tested the water absorption quality of various types of soils in Kashmir. In this regard it is worth revealing to quote Kalhana:

“After watering all village [lands], he took from [each] village [some] soil, and ascertained, by [observing] the time it took to dry up, the period within which irrigation would be required [for each soil respectively]. He then arranged accordingly on a permanent basis for the size and distribution of the water course for each village”, and by using for irrigation the Anula and other streams, embellished all regions with an abundance of irrigated fields which were distinguished for excellent produce.<sup>26</sup> This classification of soil is a unique example in the agricultural history of Kashmir.

The impact of all these welfare schemes was wonderful. Agriculture witnessed a remarkable progress. Land under cultivation registered phenomenal increase which in turn gave a quantum flip to the production of rice crop. All this surplus production ultimately led to the end of “food calamity”. Kalhana says, “There were previously from the beginning of things the purchase price of a khari of rice was two hundred dinnars in time of great abundance. In that every land of Kashmir henceforth O wonders! The khari of rice came to be bought for thirty six dinnars.”<sup>27</sup>

#### vi. Foundations

Kalhana writes that “on the banks of Vitasta, where she leaves the waters of the Mahapadma lake, he built a town resembling heaven which bore his own name. On the lake reaching to the brink of the horizon, he established by his own authority a prohibition against the killing of fish and birds, which was to last till the end of the world.”<sup>28</sup> After bestowing on Brahmans the village called Suyyakundala, in honour of his mother Suyya, he constructed the dyke called after her name, Suyya setu. On the lands which he raised from the water, thousands of villages such as Jayasthala, etc. were founded by Avantivarman and others.

To surmise there are no better words than what Kalhana has written in the fifth tarang of Rajatarangini. So let us quote him again to cap this discourse.

“Neither Kashayapa nor Samkarsana bestowed those benefits which Suyya produced with ease in that land. Suyya who possessed accumulated religious merits, achieved in a single birth that holy work which Vishnu accomplished in four incarnations, viz, the raising of earth from the water, the bestowal of it to pious Brahmans, the building of barrages with stones in water and the suppression of Naga kaliya.”<sup>29</sup>

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