

Understanding 8-12th Century Chamba through its Sources

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Abstract

To understand history from the sources justifies the volume of authenticity involved in knowing the past of any region. Chamba, which is one of the twelve districts of the present Himachal Pradesh, lies in the western Himalayan region. It has a shrouded past till 7-8th centuries but inscriptions come to help the scholars to understand the history of Chamba. Presently when this region is being observed from several corners, the present paper takes into consideration the inscriptions from 8-12th centuries, to create a basic understanding of the region. This paper is helpful not only in creating a past between 8-12th centuries Chamba but provides a bare idea of the state, polity and society as well.

Key-words: Bharmour, Chamba, inscriptions, Varman dynasty, Himachal Pradesh, *Vamshavali*

Introduction

Chamba, which is one of the twelve districts of the present Himachal Pradesh, lies in the western Himalaya and spread over a geographical area of about 6522 sq. km.¹ For Administrative purposes, the district is divided into thirteen tehsils and sub-tehsils with names, Chamba, Churah, Pangi, Brahmaur and Bhattiyat, Dalhusie and Salooni carrying the legacy of the five *wazarats* of the erstwhile Chamba State² and Tissa, Bhalai, Sihunta, Holi and Dharwala as later additions.

Chamba is the headquarters of the Chamba district, bordered by Jammu and Kashmir to the north-west and west, the Ladakh area of Jammu and Kashmir and Lahaul and Bara Banghal to the north-east and east, Kangra to the south-east and Gurdaspur district of Punjab to the south.³ The difficult terrain on the one side kept people isolated but it also helped them to preserve their culture, history and language as legacy. Though peripheral regions on the sides of Punjab and Kashmir had mix influence. To make it more clear, aspect of topography has been taken under consideration here.

Topography

The ancient history and culture in Chamba does portray very strong influence of its mountains, hills, enclosed valleys, and varied climatic types, The Zaskar, Pir Panjal and the Dhauladhars are the prominent mountain ranges which traverse the region in a north-west to south-east trend. The district is predominantly mountainous, with elevations ranging from about 2,000 meters to over 6,000 meters above sea level. Major mountain ranges include the Dhauladhar Range and Pir Panjal Range. The district is crisscrossed by several rivers, most notably the Ravi, Chenab (Chandrabhaga), and Sal rivers. Due to its altitude range, Chamba experiences a variety of climatic conditions. Lower areas have a sub-tropical climate with warm summers and mild winters. In contrast, higher Altitudes experience a temperate to alpine climate, with heavy snowfall in the winter months. In monsoon season, the district receives moderate to heavy rainfall during the monsoon (June to September), contributing to the region's agriculture and natural beauty.⁴

Climate

Climate of the district is quite diverse, varying from the humid tropical type to the high land zone. The temperatures in summer vary between 38 °C and 15 °C and in winter 15 °C and 0 °C. The average annual rainfall in the town is 785.84 mm (30.939 in).⁵ The temperature varies at different places and altitudes. The high altitudes of most of the tehsils are uninhabited and is used during summer as meadows and pastures by the shepherds. The frequency of rain decides the growth of natural vegetation. As southern part of Chamba is having sharp slops which is unable to hold/ retain water, hence the southern slopes have less of vegetation than the northern ones.

Taking topography, climate, and vegetation into consideration, the inhabited area of Chamba can be distinctly be divided into three distinctive cultural adaptations. Firstly, Pangi region which is the high mountain zone where population is scanty. Secondly Bharmour where comparatively flat land is available and small village settlements are found with earlier capital establishment and famous eighty-four temples. Here fertile agricultural land is available. Third is Shivalik zone where main Chamba town and other areas which are comparatively hot are found. This is the most densely populated region.

People

People constitute the backbone for the socio-cultural base of the society in Chamba. Agriculture is the main livelihood of the people with cattle rearing as a subsistence to agriculture. Some of the major castes and ethnic groups are there in various parts of Chamba. Brahmans, Rathis, Ranas and scheduled castes are found throughout the district. On the other hand, the tribal groups of the Gujjars and Gaddis are associated with specific ecologic adaptations and social organizations.⁶

After a shrouded past from Rigvedic age till 7th century, through inscriptions we come to know about the arrival of the Rajputs and Brahmans in Chamba, from the northern plains.⁷ It is clear from land grant references appearing in the inscriptions that people were already settled in the area and were in pastoral, agriculture and temple making activities. The Gaddis, who inhabited the whole of Brahmaur tahsil, were a pastoralist tribe⁸ who came from Punjab plains and settled in the Brahmaur region around 1000 AC. The Lahulas, the Buddhis (not of pure form) people of Tibetan affinity, live in a small arid region of Pangi in the mountainous region. Their religion and culture are blends of Hindu and Tibet-Buddhist elements.⁹

Sources to know history of Chamba

Chamba is one of the most ancient Rajput Principalities of India was set up as early as 550 AC. It is located in the foot hills of Northwest Himalayas and on the north-west and west is Jammu and Kashmir. On the north east are Ladakh, Lahaul and Bara Banghal, on the South-east and south are the districts of Kangra of Himachal and Gurdaspur of Punjab.

The main source for the history of ancient Chamba is the Vamsavali or the genealogical roll of the kings of Chamba in chronological order that carries almost 110 pages of Antiquities of Chamba vol. 1 compiled by J. Ph Vogel.¹⁰ Chamba is well known for its epigraphically records and copperplate title deeds. Nowhere else in princely states they are found in such large number. These are well preserved in Chamba region due to the isolated geographical position of this region that waves of any change were slow to reach here but once having reached here they remained unadulterated for long.

The idols enshrined with the garbhagrha of wooden temples of Brahmaur raised from 7-8th century onwards continued to remain under worship even today. The Copper plate grants issued by the kings of Chamba for the maintenance of the temples or as land grants to brahmanas are preserved by the descendants of the original donees. The inscriptions play important part in the formulation of the ancient history and culture of this region and form the first base as source.

On literary side, no contemporary records are found, still History of Punjab Hill States by Hutchinson and Vogel and Gazetteer of Chamba State forms important source material on literary sides. Besides, there is plenty of research articles written on various aspects of Chamba. Still as primary source, inscriptions hold strong footing.

One of the salient features of the inscriptions are that their texts remained the same during the course of centuries and cannot be manipulated. The inscriptions of Chamba carry volume of information starting from chronology, language, script and donative nature to eulogies, names of the kings, queens and

other people, description of land etc. Agreeing to D C Sircar that even if the inscriptions do not contain in any era,¹¹ the same can be verified and assigned to a definite period of the basis of palaeography.

The total number of inscriptions in Chamba amounts to one hundred and thirty of which fifty-four are of Pre-Muhammadan period.¹² The earliest inscriptions found are in post-Gupta brahmi character of the seventh century AC and those of later date in Sarda script used in the eighth century AC. The inscriptions are engraved on several platforms like temple slabs, rocks, images and fountain. Copper is the metal used for engraving. Stone is used for image inscription except when consecrated object is an image of metal.

The Chamba region do not contain many rock inscriptions. However, some of the ancient epigraphs engraved on rock are seem to belong to this class like Panali Nala,¹³ Tur,¹⁴ and Proli-ra-gala.¹⁵ Image inscriptions are usually recorded on the pedestals of the images. Amongst the image inscriptions the most important are those of Meruvarman datable to circa seventh century AC. Incised on the brass statues of Lakshna Devi in Brahmaur and Shakti Devi in Chhatrarhi. These inscribed stone images have still been preserved. Svaim image of Devi Ashtabhuji erected by rajanaka Bhogata of Kishkindha is most probably the oldest.¹⁶ The other inscribed images are Devi image of Tur,¹⁷ Vishnu statue of Saho,¹⁸ Narayana image of Devi-ri-kothi,¹⁹ Tur inscriptions,²⁰ and Gum stone inscriptions.²¹ The inscriptions of stone slab are mostly records of consecration or eulogies (*prashasti*). The Sarahan prasasti,²² is combination of both. Similarly, Devi-ri-kothi²³ and Mul-kihar,²⁴ fountain inscriptions contain a eulogise tone for the donors and their relatives but stand out for their literary excellence. The fountain stone slab inscriptions are scattered in the region, were issued by the *ranas* and *thakurs*. They were erected at springs and are dedicated to lord Varuna. The figure generally occupies the centre of the caved surface. A fountain stone slab raised in the memory of the deceased near the fountains are generally decorated. Especially in the Churah and Pangi area of the region they are inscribed and throw important light on the socio-religious life of the people of the area. The difference between the fountain stone deity is that while the tutelary deity of the fountains stone slabs of Churah and Pangi is lord varuna, on the other hand lord Vishnu occupies a prominent place in the fountain slabs of the areas of Holy, Basu, Tagi, Brahmaur and Chhatrarhi.

Hermann Goetz²⁵ and Seema Bawa²⁶ opined that inscribed fountain slab found from Churah and Pangi area are important for fixing chronology, as these are dated in the regnal era of the ruling king. The name of the month, lunar day (*tithi*), the week day and the lunar mansion (*Nakshatra*) are also mentioned so that it may be possible to verify or ascertain the dates. Luj²⁷ and Salhi²⁸ fountain stone slabs helped to fix the year of accession of Jasata and Lalita Varman, the two Chamba kings belonging to twelfth century AC.

The fountain stone slabs of Brahmaur and Chhatrarhi are usually carved with the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, and the donor and the donee figures. The massive stone slab of Salhi²⁹ show all the rivers of Punjab personified as female figures. The lord Varuna remained the central figure accompanied by Ganesa, Indira and six faced Karttikeya in Salhi stone slab. Another fountain stone slab which is of interest is from the time period 1168-1169 AC from the reign of Ajaypala found in the area of Sei³⁰ where the deceased hero is shown worshiping Siva-linga accompanied by his wife.

Dadvar (1041 AC)³¹ and Bhukund (1028 AC)³² fountain inscriptions of the reign of Trilokyadeva have been found but his name does not appear in the genealogical roll of Chamba. Apparently he was a petty chieftain or a local rana who owed allegiance to the Chamba kings. These inscriptions were erected by brahmans.

As said earlier that besides stone and wood, copper is the metal that has been used for inscriptions and they shed historical light apart from providing important information on the political and social conditions. The earliest copperplate comes from the reign of Yukagakarvarman. It was issued from Chamba and granted in favour of Narasimha temple of Brahmaur which was the earlier capital of Sahila Varman, father of Yakagakarvarman.³³ Next in order is a grant by Sahillvarman's grandson Vidagdharvarman granting land to a Brahmana Nanduka at Sungal.³⁴

The early copper plates provided the information that during 7-8th centuries Chamba was divided into *Mandalas* and *grama* was undoubtedly the smallest territorial division. The mandalas are mentioned by name viz., Brahmipura,³⁵ Trighattaka,³⁶ Panthila,³⁷ Tavasaka,³⁸ Parakamata,³⁹ Bhattara,⁴⁰ and Pangati.⁴¹ These inscriptions are religious in nature and mostly engraved on the pedestals, record the consecration of the temples and idols by the kings. In the Nandi idol of Brahmaur,⁴² it is stated that Meruvarman erected the temple to increase the spiritual merit of his parents. Shakti Devi at Chhatrarhi carried the same tone.⁴³ The famous Sarahan prasasti,⁴⁴ records the raising of the majestic Siva temple of Saho by *rana* Satyaki mentioning his wife Somaprabha. The fountain stone slab of Devi-ri-kothi⁴⁵ was built by Balha, the wife of *rana* Nagpal in the memory of her deceased husband. The *rana* of Mul kihar⁴⁶ erected the memorial stone in the memory of her deceased wife Suramati to allay the grief caused by her death and to increase her spiritual merit. The donations of land to brahmanas on auspicious occasion was obviously to increase the religious merit of the donor.

Historical Background: Inscriptions and *Vamshavali*

The earliest inscription pertains to the period of king Meruvarman containing the names of three of his predecessors namely Adityavarman, Divakarvarman and Balavarman,⁴⁷ though no literary reference suggest/support the existence of such names. The language of the inscriptions of Meruvarman appear to be placing him in the centre of paramount powers in the region as he seems to have war with several local chiefs while expanding his territories. Later this fact is mentioned in *gazetteer of Chamba*⁴⁸ and *History of Punjab Hill States*⁴⁹ as well.

The Gum stone inscriptions of Asadhadeva mention him as *samanta* of Meruvarman.⁵⁰ Scholars generally agree that he had commissioned the grand construction of Brahmaur and Chhatrarhi temples after a successful career of conquests of the Brahmaur region.⁵¹ The life size brass images of Laksana Devi, Ganesa and Nandi as well Narasimha were built by him in Brahmaur after victory. The Sakti Devi of Chhatrarhi seems to be the last work of king Meruvarman.⁵² For five generations after Meruvarman, no epigraphic record has come to light from this region. In the eighth century AC Brahmaur was over-run by certain *kira*⁵³ tribe who destroyed its early civilization and killed its king. Lakshmi Varman and the fleeing queen gave birth to a child in the cave who was looked after by the mice and later came to be known as legendry Musana Varman.

Brahmaur again comes into lime light with the rule of Sahila Varman in 10th century onwards. He seems to be a general of Pratiharas and his achievements are described in the Kulait copper-plate grant of Somavarman and Asata.⁵⁴ The copperplate mentioned of his glorious victories over the Kiras. We are further informed that Trigarta expressed the wish to be his ally. He asserted his sovereignty over the principality of Kulu. Vogel has rightly pointed out 'Kashmir and other states of the Punjab were in alliance with the Hindu Shahi dynasty of Udbhandapura'.⁵⁵ The inscription further points out after his successful conquests he was hailed as *Sahasanka*-the emblem of courage, *nissankamalla*-dauntless wrestler, and *matamatasimha*-roaring-lion'.⁵⁶ This was noticed that with the old age, Sahilavarman went back to Brahmaur to spend rest of his life there after abdicating in favour of his son Yugakarvarman. In Bhuri Singh Museum Chamba is preserved a copper plate grant of Yugakarvarman which records the

grants of land to the temple god of Narsimha. The Copper plates seem to have been issued by his queen Tribhuvana-Rekha. The copper plate is issued from Chamba and is the earliest of all copperplates in Chamba dating back to eleventh century AC.⁵⁷ Yugakaravarman was succeeded by his son Vidagadhavarman in circa 960 AC. A copperplate grants issued by him is preserved in the Bhuri Singh Museum Chamba. The copperplate grants to the land of the village Sungal (Sumangala) was given to a brahman whose ancestors appeared hailed from Kurukshetra.⁵⁸ Vidagadha's son Dodaka succeeded in circa AC 980. He is endowed with the title of *Parameshvara* and *Parambhattaraka* in the stone inscriptions found at Tur, which records the installation of an image of god Karttikeya by him.⁵⁹ After Dodaka, no epigraphic record of the next rulers is available. The next king seems to be Salavarman who may be assigned the period of 1040 AC. This king is mentioned by his son Somavarman and the latter's son Asata. It appears that during his period there was some loss of territory as in the fountain inscriptions of Dadwar⁶⁰ and Bhakund⁶¹ dated 1028-1029 AC and 1040AC respectively.

The name of the ruling king is given as Trilokyadeva who was the ruler of Basholi. Another loss of prestige for Chamba was in the time of Salavarman when⁶² king Anantadeva of Kashmir (1028-1063 AC) uprooted the king Salavarman of Chamba. His queen Rardhadevi erected the memorial temple.⁶³ The dominance of Kashmir over Chamba for some time is further indicated by a statement of Kalhana that during the reign of Ananta's son Kalsa, a ruler of Chamba name Asata who succeeded Somavarman was in his court.⁶⁴ Somavarman was succeeded by his younger brother Jasta who was ruling with him as in the copperplates grant both the rulers are mentioned. Though we do not get reference of joint ruling in the area in general. Two inscriptions of his reign have come to light are dated 1105-06 from Luj in tahsil of Pangi (Pangati) and the other dated AC 1114 from Loh Tikri in Churah Tahsil.⁶⁵ These inscriptions reveal that the rulers of Chamba (Somavarman or Asata) had recovered some territory which was previously ceded to Trilokyadeva. Jasata was succeeded by his brother Dhalavarman. However, no epigraph of his reign has come to light. The next ruler too whose name is mentioned as Udayavarman has been wrongly placed in the *Vamsavali* in chronological order and is numbered fifth from Jasatavarman. According to Kalhana, he was ally of Susala and helped him to regain his throne of Kashmir. This sudden shift in the policy was because of the two Chamba princesses Devalekha and Taralalekha who were married to king Susala.⁶⁶

No inscriptions have come to light of the next three kings Ajitavarman, Daityarvarman, and Prthivarman who are mentioned by name in *Vamsavali*. Next ruler Lalitavarman does not find mention though there are two inscriptions of his reign. From the inscription of Devi-ri-kothi we may conclude that he was endowed with the title of *rana*.⁶⁷ The other inscription accrues from Salhi in Pangi tahsil, which reveals that Ludrapala held sway of this area.⁶⁸ However, it appears that Chamba had to cede some territory in the reign of Ludrapala. The Sai fountain inscription mentions a king Ajayapala as ruler of this area in AC 1169.⁶⁹ There is a reference of another king Ramapala in an inscription found in Devi-ri-kothi.⁷⁰ The reign of Lalitavarman came to an end in AC 1175.⁷¹ After this Chamba suffered a dark period as no epigraphic record is available up to 1330 AC.

Conclusion

The history of Chamba forms a curious case in the regional history of western Himalaya. Where on the one side it provided a long list of inscriptions belonging to the period 8-12th centuries, on the other hand no availability of literary sources forms a gap in corroboration. The change of ruling dynasty can be noticed and so is the change in script and language. Arrival of brahmins is clearly visible and has a deep impact on the language of inscriptions and titles of the kings and rana as well. Female has got little or almost no space in the inscriptions with the set tone that they were always there. The change in territorial

conditions and relations with neighbouring principalities show a humming population and other activities taking place in the region. *Kalhan's Rajatarangini* is certainly an asset in literary sources corroborating several facts related to Chamba kings from political point of view. *Gazetteer of Chamba* and *History of Punjab Hill States* is much later edition as a source. *Vamshavali*, though questioned by several historians, still serve a benchmark to check the gap and fill-in-the blanks.

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