Brief history of Kashmir

Bernier, the first European to enter Kashmir, wrote in 1665: “In truth, the kingdom surpasses in beauty all that my warmest imagination had anticipated.”

From reliable historic records, we know that Asoka’s empire extended to Kashmir as is evident from the remains of Buddhist temples, *stupas* and statues, and in the ruins of cities founded by him about 250 years before Christ and 200 years before the Romans landed in Britain. In Kashmir Asoka founded the original city of Srinagar, then situated on the site of the present village of Pandrathan, 3 miles above the existing capital.

The next landmark in Kashmir’s history is the reign of Kanishka, the Indo-Scythian ruler of upper India around 40 AD when the Romans were conquering Britain and Buddhism was beginning to spread to China. Kanishka was of Turkish descent and was renowned as a pious Buddhist king who held in Kashmir the famous Third Great Council of the Buddhist Order which drew up the Northern Canon or “Greater Vehicle of the Law.” Nagarjuna, a famous Bodhisattva who exercised a spiritual lordship over the land was a contemporary of Kanishka.

Buddhism was in its peak during the time of Kanishka. However, soon Brahministic Hinduism started reasserting itself. Coming in conflict with Hinduism, Buddhism waned. When Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, visited Kashmir in 631 AD, he observed: “This kingdom is not much given to the faith, and the temples of the heretics are their sole thought.”

After Kanishka, the next notable but exceedingly cruel ruler of Kashmir was Mihirkula (6th century AD), known as the ‘White Hun’ and a persecutor of the Buddhist faith, whose kingdom extended to Kabul and central India. People would know his movement by noticing the vultures, crows and other birds flying ahead of him to feed on his victims.

The most famous indigenous king of Kashmir was Lalitaditya (699-736AD), a contemporary of Charlemagne, who preceded king Alfred by over a
century. His grandfather, the founder of his dynasty, was a man of humble origin but connected through marriage with the previous royal family. The Kashmiri historians speak of Lalitaditya as conquering the world. However, the fact is that he asserted his authority over the hilly tracts of Northern Punjab, reduced the king of Kanauj to submission, conquered the Tibetans and Badakhshan in central Asia and sent embassies to Peking. He erected the gorgeous temple at Martand and founded the city of Parihasapura (now in ruins), near the present Shadipur.

Lalitaditya’s rule was succeeded by weak kings barring his grandson who was as illustrious as the grandfather. After a series of insignificant rulers, economic depression and political instability, Kashmir found a talented ruler in Avantivarman (855-883) who was more known for his consolidation efforts rather than his conquest. The town of Avantipura, named after the king, has survived to the present day. His reign was remarkable for the execution of an engineering scheme to prevent floods and drain the valley. The Kashmiri engineer Suyya diagnosed correctly more than thousand years ago that floods in the valley were due to the water of the Jhelum river not being able to get through the gorge 3 miles below Baramula with sufficient rapidity. The constricted passage got blocked with boulders and Suyya adopted a novel method to have the boulders removed. He threw money into the river where the obstruction lay. Soon it spread that there was money at the bottom of the river and men dashed in to retrieve it and rooted up all the obstructing boulders in their search. So says the legend. As a result of removal of the obstruction, a large land was available for cultivation with protection against floods.

After Avantivarman, Kashmir saw a row of weak successors, palace intrigues and assassinations, till the rule of Harsa (1089-1101), said to be the most striking figure among the later Hindu rulers of Kashmir. He was courageous and well versed in various sciences as also a lover of music and arts. Later he degenerated into a despot and fell a victim of revolt. He was slain in the fighting. His head was cut off and burned, while his naked body was cremated by a compassionate wood dealer.

For 2 centuries more the Hindu rule in Kashmir continued. In 13th century, Kalhan the most reliable historian of Kashmir was living and from his annals we get most authentic account of Kashmir’s history.
In 1339, Shah Mir, a Mohammedan ruler, deposed the widow of the last Hindu ruler and founded a Mohammedan dynasty. The most illustrious Muslim ruler of Kashmir before it came under Mughal rule in 1586, was Zain-ul-ab-ul-din (1420-70). He was virtuous, liberal, a friend of cultivators, built many bridges and constructed many canals. He repaired some Hindu temples and revived Hindu learning. In 1532 Kashmir passed under Turkish rule when Mirza Haider occupied it for a brief period. In 1586 Kashmir was incorporated in the dominions of Akbar, the contemporary of queen Elizabeth of Great Britain.

Akbar visited Kashmir three times, made a land revenue settlement and built the fort of Hari Parbat. Jehangir, Akbar’s son, built the stately pleasure gardens, the Shalimar and Nishat Baghs where he and his wife Nurjehan, the most beautiful woman of her time, spent many a pleasant summer day. During the reign of Aurangzeb, Bernier, the French traveler visited Kashmir. He described it as “the terrestrial paradise of the Indies.” Though during most of the time under the Mughal rule Kashmir was prosperous, with the decaying of the Mughal Empire, Kashmir fell once more into wild disorder and eventually came under the oppressive rule of the Afghans in 1750, marked as a time of “brutal tyranny”. When the oppression became unendurable, the Kashmiris turned to Ranjit Singh, the powerful Sikh ruler of the Punjab who after an unsuccessful attempt finally defeated the Afghan governor in 1819 and annexed Kashmir. However, by that time nine-tenths of the population had been forcibly converted to Islam. After the death of Ranjit Singh, Gulab Singh, the king of Jammu and a friend of Ranjit Singh, became the virtual master of the valley though it nominally belonged to the Sikh rulers at Lahore.

Gulab Singh was a Dogra Rajput who maintained excellent rapport with Ranjit Singh and later with his successors till the British occupied Lahore and Punjab. However, in consideration of the good conduct of Gulab Singh, the British agreed to recognize his independence. On March 16, 1846, the British signed a separate treaty with Gualb Singh by which the British Government “transferred and made over, for ever, in independent possession, to Maharaja Golab Singh and the heirs male of his body, all the hilly and mountainous country, with its dependencies, situated to the eastward of the river Indus and westward of the river Ravi, including Chamba and excluding Lahoul, being part of the territories ceded to the British Government by the Lahore State.” Gulab Singh in turn was to pay the British Government 75 lakhs of rupees.
Gulab Singh was succeeded by his son Ranbir Singh in 1857 who rendered valuable services to the British Government during the Sepoy Mutiny. Ranbir Singh died in 1885. Under his rule there was steady improvement. The dynasty ruled Kashmir till king Hari Singh transferred power to independent India in 1947 by a deed.