

From the Archives - M.K.Raina
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Suyya Pandit – A Great Engineer

Avantivarman, the founder of Utpala dynasty, came to power in 855 AD and ruled Kashmir for 28 years. His peaceful and just reign was a period of consolidation, when Kashmir rose once again to great heights in the realms of philosophy, letters, art and architecture. He is well remembered for his founding the city of Avantipura, 17 kms. from Srinagar on the banks of river Jhelum, which is still called by the same name. During his rule, he also constructed the temple dedicated to Shiva Avanteshwara. The ruins, adjacent to the Jammu-Srinagar highway are among the most imposing monuments of ancient Kashmiri architecture, ranking next only to the Martand temple.

Kashmir was liable to floods owing to which it yielded little produce. King Lalitaditya, who ruled Kashmir during mid 8th century, had with great exertions, drained out some water from the valley after which it produced, to some extent, better crops. During the weak rule of the later Karkotas, the drainage operations had been neglected, with the result that floods were devastating the country as frequently as ever. Avantivarman and the people were in veritable despair. The king was very much grieved because of the famine and thought of several plans for the relief of the people. At that time, it is said, through the merits of Avantivarman, 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.

The origin of Suyya is not known. His birth is woven in mystery. By his acts, which were wonders of the world, it became certain that he had not been born from a woman's womb. It is said that as a baby, he was found in a covered earthen pot on the roadside, from where he was picked up by a Chandala woman named Suyya while she was sweeping the road. She got him nourished in the house of a Sudra woman, who named him after that of his adopted mother. He grew up into an intelligent youth and having obtained some education, became a teacher of the local boys. Possessed as he was of a sharp intellect, there was always a cluster of sensible men around him.

Suyya came to be known as a great engineer of King Avantivarman's court. Owing to the waterlogged condition of Kashmir due to constant flooding, cultivation had declined. Suyya found that the recurrence of flood in the valley

was due to the waters of the Vitasta which could not get with considerable swiftness through the gorge, some three miles below Baramulla as the compressed passage got blocked with boulders. He removed the rocks and built some stone-walls to protect their further sliding. He also constructed new beds for the river. As a result of these activities, thousands of acres of arable land were reclaimed and hundreds of new villages sprang up on these sites. The great chronicler Kalhana reveals a curious story about Suyya on this issue. Whenever there was a talk of famine, Suyya would say that he knew how to banish this monster if he were provided with the means. King Avantivarman came to know of Suyya's observation and summoned him to his presence. Questioned as to what he was saying, Suyya repeated the same words. He would not explain his scheme and so the courtiers declared him to be mad. Yet the king wanted to test him and placed his treasures at his disposal. Suyya took many pots full of money in a boat and started towards Madavarajya, the southern district of the Valley. He threw a pot of money at a village called Nandaka (Nandi on the Vashau river) which was submerged with flood water and then hastily returned, going to Yakshadar near Khadanyar below Baramulla and threw handfuls of money into the river. People were sure Suyya was mad. The king however wished to watch the result of his doing. The famine-stricken people, who were watching Suyya's operations, at once jumped into the river near Dyaragul and in order to find the precious coins, cleared the bed of rocks which had rolled down into the river bed. This accelerated the flow of water, which speedily drained out. The submerged land re-appeared. The pot full of money, which he had dropped in deep water at Nandaka, came into full view.

Kalhana's topographical exactness is strikingly revealed from his accounts of the regulation of the waters of the Vitasta by Suyya, which help us to trace the original course of the river and the changed course. Previously the Vitasta and the Sindh met near Trigami, turning a large area into a swamp. But Suyya planned their confluence at Shadipur and regulated the course of the Vitasta in such a manner that it flowed right through the Wular Lake. The course of the tributaries was also regulated in a similar manner. The water was channelled for irrigation purposes and each village was allotted as much water as was necessary for its crops. Suyya had many villages reclaimed from marshy tracts by having circular embankments raised all round them to keep out water, so that they looked like round bowls and hence were named Kundala. Some villages, for instance Utsa Kundal, Mara Kundal etc. retain this designation even to this day. However, the irrigation operations of Suyya, removing the junction of the river Vitasta and

Sindhu from Parihaspura to Shadipur, resulted in Parihaspura losing most of its importance. It is said that he built a temple of Hrashikesha Yogasayin at the new confluence.

Suyya supplemented these measures by an equally important step of improving the irrigation system, which was indispensable for the cultivation of the staple food of Kashmir. In the words of Kalhana, after examining the different classes of land, he procured a supply of river water for the villages, which thus were no longer dependant only on rainfall. After watching 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 various streams for the irrigation, and thereby embellished all regions with an abundance of irrigated fields which were distinguished for excellent produce.

The town Sopore (then Suyyapura), which Suyya built on the banks of the Jhelum river, commemorates his name. He prohibited killing of fish and water-fowl in the Wular lake. He granted the village Suyyakundala to the Brahmins in honour of his mother Suyya and constructed the bund Suyya-setu after her name.



(Main Source: Kalhana's Rajatarangini)