

**Abstract: History of Religion Panel**

**Historical and Geographical Imagination in the Mahābhārata, Nīlamata Purāṇa  
and the Rājatarāṅgiṇī**

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This paper answers two simple questions: ‘How, and in what ways, should the narrative construction of past and place evident in these sources contribute to our comprehension of them?’ and ‘What can the comparison of the mode of approach to past and place in these texts add to our understanding of the historiography and religious history of early South Asia?’ I will answer these questions by means of a close analysis and comparison of the narrative structure and content of these three texts.

I will argue that the Mahābhārata had a shaping influence on the Kaśmīri sources. This contention will be based on a reading of the Mahābhārata as a self-conscious intervention in the historical and geographical imagination of early South Asia. I will argue that the main aim of the Mahābhārata is to describe and, in so doing, to take control of the imagination of past and place. By imagining significant pasts and places, the Mahābhārata naturalizes a wide range of religious practices and ideologies that are distinctly non- or post-Vedic whilst establishing the capacity to legitimate these new practices in Vedic terms and often by Vedic means (by drawing on Vedicly charged imagery, characters, structural forms and models of interpretive competency).

I will then take up the inter-textual impact of the Mahābhārata’s example in Kaśmīri historical and geographical imagination in so far as this may be examined in the Nīlamata Purāṇa and the Rājatarāṅgiṇī. I will show how these texts take up narrative techniques, characters, and strategies of self-aggrandisement that are found in the Mahābhārata (with the Nīlamata even including an explanation for its non-inclusion in the main body of the Mahābhārata). I will demonstrate that these features of the form and content of the two texts are related to a more richly evidenced set of historical concerns and religious ideologies in late first millennium and early medieval Kaśmīr (including a more readily discernible dialogue with Buddhist thought and practice). I will further argue that the process of historically contextualising the Kaśmīri sources can enrich our sense of the ideological and practical agenda of the earlier, and harder to date, Mahābhārata. Consideration will also be given to historical and theoretical issues in relation to ideas of the genres of these texts: I will take up their various emic and etic genre designations (as *itihāsa*, *purāṇa/māhātmya* and *kāvya* or as epic, pseudo-epic and chronicle) and relate them to the texts’ differing statements about themselves and their power and role in society.

It is hoped that these analyses, taken together, will show the sense and necessity of a broader consideration of the form and function of the narrative construction of past and place in the religious history of early South Asia.