

# Situating the Historiography of the Katyuri Dynasty of Uttarakhand: Some Initial Observations

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**Abstract:** *The Katyuri dynasty (early medieval rulers of the central Himalaya whose political and cultural footprint is most visible in present-day Kumaun, parts of Garhwal and western Nepal) occupies an outsized place in regional histories of the Indian Himalaya. Despite its significance, the Katyuri past has been reconstructed unevenly: early colonial antiquarianism, nationalist-era syntheses, sporadic epigraphic editions and localized archaeological work produced a patchy literature that still leaves crucial questions unresolved—namely origins, chronology, administrative structure, and the dynamics of religious change in the region. This article maps the major historiographical strands, critiques methodologies that have dominated the field, reassesses primary evidence (inscriptions, temple architecture, numismatics and oral memory), and suggests an interdisciplinary research agenda to move Katyuri studies forward.*

**Keyword:** Kumaun, Katyuri, Regional histories, Himalayan histories, Early Medieval India

## 1. Introduction

The Katyuri polity—commonly placed between roughly the 8th and the 12th centuries CE in most conventional accounts, though exact dates vary—was for centuries the pre-eminent power in the central Himalaya, patronizing temple-building, shaping cult practices and tying together a mosaic of hill polities under a dynasty in local tradition and numerous stone and copper-plate records. The monuments of Kartikeyapur (Bajjnath) and epigraphic records such as the Pandukeshwar copper-plates have been touchstones for scholars attempting to reconstruct Katyuri political and cultural history. Yet scholarly treatments remain uneven. Some classic regional histories emphasize dynastic narratives and temple patronage; others deploy epigraphy and archaeology to critique earlier nationalist or antiquarian claims; and recent scholarship has started to reconsider Katyuri polity as a frontier, hill-based formation that participated in pan-Indic cultural networks while preserving strong local institutions. This article situates these debates in their historiographical contexts and proposes routes for consolidation and new research.

### Sources

The history of the Katyuri dynasty is reconstructed from a **limited, fragmented, and methodologically challenging body of sources**, reflecting the ecological, political, and cultural conditions of the central Himalayan region during the early medieval period. Unlike the contemporary plains polities of north India, the Katyuri state did not generate a sustained archival tradition. As a result, historians have depended on a composite evidentiary base, including copper-plate inscriptions, stone inscriptions, temple architecture, numismatic finds, later literary traditions, and oral memory. Each of these sources contributes differently to historical reconstruction and has been used—sometimes productively, sometimes problematically—by scholars across different historiographical phases.

The **most authoritative and direct sources** for Katyuri history are the copper-plate inscriptions (tāmapatras), particularly those discovered at Pandukeshwar and in parts of Kumaon, including Bajjnath. These inscriptions primarily record **royal land grants** issued to Brahmins, temples, or

religious beneficiaries and contain valuable information on royal names, genealogical references, administrative terminology, and religious invocations. The Pandukeshwar copper plates are especially significant, as they mention identifiable Katyuri rulers such as Lalitasuradeva, thereby providing rare, contemporaneous evidence of dynastic authority. Scholars have relied on these inscriptions to reconstruct tentative king-lists, understand land-revenue mechanisms, and analyze patterns of royal patronage. Paleographic analysis—through comparison of letter forms with dated inscriptions from northern India—has been the principal method for assigning approximate dates to these records. Linguistic features, particularly the use of Sanskrit and standard early medieval epigraphic formulas, have further helped situate the Katyuri inscriptions within broader subcontinental traditions. [1]

Despite their centrality, copper-plate inscriptions suffer from serious limitations. Many plates are **fragmentary or damaged**, several lack complete genealogies, and most do not provide **absolute chronological markers**, such as a clearly stated era. Regnal years are often mentioned without reference to a calendrical system, making precise dating speculative. Consequently, different scholars have proposed varying chronologies for the Katyuri rulers, and no universally accepted dynastic sequence exists. [2] This uncertainty has profoundly shaped Katyuri historiography, encouraging cautious, often provisional reconstructions rather than definitive narratives.

Complementing the copper plates are **stone inscriptions and temple epigraphy**, primarily found at sites such as the Bajjnath Temple Complex and Bageshwar. These inscriptions are generally shorter than copper-plate grants and typically commemorate temple construction, renovation, or religious donations. Scholars have used these inscriptions to corroborate royal names known from tāmapatras, to associate specific rulers with Shaiva patronage, and to understand the linkage between political authority and sacred geography. Art historians often read temple inscriptions alongside sculptural programs and architectural features to establish **relative chronologies** and identify phases of construction. However, methodological difficulties persist:

many inscriptions are weathered, displaced during later renovations, or reused in secondary architectural contexts, complicating attempts to securely associate them with particular rulers or periods. [3]

**Temple architecture and material culture** constitute another major category of evidence. Monumental stone temples at Baijnath and Katarmal represent the most visible material legacy of the Katyuri period. These structures testify to royal patronage, artistic preferences, and ritual life. Scholars have employed stylistic comparison with better-dated temples in the plains, iconographic analysis of sculptural motifs, and spatial distribution studies to infer political centers and religious orientation. The architectural vocabulary broadly aligns with early Nagara traditions, while iconography suggests strong Shaiva affiliations alongside Vaishnava and local cult elements. Nevertheless, the interpretive value of architecture is constrained by the fact that many temples underwent later repairs, additions, or reconstructions, and older stone blocks were frequently reused. In the absence of stratified archaeological excavation and scientific dating, it remains difficult to assign all architectural elements securely to the Katyuri period. [4]

Numismatic evidence plays a relatively **minor but supportive role** in Katyuri historiography. Coins directly attributable to the Katyuris are rare, and most finds from the Kumaon–Garhwal region cannot be conclusively linked to the dynasty. Earlier scholars attempted to associate certain coins with the Katyuris to argue for continuity with the Kuninda polity or participation in trans-Himalayan trade networks. More recent scholarship treats such claims cautiously, emphasizing that coin circulation often reflects commercial exchange rather than political control. As a result, numismatic evidence is now used primarily to contextualize economic networks rather than to establish dynastic history. [5]

Another significant category comprises **later literary sources, chronicles, and genealogies**, many of which were compiled under the Chand rulers of Kumaon. These texts frequently refer to the Katyuris as predecessor rulers and have been used to construct extended dynastic narratives or to legitimize later regimes by claiming descent from Katyuri ancestors. While earlier historians relied heavily on such materials to reconstruct political history, modern scholarship recognizes their **retrospective and ideological character**. Consequently, these sources are now read less as factual records of early medieval events and more as evidence for historical memory, political legitimation strategies, and the symbolic importance of the Katyuri past in later centuries. [6]

Finally, **oral traditions and local memory**- including folk narratives, ritual songs (jāgars), and place-name legends-remain an important, though methodologically sensitive, source category. These traditions, preserved across Kumaon and western Nepal, maintain vivid memories of Katyuri rulers, sacred sites, and political fragmentation. Anthropologists and historians have used oral traditions to trace the continuity of cult centers, understand regional identity formation, and explore how the Katyuri past was remembered and reinterpreted over time. However, oral sources lack precise chronology and often merge myth with history. Their value lies not in providing exact dates or

sequences, but in illuminating cultural perceptions of the past, and they must be carefully triangulated with epigraphic and archaeological evidence. [7]

Taken together, the nature of the available sources demands a **multi-source, interdisciplinary approach** to Katyuri history. Over-reliance on any single category- whether inscriptions, temples, or folklore- has led to distortions in earlier historiography. Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes cross-verification, cautious dating, and contextual reading of political and religious change. The character of these sources strongly suggests that the Katyuri polity functioned as a **typical early medieval Himalayan frontier state**, characterized by negotiated authority, religious pluralism, and localized governance rather than rigid centralization.

#### **The historiographical trajectory: from colonial descriptions to interdisciplinary studies:**

The historiography of the Katyuri dynasty has developed through **distinct intellectual phases**, each shaped by the nature of available sources, prevailing historical methods, and broader ideological frameworks. Rather than forming a linear narrative, Katyuri historiography is marked by **recurring debates** concerning origin, chronology, religious orientation, political structure, and decline. These debates reveal not only uncertainties in the source material but also changing assumptions about state formation in the Himalayan region.

One of the **earliest historiographical strands** emerged during the colonial period, when British administrators and antiquarians attempted to document the history of the Kumaon–Garhwal region through gazetteers and surveys. Writers such as E. T. Atkinson treated the Katyuris largely through the prism of **local tradition, temple ruins, and genealogical memory**, often without rigorous source criticism. The Katyuri dynasty was described as an early ruling house whose political center shifted from Joshimath to Baijnath, but their chronology and administrative structure remained vague. Colonial historiography tended to portray the Katyuris as a peripheral and relatively static hill polity, implicitly contrasting them with the more “advanced” states of the Indo-Gangetic plains. [8] While methodologically limited, this strand remains important for preserving inscriptions and local traditions that later disappeared.

A second major strand developed in the **nationalist and regional historiographical phase** of the early to mid-twentieth century. Regional historians, most notably Badri Datt Pandey, sought to reclaim the Katyuri past as a foundational chapter in the history of Kumaon. In this framework, the Katyuris were presented as **powerful and culturally significant rulers**, responsible for temple-building, territorial unification, and the establishment of political order in the hills. This strand frequently emphasized dynastic continuity and grandeur, often relying heavily on later chronicles and oral traditions. One of its defining features was the tendency to attribute to the Katyuris a **Suryavanshi or Ayodhya-based origin**, aligning them with pan-Indian Kshatriya genealogies. While this approach strengthened regional historical identity, it also introduced **teleological and legitimizing narratives** that modern

scholarship has found difficult to substantiate through contemporary evidence. [9]

The most persistent historiographical debate concerns the **origins of the Katyuri dynasty**. Three broad positions can be identified. The first, rooted in genealogical and Puranic traditions, claims an external origin- often linking the Katyuris to Ayodhya or ancient solar lineages. The second argues for continuity with earlier Himalayan polities such as the Kunindas, based largely on numismatic speculation. The third, increasingly accepted in recent scholarship, posits that the Katyuris emerged from **local hill elites, often associated with the Khasa cultural zone**, who gradually adopted Sanskritic royal idioms. Modern historians favor this third interpretation, arguing that external-origin theories reflect later processes of **Sanskritization and political legitimation**, rather than historical migration. [10] This debate is central because it shapes how the Katyuri state is understood- either as an imported model or as an indigenous Himalayan formation.

Another major historiographical strand focuses on **chronology**, an area marked by sustained disagreement. Early works proposed broad and sometimes speculative date ranges for the Katyuri period, often stretching from the sixth to the twelfth centuries CE. With the systematic study of copper-plate inscriptions and temple epigraphy, later scholars narrowed this range, generally situating Katyuri dominance between the eighth and twelfth centuries. However, the absence of inscriptions with clearly dated eras has prevented precise chronological reconstruction. Paleographic dating, architectural style comparison, and relative sequencing of rulers have produced **overlapping and sometimes contradictory chronologies**. This has led historians to adopt cautious formulations such as “circa” periods, reflecting the provisional nature of Katyuri dating. [11]

A further significant debate concerns the **religious character of the Katyuri state**. Earlier historiography frequently framed Katyuri history within a narrative of **religious transition from Buddhism to Brahmanical Hinduism**, often associating this shift with figures like Adi Shankara. Temple remains at Baijnath and Katarmal, with their strong Shaiva orientation, were interpreted as evidence of a decisive Brahmanical revival. More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this linear model, emphasizing **religious coexistence and syncretism**. Inscriptions and iconography suggest that Buddhist, Shaiva, Vaishnava, and local cult practices overlapped for extended periods. The Katyuri rulers appear to have patronized Brahmanical institutions not as a rejection of earlier traditions but as a strategy of political legitimation within wider north Indian cultural networks. [12]

Equally important is the debate over the **nature of Katyuri political organization**. Traditional historiography often described the Katyuri polity as a centralized kingdom with defined capitals and territorial control. In contrast, more recent interpretations, informed by studies of frontier states, argue that Katyuri authority was **segmentary and negotiated**, resting on ritual supremacy, control over pilgrimage centers, and strategic alliances with local elites. Copper-plate grants reveal dependence on Brahmin intermediaries and village-level structures, suggesting that

governance operated through **localized units (grama or grāma-rājya formations)** rather than through a fully centralized bureaucracy. This debate has shifted scholarly attention from dynastic narratives to questions of political practice and spatial control in mountainous environments. [13]

The issue of **decline and fragmentation** constitutes another historiographical strand. Earlier historians explained the fall of the Katyuris through moral decay, dynastic weakness, or external invasion. Later scholarship has reframed decline as a process of **political decentralization**, whereby the Katyuri realm fragmented into smaller successor principalities such as Doti and Askot. This fragmentation coincided with broader early medieval trends across the subcontinent, including the rise of regional powers like the Chand dynasty in Kumaon. Rather than representing abrupt collapse, the end of Katyuri dominance is now understood as a **reconfiguration of power** within the Himalayan political landscape. [14]

Taken together, these historiographical strands reveal a gradual shift from **dynastic and origin-centered narratives** toward **structural and contextual interpretations**. Contemporary scholarship increasingly situates the Katyuri dynasty within wider debates on early medieval state formation, frontier governance, and cultural interaction between the plains and the mountains. The persistence of unresolved debates- especially regarding chronology and origins- underscores the need for interdisciplinary methods, but it also highlights the richness of the Katyuri case for understanding how historical knowledge is produced in regions with fragmented source traditions.

The historiography of the Katyuri dynasty is characterized less by consensus and more by a series of **interlinked debates** arising from fragmentary sources, retrospective traditions, and shifting methodological frameworks. These debates have shaped how the Katyuri polity has been conceptualized- whether as an indigenous Himalayan formation or an extension of plains-based political culture, whether as a centralized kingdom or a loose network of hill chiefdoms, and whether its religious history represents transformation or continuity. An examination of these debates reveals how interpretations of the Katyuri past are deeply contingent upon the nature of sources and the historiographical assumptions brought to them.

One of the most enduring debates concerns the **origin of the Katyuri dynasty**. Early colonial and nationalist historians often argued that the Katyuris were of **external, solar (Suryavanshi) origin**, tracing their lineage to Ayodhya or other prestigious centers of ancient north India. This view relied heavily on later genealogical traditions and the desire to situate regional dynasties within pan-Indian Kshatriya lineages. However, critics have pointed out that such claims appear **only in post-Katyuri sources** and are absent from contemporary inscriptions. In contrast, a second interpretation suggests continuity with earlier Himalayan polities such as the Kunindas, largely on the basis of geographical overlap and occasional numismatic parallels. This position has also been questioned, as coin circulation does not necessarily indicate dynastic succession. The most persuasive and increasingly accepted interpretation situates

the Katyuris as **indigenous hill elites**, possibly linked to the broader Khasa cultural zone, who later adopted Sanskritic genealogical idioms as part of political legitimation. This debate is significant because it determines whether the Katyuri state is understood as an imposed model or an organically evolved Himalayan polity. [15]

Closely related is the debate over **chronology**, which remains one of the most technically complex issues in Katyuri historiography. Scholars have proposed widely varying date ranges for the dynasty, from as early as the sixth century to as late as the twelfth century CE. The core difficulty lies in the absence of inscriptions with explicit, universally recognizable dates. Most copper-plate records provide regnal years without reference to a calendrical era, while stone inscriptions are often undated or damaged. As a result, historians have relied on paleographic analysis, linguistic features, and architectural style comparisons, all of which yield **approximate and overlapping chronologies**. While a broad consensus places the Katyuri period between the eighth and twelfth centuries, disagreements persist regarding the dynasty's formative phase and the timing of its political peak. This debate underscores the provisional nature of early medieval Himalayan chronology and the need for scientific dating methods to supplement epigraphic analysis. [16]

Another major historiographical debate centers on the **religious character of the Katyuri polity**. Earlier scholarship often presented Katyuri history within a linear narrative of **religious transition from Buddhism to Brahmanical Hinduism**, sometimes attributing this transformation to the influence of figures such as Adi Shankara. The prominence of Shaiva temples at Baijnath and Katarmal was interpreted as evidence of a decisive Brahmanical revival. More recent historians have challenged this model, arguing that it oversimplifies a complex religious landscape. Epigraphic and iconographic evidence suggests the **coexistence of Buddhist, Shaiva, Vaishnava, and local cultic practices** over extended periods. From this perspective, Katyuri patronage of Brahmanical institutions is seen not as a rejection of earlier traditions but as a political strategy aimed at integration into wider north Indian cultural and ritual networks. The debate thus reflects a broader shift in historiography- from conversion narratives to models emphasizing syncretism and pluralism. [17]

Equally significant is the debate regarding the **nature of Katyuri political organization**. Traditional historiography described the Katyuri state as a centralized monarchy with fixed capitals and clearly defined territorial boundaries. This view was influenced by the dynastic orientation of early historical writing and by analogies drawn from plains-based kingdoms. In contrast, more recent interpretations emphasize the **segmentary and negotiated character of power** in the Himalayan context. Copper-plate grants reveal a reliance on Brahmin intermediaries and village-level structures, suggesting that authority was exercised through local elites rather than imposed through a centralized bureaucracy. Drawing on comparative studies of frontier states, scholars now argue that Katyuri kingship combined ritual supremacy with limited administrative penetration, making it more appropriate to view the polity as a **hegemonic or**

**overlordship- based formation** rather than a fully centralized state. [18]

The **debate on decline and political fragmentation** constitutes another important historiographical issue. Early accounts often attributed the fall of the Katyuris to moral decay, dynastic weakness, or sudden external invasions. Such explanations reflected a tendency to personalize historical change and to interpret decline as abrupt collapse. Later scholarship has reframed this process as one of **gradual decentralization**, in which the Katyuri realm fragmented into smaller successor principalities such as Doti and Askot. This fragmentation is now understood as part of a wider early medieval pattern across the Indian subcontinent, characterized by the localization of power and the emergence of regional dynasties like the Chands of Kumaon. The debate has thus shifted from identifying a single cause of decline to analyzing long-term structural transformations in Himalayan politics. [19]

Finally, there is an ongoing debate about the **use and misuse of later literary traditions and oral memory** in reconstructing Katyuri history. Earlier historians often treated later chronicles and folk narratives as repositories of historical fact, using them to fill gaps left by the absence of contemporary records. Modern historiography, however, approaches these sources with greater caution, recognizing them as products of later political and cultural contexts. While they remain invaluable for understanding historical memory, identity formation, and the symbolic afterlife of the Katyuri dynasty, their direct use for early medieval reconstruction is now widely questioned. This debate has contributed to a more reflexive historiography that distinguishes between history as lived reality and history as remembered tradition. [20]

Taken together, these major debates reveal that Katyuri historiography is not merely about reconstructing a lost dynasty but about negotiating methodological questions central to early medieval and Himalayan history. The persistence of unresolved issues- especially regarding origins and chronology- does not indicate failure, but rather reflects the complexity of studying societies with fragmentary sources. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views these debates as productive, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches that combine epigraphy, archaeology, anthropology, and comparative political theory to move beyond inherited binaries and toward more nuanced interpretations.

## 2. Methodological Critiques of the Literature

A critical assessment of the literature on the Katyuri dynasty reveals that many of the enduring disagreements in Katyuri historiography arise not merely from the scarcity of sources, but from **methodological choices** that have shaped how available evidence has been interpreted. Early and mid-twentieth-century scholarship often proceeded from a **dynastic and narrative-driven model**, privileging origin stories, king-lists, and linear political development. This approach, while useful for constructing an initial framework, tended to treat fragmented evidence as parts of a continuous whole, thereby masking discontinuities and regional variations inherent in Himalayan political formations. As a

result, hypotheses were frequently presented as established facts, especially in discussions of origin and chronology. [21]

One of the most persistent methodological problems in Katyuri studies has been the **uncritical use of later literary traditions and genealogies**. Regional chronicles composed under later ruling houses, particularly during the Chand period, were often employed to fill gaps left by the absence of contemporary records. While these texts are invaluable for understanding how the Katyuri past was remembered and appropriated, they are **retrospective, legitimizing documents** rather than neutral historical accounts. Earlier historians frequently treated these genealogies as reliable evidence for early medieval events, leading to speculative claims about Suryavanshi descent and dynastic continuity. Modern historiography has increasingly questioned this practice, arguing that such texts should be analyzed primarily as sources for political memory and ideological construction rather than as factual records of Katyuri rule. [22]

A related issue concerns the **overextension of epigraphic evidence beyond its evidentiary limits**. Copper-plate inscriptions and temple epigraphy form the backbone of Katyuri history, yet their fragmentary nature has often been underplayed. Scholars have sometimes attempted to reconstruct complete dynastic sequences and administrative systems from a small number of damaged or partially preserved inscriptions. Palaeographic dating, though indispensable, has also been treated at times with unwarranted precision, resulting in chronologies that appear firmer than the evidence allows. The absence of inscriptions with securely dated eras means that most chronological frameworks remain **relative rather than absolute**, a fact not always adequately acknowledged in earlier literature. [23]

Another methodological limitation lies in the **overreliance on architectural style as a dating tool**. Temple architecture at sites such as Baijnath and Katarmal has been central to arguments about Katyuri religious affiliation and political power. While stylistic comparison with better-dated monuments from the plains provides useful clues, architectural analysis alone cannot establish precise chronologies. Many Himalayan temples underwent repeated phases of repair, renovation, and reuse, often incorporating earlier materials into later structures. Without stratified excavation or scientific dating, attributing entire temple complexes to a single dynastic phase risks oversimplification. The tendency to equate monumental architecture directly with centralized political authority further reflects plains-centric assumptions that may not hold in a mountainous frontier context. [24]

The literature has also been shaped by a **plains-centric bias in models of state formation**. Earlier historians frequently evaluated the Katyuri polity against the criteria of early medieval kingdoms of the Indo-Gangetic plains, such as bureaucratic centralization, fixed capitals, and uniform administrative hierarchies. When Katyuri evidence failed to meet these expectations, it was often interpreted as a sign of political weakness or incomplete state formation. Recent scholarship has challenged this assumption, emphasizing that Himalayan polities operated through different mechanisms—ritual authority, control of pilgrimage routes, negotiated

relations with local elites, and symbolic dominance over sacred landscapes. Methodologically, this shift calls for comparative frameworks that treat Himalayan states as **frontier formations** rather than imperfect versions of plains-based models. [25]

A further critique concerns the **limited integration of archaeological and scientific methods** into Katyuri historiography. While epigraphy and art history have received considerable attention, systematic archaeological excavation has been sporadic. Few sites associated with the Katyuris have been excavated stratigraphically, and the application of radiocarbon dating, optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), or material-science techniques remains minimal. This imbalance has reinforced dependence on textual and stylistic inference, leaving key questions of settlement patterns, economic life, and temporal sequencing underexplored. The absence of landscape archaeology and GIS-based spatial analysis has similarly constrained understanding of how geography shaped Katyuri political authority. [26]

Finally, the treatment of **oral traditions and local memory** reveals a broader methodological tension between history and anthropology. Earlier works either dismissed oral narratives as unhistorical or, conversely, incorporated them uncritically into political history. Contemporary approaches advocate a middle path: recognizing oral traditions as crucial for understanding cultural continuity, sacred geography, and identity formation, while refraining from using them as direct chronological evidence. Methodologically, this requires careful triangulation with epigraphic and archaeological data, as well as sensitivity to the changing meanings of historical memory over time. [27]

Taken together, these methodological critiques suggest that the limitations of Katyuri historiography stem less from an absence of data than from **analytical frameworks inherited from earlier phases of Indian historiography**. The most promising recent studies are those that combine cautious epigraphic analysis with archaeological context, comparative political theory, and anthropological insight. Such approaches move beyond the search for definitive dynastic narratives and instead focus on understanding how power, religion, and society were negotiated in the Himalayan world of the early medieval period.

### Reassessing Key Evidence: A Closer Reading of Inscriptions and Monuments

A reassessment of Katyuri historiography necessitates returning to the **core primary evidence**—inscriptions and monuments— not merely as repositories of names and dates, but as historically situated texts and material forms produced within specific political, ritual, and ecological contexts. Earlier scholarship often approached Katyuri inscriptions and temples with the aim of extracting dynastic sequences or demonstrating centralized authority. A closer reading, however, reveals that these sources speak more convincingly about **patterns of patronage, negotiated power, and symbolic legitimation** than about rigid political structures.

The copper-plate inscriptions discovered at Pandukeshwar occupy a central position in any reconstruction of Katyuri political history. These *tāmrāpatras* record royal land grants,

usually issued in favor of Brahmins or religious institutions, and are framed within standard early medieval Sanskrit epigraphic conventions. Historians have long mined these records for royal names- most notably Lalitasuradeva- and for clues to administrative organization. Yet a closer reading shows that the inscriptions are **highly formulaic**, emphasizing ritual merit (*punya*), royal generosity, and religious sanction rather than detailed mechanisms of governance. The absence of explicit references to standing bureaucratic offices or territorial administration suggests that royal authority was articulated primarily through **donative and ritual acts**, rather than through continuous administrative intervention. [28]

Equally significant is what the Pandukeshwar inscriptions **do not** reveal. Most plates are silent on the precise spatial extent of Katyuri control, provide no systematic account of revenue extraction beyond the donated lands, and lack absolute calendrical dates. Earlier attempts to construct comprehensive political chronologies from these inscriptions often exceeded what the evidence could support. A more cautious interpretation treats the plates as **snapshots of royal presence** at specific locations rather than as proof of uninterrupted sovereignty over a fixed territory. This reading aligns more closely with what is known about early medieval frontier polities elsewhere in the subcontinent. [29]

Stone inscriptions associated with temple complexes- particularly those at the Baijnath Temple Complex- have similarly been used to reinforce narratives of Katyuri political dominance and Shaiva orthodoxy. These inscriptions typically commemorate temple construction, renovation, or donations and often invoke Shaiva deities such as Vaidyanatha. Earlier historiography tended to read these records as evidence of a decisive Brahmanical "revival" under Katyuri patronage. However, a closer epigraphic and contextual reading suggests a more nuanced picture. The inscriptions emphasize **royal piety and ritual legitimacy**, but they do not explicitly exclude other religious traditions. Their function appears less doctrinal and more political: to anchor royal authority within a sacred landscape that was already religiously plural. [30]

Monumental temple architecture, especially at Baijnath and Katarmal, has played an even larger role in shaping interpretations of Katyuri power. The scale, durability, and stylistic sophistication of these temples have often been taken as proxies for centralized state authority and economic surplus. Yet architectural evidence, when read critically, complicates such assumptions. Many temple complexes show clear signs of **multi-phase construction**, repair, and reuse of materials. Sculptural styles vary within single sites, indicating extended building histories rather than single episodes of royal patronage. Without stratified excavation and scientific dating, it is methodologically unsound to attribute entire temple complexes to a single Katyuri ruler or even to the Katyuri period as a whole. [31]

A closer reading of architectural layout and site location further suggests that Katyuri temples were strategically situated along **pilgrimage routes, river valleys, and communication corridors**, rather than at administratively central locations. This pattern points toward a mode of power

that relied on **ritual centrality and control of sacred movement**, rather than direct bureaucratic administration. The temples functioned as nodes of religious authority, economic exchange, and symbolic dominance, reinforcing royal presence in a landscape where permanent administrative penetration would have been difficult. Such a model resonates with comparative studies of Himalayan and other mountainous polities. [32]

Numismatic and material evidence, though limited, also benefits from reassessment. Earlier historians occasionally treated isolated coin finds as indicators of political control or dynastic succession. A more cautious reading recognizes that coins primarily testify to **circulation networks** rather than sovereignty. In the Himalayan context, where trade routes connected the plains with trans-Himalayan regions, coinage reflects participation in wider economic systems rather than direct state authority. Material culture thus supports interpretations of Katyuri power as **embedded in networks**, not imposed through uniform territorial control [33]

Taken together, a closer reading of inscriptions and monuments challenges earlier attempts to reconstruct the Katyuri dynasty as a centralized, plains-style kingdom. Instead, the evidence points toward a **ritual-political formation**, in which authority was asserted episodically through land grants, temple patronage, and symbolic association with sacred landscapes. Inscriptions articulate legitimacy rather than administration; monuments express presence rather than control. Reassessing these sources with methodological restraint allows the Katyuri polity to be understood on its own terms- as a Himalayan state shaped by geography, mobility, and negotiated authority rather than by bureaucratic centralization.

### 3. Conclusion

The historiography of the Katyuri dynasty demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of writing early medieval Himalayan history from fragmentary and heterogeneous sources. From colonial antiquarian accounts to nationalist regional histories and more recent interdisciplinary scholarship, interpretations of the Katyuri past have been shaped as much by **methodological frameworks** as by the nature of the evidence itself. This study has argued that many longstanding debates- regarding origin, chronology, religious change, political structure, and decline- are less the result of contradictory data than of **overextended readings of limited sources** and the application of plains-centric models of state formation to a fundamentally different ecological and political context.

A critical reassessment of the primary evidence- especially inscriptions and monuments- suggests that Katyuri power was articulated primarily through **ritual authority, land grants, and sacred patronage**, rather than through continuous administrative control. Copper-plate inscriptions functioned as instruments of legitimation and religious merit, not as comprehensive records of governance. Temple architecture, while monumental and symbolically potent, reflects long-term processes of construction, reuse, and regional interaction rather than single moments of centralized royal initiative. When read cautiously, these sources point toward a

**negotiated and episodic form of authority**, characteristic of Himalayan frontier polities, rather than a centralized kingdom modelled on the Indo-Gangetic plains.

The historiographical shift from dynastic and origin-centered narratives toward structural and contextual interpretations marks an important advance in Katyuri studies. Increasing attention to religious pluralism, local social formations, and the symbolic geography of power has complicated earlier linear narratives of Buddhist decline and Brahmanical ascendancy. Similarly, the reinterpretation of Katyuri decline as political fragmentation and regional reconfiguration, rather than abrupt collapse, situates the dynasty within broader early medieval processes observable across South Asia. In this sense, the Katyuri case contributes to wider debates on **state formation, localization of power, and the nature of sovereignty in marginal landscapes**.

At the same time, this study underscores the need for greater methodological rigor and interdisciplinary integration. The persistence of unresolved questions—particularly concerning chronology and territorial reach—reflects the limits of relying predominantly on epigraphy and art history in the absence of stratified archaeological data and scientific dating. Future research must therefore move beyond textual and stylistic inference to incorporate **targeted excavation, material-science analysis, digital epigraphy, and landscape-based approaches**. Equally important is a reflexive engagement with oral traditions and later literary sources, not as repositories of factual detail but as windows into the afterlife of Katyuri memory and its role in shaping regional historical consciousness.

In conclusion, situating the historiography of the Katyuri dynasty reveals that its significance lies not only in reconstructing the history of a single ruling house but also in challenging inherited assumptions about political complexity, cultural integration, and historical change in the Himalayan world. By reading inscriptions and monuments as context-bound expressions of power rather than as straightforward records of state machinery, this study repositions the Katyuri polity as a **distinctive early medieval Himalayan formation**, whose history enriches and complicates our understanding of India's past. The Katyuris thus emerge not as a marginal footnote but as a critical case for rethinking the categories and methods through which early medieval South Asian history is written.

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