

The Nāgas and the Nāga Cult in Early Kashmir : As Reflected in Nīlamata Purāna.

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Abstract

Nīlamata Purāna, which is a 6th -7th century C.E Sanskrit text from Kashmir is full of references to nāgas. The present research paper aims to analyze and contextualize their description in the aforementioned purana. Attempt has been made to delineate the nāgas described in the purana into two subthemes viz. Nāga as a tribe and Nāga as a cult. The former theme would naturally focus on those narrations in the purāna which class them as human beings whereas the later theme would take into consideration the semi divine aspects attributed to them. The inferences thus made would constitute the concluding remarks.

Key words : Nīlamata Purāna, Nāgas, Piśācas, Manavas, Kashmir.

Introduction

History of early Kashmir is intricately linked with nāgas, with considerable evidence available to suggest that atleast by 4th -3rd century B.C nāgaworship seems to be the principal religion of the inhabitants of Kashmir.ⁱ

Mahavamsa testifies to the presence of nāgacult in early Kashmir in 3rd century B.C, as it informs us that many nāgas were converted to Buddhism by *Majjhantika*, who was sent by *Moggaliputta Tissa*, the adviser of Ashoka, to Kashmir to preach Buddhism.ⁱⁱ Thereafter, Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang who visited Kashmir in 7th century C.E and Bu-ston, a Tibetan scholar who wrote about history of Buddhism in 14th century C.E also document the conversion of nāgas of Kashmir to Buddhism by the *Arhat Madhyantika* (apparently *Majjhantika*).ⁱⁱⁱ

The native literature of Kashmir also confirms the presence of nāgas in early Kashmir. *Nīlamata Purāna* (6th-7th c. C.E) and *Rājataranganī* (12th c. C.E) narrate the story of origin of Kashmir valley, provide many legends about the nāgas and also refer to rituals and festivals of nāgas. Abul Fazl, informs us that during Akbar's reign there were more than 700 places in Kashmir where carved images of nāgas were found and were worshipped by the locals.^{iv}

The present research paper is based on a careful and detailed study of *Nīlamata Purāna* and attempts to analyze various legends described in the purana, so as to bring forth a reasonable understanding of the nāgas who seems to be so elusive and mythical that it becomes hard to comprehend their true nature.

The Nāgas and the Nāga Cult

Etymologically, the word nāga is a Sanskrit word which means a 'snake' especially the Indian cobra. The other meanings of the word are elephant, mountain or hill and some scholars have even tried to derive it from the word 'nagna' meaning naked, as the ancient tribes used to remain almost naked. However, the association of nāgas with serpents in ancient Indian literature and plastic art seems to justify the first proposition.

In ancient Indian literature we find frequent mention of nāgas variously as humans, as animals as well as semi divine beings. As human beings (a tribe) they are spread through out the entire geography of Indian subcontinent, hold various prestigious positions under different rulers, and even many ruling dynasties are said to be nāgas.^v References to marriages of royal princes to nāga princesses are numerous.^{vi} As such they appear to be a totemistic people having serpent as the totem of their tribe.^{vii} As semi divine beings, nāgas are often classed with *yakshas*, *kinnaras* and *gandharvas*. They find an important place as

local deities in all major religious traditions of ancient India. *Nāgas*, in independent form as well as in association with Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are clearly visible in the literature and plastic art of ancient and medieval India.^{viii}

The word *cultis* defined as a system or group of people who practice excessive devotion to a figure, object or belief system. Thus, *nāga* cult may refer to those groups of people or systems who show devotion to *nāgas* in theriomorphic (animal form), Anthropomorphic (human form) and therio-anthropomorphic (half human-half snake) forms.

Contextualizing Nīlamata Purāna

Nīlamata Purāna, as most scholars are in agreement, belongs to 6th or 7th century AD. As such, understanding the prevailing socio-cultural and political conditions of the period are essential for better understanding the content of *Nīlamata Purāna*.

First and foremost, the 7th century CE is characterized by the emergence of Karakota dynasty in Kashmir. Durlabhvardhan, the founder of the dynasty has been described as the offspring of *nāga Karkota*. His description of being of lowly origin and gradually joining the service under king Baladitya, marrying his daughter and finally succeeding him, required him to be a descendent of some respectable family.^{ix} Probably that may be the reason for tracing his lineage to the legendry figure i.e *nāga Karkota* in order to seek legitimacy. Another reason may be to reclaim the old glory of *nāga* rule in Kashmir. Durlabhvardhan being a *nāga* chief and *nāga* worshipper tried to revive the practices of good old days.

Further, by 7th c. CE Buddhism was in a state of decline. In this context *Nīlamata Purāna* may be seen as an expression of rising influence of Brahmanism. Also, as Prof. Suman Jamwal points out, the central concern of *Nīlamata Purāna* to define Kashmir as a geographical and cultural entity, seems to indicate an effort to create a regional identity.^x

Nāgas in Nīlamata Purāna

Many legends in *Nīlamata Purāna* clearly show *nāgas* as a tribe involved in struggle with other contemporary tribes. In this context, the stories narrated in *Nīlamata Purāna* along with the reasonable inferences that could be drawn have been stated as under.

Nāgas and Garuda

Brief story of enmity between *nāgas* (sons of *Kadrū*) and *garuda* (son of *Vinatā*) which has been described in *Nīlamata Purāna* is presented as under.^{xi}

Nīlamata Purāna informs us that thirteen daughters of Daksha were married to Kashyapa. Out of them, *Kadrū* bore *Nāgas* whereas *Vinatā* bore *Garuda* and *Aruna*. Both these sisters were jealous of each other. Once they betted slavery for life over the colour of the horse *Uccaihsravas* (born out of water). *Vinatā* and *Kadrū* proclaimed it to be white and black respectively. *Kadrū* asked her sons to cover the horse and as a result the colour of the horse appeared black. Thus by cheating *Vinatā* was won over as a slave for life by *Kadrū*. *Garuda* rescued his mother by bringing soma from Indra and in order to seek revenge asked for the boon to eat *nāgas* from Indra, which he got. Now *Garuda* started slaughtering *nāgas*. *Vāsuki*, the king of *nāgas*, approached *Janardana* and sought his protection to which *Hari* told him to live with his *nāga* brethren in the beautiful lake in the country of *Sati* (*Satidesa*) where *Garuda* would not kill any *nāga*. *Janardana* (*Vishnu*) further asked *Vāsuki* to coronate *Nīla*, as the king of *nāgas* of *Satidesa*.

Detailed story of the enmity between *nāgas* and *garuda* is narrated in *Adiparva* of *Mahābhārata*. The inference that can be deduced from this story is that *nāga* tribe found Kashmir valley, a place surrounded by lofty mountains and few passes, a safe place to reside, away from the constant purging by the *garuda* tribe and as a result they moved here.

Nāgas and the Creation of Kashmir

Nāgas are stated to have been present in Kashmir region when the valley was still a large lake. *Nīlamata Purāna* calls the lake 'Satisar' i.e the lake of Sati. The creation of Kashmir valley as narrated in *Nīlamata Purāna* has been described as under.^{xii}

Jalodbhava (the water born) was born out of the seed of daitya *Samgrha* which fell into the water of the lake when he was lustfully trying to capture *saci*, the wife of *Indra*. The *Daitya* was eventually killed by *Indra* in one year long fight. Out of compassion and peity, the child was brought up by the *nāgas*. When adult *Jalodbhava* through penance got three boons from lord *Brahma* viz. magical powers, unparalleled prowess and immortality in water. Now *Jalodbhava*, using his magical powers started to devour the human beings who lived in the neighbouring countries and laid waste the lands of *Darvaabhisara*, *Gandhara*, *Juhundra*, the *Sakas*, the *Khasas*, the *Tanganas*, the *Mandavas*, the *Madras* and the inhabitants of *Angiri* and *Bahirgiri*. He also caused trouble for the *nāgas*. At the same time *rishi Kashyapa*, the father of the *nāgas* was travelling world on a holy pilgrimage. *Nīla* went to meet him at *Kankhala*. While moving to the North on his pilgrimage along with *Nīla*, *Kashyapa* asked the reason for desolation of the *Madras* and other neighboring countries to which *Nīla* told him the entire story of the devastation caused by *Jalodbhava*. *Kashyapa* along with *Nīla* went to the abode of Lord *Brahma* where by chance *Isvara*, *Vasudeva* and *Ananta* were also present and sought his help. *Brahma* asked *Hari* to kill the demon. They went on their respective vehicles/mounts to the lake of *satisdesa*. *Brahma* on swan, *Hari* on *Tarkasya*, *Hara* on Bull and the two *nāgas* on cloud. Similarly many *devtas*, *devis*, *rivers* etc also reached the spot (*Naubandhana* mountain) on their respective mounts, to see the fight. *Jalodbhava* knowing that he is immortal in water did not come up to fight. In response *Hari* asked *Ananta* to drain the lake with his plough with he did and the water started gushing out with such force that it terrified all the beings. As the water drained, *Jalodbhava* caused darkness with his magical powers. *Hara* held sun and moon in his hands and thus the darkness was dispelled. Now *Hari* using his yogic powers fought *Jalodbhava* with one body and watched the fight with other body. Using his discuss *Hari* struck off the head of *Jalodbhava* and thus the era of terror ended. *Brahma* obtained great gratification. The land so formed by draining the lake came to be known as *Kasmira* (*Ka* means *Prajapati* (*Brahma*) and *Kashyapa* is also *Prajapati*, hence after him the land was called *Kasmira*).^{xiii} Also *Ka* means water and as such the land formed by draining water by *Ananta* (*Balarama*) came to be known as *Kasmira*.^{xiv}

It is pertinent to state here that the legendary origin of the valley mentioned in *Nīlamata Purāna* has been well corroborated by geological facts. The lacustrine deposits called *Karewas* in the valley provide for an irrefutable evidence. According to the geologists, the valley was a lake during Pleistocene period and was drained through *Baramullah* gorge due to some endogenetic forces.^{xv}

Nāgas, Pishachas and Manavas

Nāgas, *Pishachas* and *Manavas* contested and compromised in order to create for themselves a space in Kashmir valley. Their story has been narrated in *Nīlamata Purāna*.^{xvi}

For 4 aeons the nāgas had to live with pishachas. In manavantara, the manavas were allowed to live in Kashmir only for six months in a year. They had to move out before the onset of winters. Due to a brahmin Chandradeva's request to nāga Nīla, manavas were allowed to settle permanently in Kashmir.

Once the lake was drained and Jalodbhava killed, Kashyapa requested lord Viśṇu with folded hands to let the country be inhabited by the human beings. To this nāga said that they would not live in the company of men. Furious Kashyapa then cursed them to live with the pisacas. Anxious Nīla said to Kashyapa that they are overpowered with anger and know nothing. To this, kasyapa replied that there lived highly terrible pisacas belonging to the side of daityas in the sea of sand which is 6 yojnas long. Nikumbha, a noble and strong lord of pisacas has been appointed by Kubera to keep the pisacas in check. In the month of chaitra, he goes to fight 5 crore pisacas in the sea of sand along with his 5 crore followers. Nikumbha along with his followers come back on the bright 15th of Asvayuj. For six months he lives happily on Himacala. Nīla replied that they are ready to live with men but not with pisacas who are cruel and like cruelty. To this Viśṇu said that the words of the sage would be effective for one caturyuga only and after that nāgas will live in the company of men only. Furthermore here the pisacas will always be weak and endowed with strength they would go to the sea of sand to fight for six months. Men will worship nāgas on whose territory they would dwell.

Each year, having collected rice, grains etc. the human beings go away by taking permission and come back on the full moon day of Caitra. Four eons passed by and at the end of Asvayuj month human beings collected rice and went away but one good old brahman named Candradeva, descendent of kasyapa due to despondency and being ordained future events did not go. Candradeva was not killed by the pisacas due to the fear of Nikumbha and for the sake of sport. Pisacas played with him like boys play with a bird tied to string. Agitated then he obtained complete indifference. Oppressed by piśācas, cold and snow he roamed with a perplexed mind and reached the palace of Nīla. He asked Nīla to let the human beings live constantly in Kasmira. It will be so said Nīla. Candradeva lived happily in Nīla's palace for next six months. When the full moon night of caitra passed, king Virodhaya surrounded by horses and elephants came. A young brahman appointed by Nīla narrated the whole story to Virodhaya who told the same to the people. Since then human beings started living in Kasmira constantly acting upon the instructions of Nīla. They constructed houses, temples, sacred places, villages and cities. Since then very less snow falls and people obey the words of Nīla.

As can be gleaned from the story, initially there seems to be an arrangement amongst nāgas, piśācas and manavas whereby for six months of summer manavas would reside in Kashmir valley along with nāgas and for the remaining six months of winter piśācas would stay along with nāgas. It may be noted that the nāgas, stayed throughout the year, which in turn strengthens the notion that they were the original inhabitants of the Kashmir valley. P N K Banzai identifies them as pre Aryan tribes who inhabited the mountain tracts of North Western India particularly, the Kashmir^{xvii}. Further, he identifies Piśācas to be the chalcolithic tribe from Sinkiang^{xviii} and Manavas to be the Aryans (termed as Saraswat) residing in the Punjab region who migrated to Kashmir when the Saraswati river dried up^{xix}.

Some Prominent nāgas in Nīlamata Purāna

1. *Vāsuki* : *Vāsuki* is stated to be the Lord of all *nāgas* . It was he who approached *Janardana (Viśhu)* to grant *nāgas* refuge in Kashmir valley. We are informed that being a yogi *Vāsuki* stays with his primary body at Bhogavati but also dwells at Vriddhatirtha in Kashmir.^{xx}

2. *Nīla* : *Nīla* is the king of all the *nāgas* of Kashmir. He is appointed as the king by *Vāsuki* on recommendation of Lord *Kesava*.^{xxi} The text *Nīlamata Purāna* itself means 'The Teachings of *Nīla*' which are basically instructions to be followed by *manavas* who wish to reside in Kashmir valley. His abode is stated to be the blue water spring at the origin of *Vitasta*.

3. *Bindusara, Śrimādhaka, Uttaramānasa*: These three *nāgas* are stated to be the *Dikpalas* i.e the gaurdians of the directions in Kashmir valley. *NāgaBindusara* is the guardian of eastern direction, *nāga Uttaramānasa* of northern direction, and *nāga Śrimādhaka* of southern direction.^{xxii} The guardian of western direction is not stated in *Nīlamata Purāna*. However, *nāga Elapatra* is considered to be the fourth *dikpala*.^{xxiii}

4. *Sadangula* : *NāgaSadangula* was banished by *nāga Nīla* from his abode in Kashmir valley because he used to kidnap and carry away the wives of men. He was allotted a place on *Usiraka* mountain in the *Darva* country.^{xxiv}

5. *Mahāpadma* : *Nāga Mahāpadma* and his people being devoured by *Garuda*, sought land for settlement of his tribe from *nāga Nīla*.^{xxv} *Nīla* allocates to him the city of *Chandrapura*, which belonged to king *Viśvagaśva*. A treacherous method, through which the city was occupied by *nāga Mahāpadma* and turned into a lake was revealed to him by *nāga Nīla* himself.

Nāga Cult in Nīlamata Purāna

As gleaned from *Nīlamata Purāna*, the cults of *Siva, Vishnu, Buddha* and other Brahmanical deities along with the *Nāgas* were prevelant amongst the inhabitants of ancient Kashmir. As such their interaction, negotiation and assimilation leading to the subsequent syncretic form is quite evident through-out the purana. The cult of *Vishnu* seems to have greatly influenced the *Nāga* cult and vice versa. The syncretic form thus developed can be seen as under.

First, *Vishnu* grants a safe place to the *nāgas* in Kashmir.^{xxvi} *Nāgaraja Vāsuki* seeks refuge from *Vishnu* in order to save the *nāgas* from the onslaught of *garuda*, who also happens to be the mount of *Vishnu*. In the quest to avenge the suffering of his mother at the hands of *Kadrū*, the mother of *nāgas*, *Garuda* was hell bent on eradicating all the *nāgas*. *Vishnu* grants Kashmir, the land of Sati, as a safe dwelling place to *nāgas*. Second, *Vishnu* is described as lying on thousand hooded *Sesa*^{xxvii} and *Balaram* has been identified with *Śesha/Ananta*.^{xxviii} Third, *Nīla* and *Vāsuki* are stated to be very dear to *Vishnu*^{xxix} and they always obey his command. Fourth, *Nīla* states that the instructions that he has been given to *Candradeva* to be followed by *manavas* were revealed to him by *Kesava*(*Vishnu*) himself^{xxx} and Fifth, *Vishnu* himself enjoins upon all the inhabitants of Kashmir to worship the local *nāgas* and follow their instructions.^{xxxi}

In *Nīlamata Purāna*, the *nāgas* as independent deities have been attributed the powers over water, rain and snow.^{xxxii} As regards their worship, *Nīlamata Purāna* states that the *nāgas* must be worshipped by the *manavas* who wish to reside in their territory lest they should fall prey to heavy snow, destructive rains and droughts. The word *Nīlamata* itself means 'The Teachings of *Nīla* (the *nāga* king of Kashmir)'. As such, *Nīlamata Purāna* may be seen as the instruction manual to be followed by the *manavas* who wish to inhabit the Kashmir valley.

As regards the propitiation of *nāgas*, *Nīlamata Purāna* informs us about the occasions when the *nāgas* are to be worshipped. On the first snowfall, *Nīla* as well as other local *nāgas* are to be worshipped with offerings of flowers, fruits and incense of bdellium.^{xxxiii} On the occasion of *Iramanjaripujana*, *Nīla* and other local *nāgas* receive worship along with other gods and goddesses with offerings of Ira flowers which are stated to be dear to *Nīla*.^{xxxiv} On bright 5th of *Indra's* fortnight, offerings are made to *Nīla* and local *nāgas*.^{xxxv} 5th, 12th and bright 15th of a month are reserved for the pilgrimage to the abode of *nāgas*.^{xxxvi} 5th day of every month is reserved for the worship of *nāgas*.^{xxxvii} *Varunapancami*, is dedicated to the worship of *Nīla* under the name *Dhanada*.^{xxxviii}

Conclusion

On careful perusal of the *Nīlamata Purāna*, the inferences that are drawn are discussed as under.

Nāgas were the original inhabitants of Kashmir region, as they resided there even before the draining of *Satisar* lake and formation of Kashmir valley. Enmity with *Garuda* forced them to flee in search of a safe place to live. Kashmir valley, surrounded with lofty mountains and rugged terrain provided the ideal safe haven to the *nāgas*.

In sharp contrast to the *nāgas* being mythical semi divine beings as portrayed in many puranas, jatakas and epics, the *nāgas* in *Nīlamata Purāna* are undoubtedly humans beings. As a tribe they are stated to have cohabitated the valley along with tribes of *pisācas* and *manavas*. *Nāgas* were tribal people who wore serpent hoods, as they are described as the hooded ones in *Nīlamata Purāna*.^{xxxix} This justifies the notion that *nāgas* were totemistic tribe wearing serpent hoods alike to a cobra. They were the rulers of ancient Kashmir. *Nāga Nīla* being the King of *nāgas*, asserted sovereignty over local *nāga* chieftains.

As far as the worship of *nāgas* is considered, it is stated in *Nīlamata Purāna* that, 'Men will worship the *nāga* in whose territory they dwell and follow the customs laid by you (*nāga Nīla*)'.^{xl} It is clear that only the men who wished to reside in Kashmir valley are enjoined upon to worship the *nāga* Kings, in whose territory they are allowed to settle. Moreover, only *nāga* chiefs, who also happen to be kings (local as well as regional) are to be propitiated. *Nāgas* as semi divine beings are described as both benevolent as well as malevolent. If propitiated properly, they grant the boons of good rain, potable water supply through springs and lakes, bountiful crops and cattle wealth, whereas if neglected they resort to heavy snowfall, thunderstorms and even droughts thereby causing mass destruction.

Thus, in light of the above discussion, *Nīlamata Purāna* may be seen as an attempt to incorporate the prevalent *Nāga* Cult into Brahmanical pantheon. It is stated in *Nīlamata Purāna* that both *Vāsuki* and *Nīla* are dear to *Vishnu* and they obey his command. This in a subtle way implies that *nāgas* have been assimilated in the Brahmanical fold by assigning a relatively subordinate position to their chief kings in Brahmanical pantheon. This may be seen as a give and take between a great tradition and a little tradition.^{xli}

Nīlamata Purāna may also be seen as an attempt at granting legitimacy to the rule of Karkota dynasty by bringing forth the notion that *nāgas* were the original rulers of ancient Kashmir. Further, creation of a sacred geography^{xlii} in *Nīlamata Purāna*, quite familiar to the followers of Brahmanical deities, provides for them an easy way to settle in Kashmir valley.

Notes and References

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- ⁱⁱ*ibid.* p.140.
- ⁱⁱⁱ*ibid.* p.141.
- ^{iv}*ibid.* p.142
- ^v Gupta, Karunakana. (1939). The nāgas and the nāga Cult in Ancient Indian History. *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*. pp. 218-223.
- ^{vi} *ibid.* pp. 216-17.
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- ^{viii}*ibid.* pp. 15-29.
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- ^{xi}*The Nilamata Purana*. (1968). A critical edition and translation by Ved Kumari. Srināgar. Vol II (henceforth referred to as *Nilamata*). vv. 48-72.
- ^{xii}*ibid.* vv. 74-180.
- ^{xiii}*ibid.* v. 226.
- ^{xiv}*ibid.* v.227.
- ^{xv}Husain, Majid. (2020). *Geography of India*. Tamil Nadu. Mcgraw Hill Education (India) Pvt. Ltd. p. 283.
- ^{xvi}*Nilamata*. vv. 205-383.
- ^{xvii} Bamzai, P.N.K. (1994). *Culture and Political History of Kashmir*. Darya Ganj, New Delhi : M D Publications Pvt. Ltd.p. 58.
- ^{xviii}*ibid.* p. 59.
- ^{xix}*ibid.* p. 60.
- ^{xx}*Nilamata* . vv. 230-233.
- ^{xxi}*ibid.* v. 72.
- ^{xxii}*ibid.* vv. 984-85.
- ^{xxiii}Ray, S.C. (2001). *op.cit.* p. 141.
- ^{xxiv}*Nilamata*. vv. 1000-1001.
- ^{xxv}*ibid.* vv. 994-996.
- ^{xxvi}*ibid.* v. 61.
- ^{xxvii}*ibid.* v. 66.
- ^{xxviii}*ibid.* v. 189.
- ^{xxix} *ibid.* v. 367.
- ^{xxx}*ibid.* v. 375.
- ^{xxxi}*ibid.* vv. 223-224.
- ^{xxxii}*ibid.* v. 363.

^{xxxiii} *ibid.* vv. 477-479.

^{xxxiv} *ibid.* vv. 703-704.

^{xxxv} *ibid.* vv. 757-758.

^{xxxvi} *ibid.* v. 879.

^{xxxvii} *ibid.* v. 883.

^{xxxviii} *ibid.* v. 784.

^{xxxix} *ibid.* v. 353.

^{xl} *ibid.* vv. 223-225.

^{xli} Great tradition implies the tradition contained in written form e.g vedas, epics, puranas etc. and is followed by the elites whereas the little tradition, which may also be termed as a folk tradition is mostly preserved and transmitted through oral form. Based on Robert Redfield's model of 'Little Communities' the concept of Great and Little tradition was developed by McKim Marriott and Milton Singer.

^{xlii} Sacred Geography may be defined as a geographical space which has been attributed the quality of being sacred. *Nīlamta Purāna* is full of descriptions of springs, lakes, rivers, confluences and mountains of Kashmir, where various deities reside and are sacred to both *nagas* and *manavas*.