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Social Life of the Nagas: A Case Study of the *Nilamata Purana*

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Abstract: This paper explores the social life of the Nagas as depicted in the *Nilamata Purana*, focusing on their evolving relationship with humans and their role in shaping the cultural and social foundations of early Kashmir. Rather than viewing the Nagas as purely mythological entities, the study examines their active participation in the region's sacred geography and community development. Through narratives involving figures such as Jalodbhava, Candradeva, and King Nila, the text reveals how the Nagas mediated between divine will and human need, gradually enabling a shift from conflict to coexistence. The paper also investigates the social organization of the Naga community, as evidenced by extensive genealogical records and leadership hierarchies, suggesting a structured and functioning society. Themes of hospitality, spiritual authority, and cosmic regulation emerge throughout the text, reflecting the Nagas' significance beyond myth. The research highlights the *Nilamata Purana* not only as a religious text but also as a valuable source for understanding the cultural memory and early societal imagination of Kashmir, where the Nagas served as both symbols and agents of social order, environmental guardianship, and ritual continuity.

Keywords

Nagas, Nilamata Purana, Early Kashmir, Naga-Human Relations, Mythology.

Introduction

The social life of the Nagas, as portrayed in the *Nilamata Purana*, offers a vivid glimpse into the evolving relationships between divine beings, humans, and supernatural entities in early Kashmir. Emerging from the progeny of Prajapati Kasyapa and Kadru, the Nagas occupied a central role in shaping the valley's sacred and social landscapes. Initially reluctant to coexist with humans, the Nagas preferred isolation, but the intervention of Kasyapa and Visnu led to a compromise of alternating seasonal habitation with the Pisacas and humans, eventually culminating in harmonious coexistence. The Naga king Nila's compassion and sense of governance are reflected in his efforts to maintain order within Naga society, notably by exiling Sadangula for violating human dignity, and by welcoming Candradeva, a Brahmana, into Naga hospitality. Over time, rituals of Naga worship were prescribed for humans, embedding the Nagas deeply into the cultural and spiritual rhythm of the region. This paper explores how the Nagas not only maintained an internal social structure but also negotiated coexistence with humans and supernatural beings, thereby playing a major role in shaping the early community life of Kashmir. The *Nilamata Purana* depicts a highly organized Naga society under powerful leaders like Nila, Vasuki, and Karkota, supported by extensive genealogical lists that reveal the breadth and diversity of Naga traditions. Far from

being mere mythological figures, the Nagas emerge as protectors, regulators, and spiritual custodians of early Kasmira, embodying ideals of loyalty, adaptability, and cosmic balance. This paper presents their story as a reflection of how divine compassion, social discipline, and ritual interconnectedness shaped the foundations of human society in the sacred geography of Kashmir.

To study the social life of the Nagas in early Kashmir in an organized manner, this paper has been divided into four main themes. Each theme examines a specific aspect of their society, starting from their role in shaping early settlements to the development of their internal social structure and organization.

1. Nagas and their Role in Shaping Early Society

In the mythological traditions preserved within the *Nilamata Purana*, the account of Jalodbhava offers a striking insight into the compassionate and complex social conduct of the Nagas. According to the narrative, a child was miraculously born in the waters, originating from the fallen semen of the evil-minded being Samgraha.¹ The Nagas, demonstrating an innate sense of mercy even towards beings born of impure circumstances, chose to nurture the child within their aquatic domain. In acknowledgment of his unique origin, he was named Jalodbhava, meaning “water-born”.² As he grew, Jalodbhava performed rigorous penance and succeeded in pleasing the deity Pitamaha (Brahma), from whom he received three extraordinary boons: immortality within water, the acquisition of magical powers, and unrivaled physical strength.³ However, the benevolence shown by the Nagas ironically culminated in tragedy. Empowered by the magical gifts, Jalodbhava turned malevolent, consuming the human populations dwelling near the lake.⁴ Terrified by his tyranny, the people were forced to abandon their settlements, leaving the once-flourishing region deserted while Jalodbhava roamed unchecked.⁵ It was during this time of widespread fear and abandonment that the sage Kasyapa, renowned for his spiritual authority, journeyed across the earth on a pilgrimage,⁶ setting the stage for future interventions that would redefine the human-Naga relationship in Kasmira’s sacred landscape. This episode not only highlights the compassionate nature of the Nagas but also reflects the unintended consequences of misplaced kindness within the socio-mythical framework of early Kashmir.

The disruptive emergence of Jalodbhava, despite being nurtured by the Nagas, ultimately challenged the harmony between humans and Nagas, prompting a deeper reorganization of their relationship. Against this backdrop, the evolving patterns of Naga-human coexistence come into sharper focus, reflecting both conflict and collaboration in the shaping of early Kasmira’s social fabric.

2. Naga-Human Coexistence

The *Nilamata Purana* offers a vivid account of the tensions and eventual adjustments that shaped the early patterns of Naga-human coexistence in Kasmira. Initially, when Prajapati Kasyapa urged the Nagas to live alongside human beings, they refused, expressing an aversion to cohabiting with men.⁷ Enraged by their audacity, Kasyapa pronounced a curse, decreeing that the Nagas would have to dwell with the Pisacas, a fearsome class of beings associated with the Daityas, for part of the year. Sage Nila, however, intervened with humility, acknowledging that his fellow Nagas, blinded by anger, were unaware of the consequences of their actions.⁸

In response, Kasyapa devised a compromise. He allocated the Nagas a dwelling place in the oasis at the center of the Sea of Sand, alongside the Pisacas, for six months each year.⁹ These Pisacas, led by Nikumbha, were in constant battle among themselves, and during the six-month war season, vast numbers from both sides would perish.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Nikumbha and his followers would return annually, enjoying a respite on Himacala, while the Nagas would have to share habitation alternately with them and with men.¹¹

Despite the uneasy arrangement, Naga king Nila pleaded once again, preferring permanent coexistence with humans rather than living among the violent Pisacas. Acknowledging his plea, Visnu intervened, assuring Nila that after the passing of one Caturyuga, the Nagas would permanently dwell among human

communities.¹² Over time, the Pisacas would weaken and retreat to the Sea of Sand, allowing humans and Nagas to coexist more harmoniously. As part of this developing relationship, human settlers were instructed to venerate the Nagas of their regions with offerings of flowers, incense, food, and dramatic performances.¹³

Following this divine settlement, the country of Kasmira evolved into a region characterized by seasonal rhythms: inhabited by humans for six months and by the flesh-eating Pisacas for the other six months.¹⁴ This transitional phase laid the groundwork for a durable Naga-human bond, wherein humans learned to respect and worship the Nagas, ensuring a relatively peaceful coexistence rooted in ritual reciprocity and sacred obligation.

The gradual normalization of Naga-human relations, fostered through mutual respect and ritual obligations, eventually paved the way for a critical transformation in Kasmira's social landscape—the transition from seasonal occupation to permanent human habitation.

3. Transition from Seasonal Settlement to Permanent Human Habitation

The *Nilamata Purana* presents the gradual transition from seasonal occupation to permanent human settlement in Kasmira as an outcome of both divine will and human perseverance. After four aeons of alternating habitation between humans and Pisacas, humans would traditionally leave the region at the end of the month of Asvayuj after stockpiling rice and grains.¹⁵ However, during one such exodus, an elderly Brahmana named Candradeva, a descendant of Kasyapa, remained behind, weighed down by despair and by a destiny yet to unfold.¹⁶ Instead of being harmed by the Pisacas, Candradeva was spared, becoming instead an object of their cruel sport, much like a bird tethered on a string. Harassed by the Pisacas and the harsh climate, he eventually became detached from worldly concerns.¹⁷ Wandering aimlessly under these difficult conditions, Candradeva reached the sacred abode of Naga king Nila, situated where Ananta had once set his plough, beneath Mount Dhanada.¹⁸ There, Nila, resplendent in his dark blue form adorned with seven hundred radiant snake-hoods and celestial ornaments, was surrounded by Nagas, Naga-maidens, and even the formidable Pisaca Nikumbha, who all attended him with great devotion.¹⁹ Awed by this divine spectacle, Candradeva approached Nila with reverence and offered a hymn of praise, extolling his radiant beauty, his association with divine forces like Visnu, and his role as a protector and benefactor of devotees.²⁰ Moved by Candradeva's devotion, Naga king Nila welcomed him as an honoured guest and offered to grant him a boon.²¹ Seizing the opportunity, Candradeva requested that humans be permitted to settle permanently in Kasmira, so that they would no longer suffer the hardships of repeated migration.²² Nila readily agreed, stating that, with the approval of Kesava (Visnu), humans would henceforth be allowed to reside continuously in the valley.²³ Nila then hosted Candradeva in his home, shared the customs and practices necessary for harmonious life in Kasmira, and honored him accordingly.²⁴

Following this divine settlement, when the next full moon of Caitra had passed, human populations began to flow steadily back into the valley. They were soon joined by King Virodaya, who, along with his retinue of horses and elephants, formally re-established human habitation. The young Brahmana appointed by Nila relayed the entire sequence of events to King Virodaya, who in turn shared it with the broader community, thus marking the beginning of Kasmira's permanent human settlement.²⁵ This pivotal moment not only reshaped the demographic rhythms of Kasmira but also symbolized the divine sanction behind the enduring human presence in the region. As humans began to settle permanently in Kasmira, the story of the Nagas unfolds further, highlighting how their well-defined social order and leadership traditions helped lay the foundations of community life in the region.

4. Social Structure of the Nagas

The *Nilamata Purana* provides a remarkable glimpse into the structured and extensive social organization of the Nagas in early Kasmira. Responding to King Gonanda's request to know about the Nagas dwelling in the region,²⁶ the sage Brhadasva offers a detailed enumeration of their names and associations. At the apex stood Nila, the king of the Nagas, alongside other prominent figures such as Vasuki, Upataksaka, Kambala, Avatara, Karkota, and Dhananjaya.²⁷ The listing continues with important Nagas like Ailapatra, Ananta, Nanda, Upanandaka, Kulika, Svetasankha, Palasa, and Khedima.²⁸ This reveals the foundation of a hierarchical structure built around significant leaders. Subsequent verses describe an even broader set of Nagas, with names such as Helihala, Sankhapala, Candana, Nandana, and others,²⁹ and groups like the Padmas, Mahapadmas, Kalas, and Taksakas.³⁰ Further names, including Hastikarna, Vamana, Mahisa, and Varaha, continue to indicate the wide lineage of the Naga race.³¹ Additional figures like Paniya, Anika, Kanakaksa, Kalinkaka, and Nadakubara are also mentioned.³² An extensive array of other Nagas such as Kheda, Sapala, Jayanta, and Tvausama follows,³³ moving into an even longer catalogue listing figures like Sudanas, Suparsva, Sambhu, Ghasa, and Ugola.³⁴ Mythologically significant names like Narayana, Aniruddha, Vasudeva, and Jalandhama are also part of this network.³⁵ The descriptions continue with Amanasa, Kapali, Sankarsana, and Rohinyaksa,³⁶ and Nagas such as Akhuphala, Phalapha, and Balahaka.³⁷ The richness of Naga society is reflected in mentions of Candras, Suryas, Viduratha, Vijaya, and Jaya,³⁸ along with Gandhara, Vaisravaṇa, and Surparka.³⁹

The text further lists Nagas like Bindusara, Nada, and Grahapati,⁴⁰ and those such as Aparajita, Himasara, and Phalasara.⁴¹ Important figures like Agrasara, Nilasara, and Prahlada also appear,⁴² alongside Sumukha, Khadgapuccha, and Vibhisana.⁴³ The tradition continues with names like Kapala, *Puranaka*, and Kalakunjara,⁴⁴ and Nagas such as Cakradhara, Svabhra, and Pangu.⁴⁵ Further figures like Anagapada, Sukara, and Satamukha show the diversity of the Naga community.⁴⁶

Another set of Nagas such as Atinidra, Bindunada, and Suvartaksa are mentioned,⁴⁷ and others like Bhuvira, Dhṛtaraṣṭra, and Gandharva add to the richness.⁴⁸ Names like Mahakṣa, Deva, Gautama, and Susubha,⁴⁹ and Svarga, Srivasa, and Svarupa⁵⁰ continue the extensive enumeration.

Some specific Nagas are linked with supernatural and cosmic attributes. Nagas like Kamarupa, Bahunetra, Hanuman, and Angada are described as having great strength and mystical powers.⁵¹ This trend continues with Nagas like Satamukha, Citrasva, and Dadhivahana,⁵² and Kaliya, Kala, and Atri.⁵³

The narrative lists further figures like Heliyara, Pancasya, and Pingalodara,⁵⁴ and Nagas associated with cosmic cycles like Krta, Treta, and Dvapara.⁵⁵ The story continues with names like Satananda, Trisirsa, and Jatila,⁵⁶ Gandha, Airavata, and Kumudaprabha.⁵⁷ Several well-known figures are included among the Nagas listed in the *Nilamata Purana*, such as Rama, Lakshmana, Mahadeva, and Yudhisthira, along with others like Visakha, Reva, Mahodara, and Makara.⁵⁸ The lineage continues with names such as Candapatanaka, Brahmanapriya, Jarasandha, Patanjali, Vatsa, Siras, Varaghosa, Sumangala, and Mahanihasaja.⁵⁹

Further extending this rich list, Nagas like Dhaumya, Galava, Hiranyaya, Satyakula, Krpana, Priyasaraka, Vasistha, Subhadra, and Bhadravalisa are mentioned, emphasizing both martial and spiritual qualities within Naga society.⁶⁰ Notable figures such as Vira, Brahmasana, Vamsanaga, Vidyadhara, Yaksha, Gajanetra, Anaka, Kanava, and Amrtasana further reveal the vastness of the Naga network.⁶¹

The *Purana* also highlights Nagas symbolizing the four varnas—Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra—reflecting a social order within their community.⁶² Other important figures like Sankhakṣa, Maninaga, Bhisma, Kasmira, and Matsyanaka are also named.⁶³ Bhimakṣa, Mahendra, Sudhama, Sahasradhara, Vibhuti, and Uttariyasa further expand the listing,⁶⁴ followed by Manikantha, Kusakunda, and Vitarna.⁶⁵

The Nagas' deep connection with sacred rivers and cosmic geography is shown through associations with Ganga, Yamuna, and Vaitasta.⁶⁶ Important mythological figures such as Narada, Parvata, Visvvasu, and Parijata are also included, highlighting the interweaving of Naga traditions with wider mythologies.⁶⁷ The text continues by mentioning Nagas like Akadra, Srimadhaka, Avartaksa, and Puṣkarasa, with others such as Aksotanaga, Syena, and Samarapriya, demonstrating the martial strength and sacred ties within the Naga tradition.⁶⁸ The list concludes with names like Elighana, Bhoga, Raudra, Bharadvaja, Satru, Kardama, Rambha, Bahubhoga, Vinatapriya, Tamrakara, Jyotisyaka, and Janardana.⁶⁹

Finally, the narrative closes with references to Nyagrodha, Balipuṣpa, Budha, and symbolic cosmic figures like Kali, Rahu, and Ketu.⁷⁰ After this exhaustive listing, Brhadasva acknowledges that recounting all the lineages, sacred places, and genealogies of the Nagas would take hundreds of years.⁷¹ Despite their vast numbers, all Nagas are described as boon-givers, deeply loyal to King Nila and beloved of Vasuki.⁷² The Nagas' role as protectors of spatial directions is also recorded, with Bindusara guarding the east, Srimadhaka the south, and Uttaramanasa the north.⁷³

Conclusion

The *Nilamata Purana* presents the Nagas as a highly organized, spiritually significant, and socially active community whose role in early Kasmira went far beyond myth. Their compassion towards beings like Jalodbhava, their complex negotiations for coexistence with humans, and their structured internal hierarchy all point to a sophisticated societal model. The transition from seasonal human habitation to permanent settlement, sanctioned by Naga king Nila himself, reflects not only the importance of divine intervention but also the Nagas' willingness to adapt and support human flourishing.

Through an extensive catalog of Naga names, roles, and territories, the text reveals a world where divine beings were not distant or abstract but deeply involved in the rhythms of earthly life. The Nagas protected, guided, and coexisted with humans, embodying ideals of loyalty, piety, and cosmic balance. Their story, as preserved in the *Nilamata Purana*, reminds us that in early Kashmir's imagination, society and spirituality were inseparable, and that the guardianship of nature, sacred traditions, and human welfare often lay intertwined in the figures of the Nagas themselves.

Thus, the *Nilamata Purana* portrays the Nagas as a highly organized and deeply revered community, intricately connected with the sacred landscape and social order of early Kasmira. Their elaborate listing, divine associations, and territorial guardianship reflect a vibrant and structured society woven into the region's spiritual and cultural fabric.

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