

# Religious Life of Nagas: A Case Study of *Rajatarangini*

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**Abstract:** *The Rajatarangini of Kalhana stands as a remarkable historical text that intricately weaves together political narrative, mythic memory, and sacred geography in the cultural landscape of early Kashmir. Among its most enduring religious motifs is the presence of the Nagas-revered not merely as serpent deities, but as powerful spiritual entities embedded in the land's ecology, cosmology, and ritual life. This study examines the religious significance of Nagas as portrayed by Kalhana, drawing upon selected verses that reveal their relationship with kings, sages, natural spaces, and the spiritual well-being of the realm. The Nagas emerge as more than mythical figures-they are living forces who respond to human conduct, demand ritual reverence, and act as custodians of sacred order. Their interactions through dreams, elemental forces, and divine manifestations reflect a worldview in which nature, divinity, and society are inseparably linked. By analyzing KalhaGa's nuanced representation, this paper highlights how Naga devotion served as a vital expression of religious continuity, moral order, and the spiritual ecology of Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** Naga, *Rajatarangini*, Kashmir, Sacredness, religious traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

In the cultural and spiritual imagination of early Kashmir, the Nagas occupy a space far greater than that of mythical serpents or folk deities. In *Rajatarangini*, Kalhana presents the Nagas as living embodiments of sacred geography, ritual continuity, and cosmic order. Far from being peripheral figures, they are deeply rooted in the land's ecological and metaphysical fabric-guardians of springs, lakes, and valleys, arbiters of divine justice, and symbols of moral equilibrium. While earlier texts like the *NilamataPurana* laid the foundation for Naga worship, KalhaGa's historical chronicle reflects the persistence and adaptation of these traditions into the political and religious life of early medieval Kashmir.

This paper explores the religious life of the Nagas as portrayed in the *Rajatarangini*, structured around three interrelated themes: their role in the sacred geography of Kashmir; the rituals, worship, and acts of restoration that kept their devotion alive; and their metaphysical and cosmological significance as beings that operate across natural and spiritual realms. By examining key verses across multiple books of the text, the study aims to illuminate the ways in which Naga worship was not only preserved but continually negotiated through political, environmental, and religious shifts. In doing so, it reveals how KalhaGa's narrative offers a layered understanding of Nagas-not as relics of a mythical past, but as active agents within the spiritual and ecological history of Kashmir.

To explore this multifaceted religious presence of the Nagas, the study is structured around three key dimensions of their portrayal in the *Rajatarangini*-their connection with sacred geography, their worship through ritual and restoration, and their deeper metaphysical and cosmological significance.

## Nagas and the Sacred Landscape of Kashmir

The *Rajatarangini* opens not with a king's deeds or a royal chronicle, but with a memory of deep time-a vision of the valley of Kashmir before it was land, when it existed as a sacred lake. Kalhana recounts that during the six early ages of creation, the valley remained submerged under water, forming what was known as the Lake of Sati (Satisaras), held in the cradle of the Himalayas. This wasn't just geographical history-it was cosmological memory. The waters were not empty but charged with myth, serving as the dwelling of the demon Jalodbhava, whose very presence signified imbalance in the cosmic order.

In response to this crisis, the sage Kasyapa-a figure embodying divine foresight and order-petitioned the gods. The powerful trinity of Brahma (Druhina), Visnu (Upendra), and Siva (Rudra) descended into this watery realm, and with divine force, defeated Jalodbhava, bringing the sacred lake to an end and revealing the land of Kashmir beneath its surface. This act of desiccation was not mere drainage-it

was a moment of re-creation, a reordering of the world, sanctifying the valley from its very origin.

At the heart of this sanctified land stands Naga Nila, the sovereign protector of Kashmir's sacred waters and springs. Kalhana evokes his presence through a beautiful metaphor: Nila's parasol is the shimmering blue pond of Nilakunda, and its supporting stick is the newborn stream of the Vitasta river.<sup>i</sup> This is no ordinary description-it transforms a physical landscape into divine regalia, and the Naga king into a celestial monarch. His abode, now known as Verinag, remains revered to this day, linking mythic imagination with lived geography.

The river Vitasta, personified as Gauri, retains her divine character even in her earthly form. She is said to turn her face toward the ravine (guha), just as she turns her gaze lovingly toward her son Kumara in the divine realm. Her nourishing waters, drunk by the mouths of the Nagas, mirror the mythic scene of GaGesa (Nagamukha) drinking his mother's milk.<sup>ii</sup> KalhaGa fuses the natural and mythic, showing how rivers, deities, and Nagas form one continuous sacred order.

The presence of other Nagas-Sankha, Padma, and their jeweled kin-is also evoked. They are imagined as radiant guardians surrounding the valley, just as treasure deities attend to Kubera, the god of wealth.<sup>iii</sup> These are not marginal beings. In Kalhana's Kashmir, Nagas are deeply woven into spiritual life. Springs and lakes are not inert-they are sentient, inhabited, and divine. The continued reverence for Nagas, even among later Muslim communities in the valley, hints at the persistent emotional and cultural memory of these water-deities, long after formal religion had shifted.

Kashmir's own mountains are mythologized as protectors. Kalhana writes that when the Nagas, fleeing the wrath of Garu a, sought refuge, the valley itself rose in their defense. Its mountain walls stretched upward like arms, shielding the frightened serpents and offering them sanctuary.<sup>iv</sup> This poetic gesture transforms the very terrain into an ally of the Nagas-a gesture of the land's own compassion toward its divine guests.

Centuries later, the sacred bond between Nagas and Kashmir is reaffirmed in a powerful moment from King Jayapita's reign. In a dream, the king is visited by a radiant figure who introduces himself as Naga Mahapadma, guardian of the great Mahapadmasaras-today's Wular Lake. In humble supplication, the Naga asks for the king's protection, affirming that he and his kin live peacefully within the realm.<sup>v</sup> This is not just a dream sequence; it reflects the continuation of sacred duty. Even kings, in Kalhana's vision, must honor the divine inhabitants of the land, recognizing their rights and presence.

The spiritual role of Nagas is felt not only in dreams but also in moments of political tension. During a military encounter, when a Darada ruler marches toward conflict, he halts at the village of Kciraprstha. There, Kalhana tells us, the brave general Rudrapala advances to face him. But before the battle begins, the Darada king pauses to immerse himself in a nearby sacred pool, the dwelling place of the Naga Pinaraka.<sup>vi</sup> Even on the brink of war, a moment is given to ritual, to purification, to seeking the favor-or perhaps the restraint-of the divine guardian of that place. This single act speaks volumes about how deeply the Nagas remained embedded in the psyche and politics of early Kashmir.

Together, these verses paint a vivid tapestry of a

land where hills and waters are alive with sacred presence, and where Nagas are not just mythic beings but active custodians of the valley's spiritual and ecological life. Through poetic metaphors, political dreams, and ritual geography, the *Rajatarangini* preserves a vision of Kashmir as a sacred partnership between humans, gods, and Nagas - each shaping the landscape, each owed a measure of reverence.

While the sacred geography of Kashmir provided the Nagas with divine abodes and symbolic presence across the valley, it was through ritual practices, acts of worship, and periodic restorations that their sanctity was actively sustained, renewed, and woven into the spiritual rhythm of everyday life.

### Ritual Practices, Worship, and Restoration of Naga Traditions

The reverence for Nagas in Kashmir was not limited to mythology and geography alone-it manifested powerfully through ritual practices and seasonal festivals. These practices maintained a sacred covenant between the people and the Nagas. When this covenant was broken, Kalhana tells us, the very balance of nature and society was disturbed.

A turning point comes during a period of intense philosophical and religious change. Under the guidance of scholars like Candracarya, texts such as the Mahabhacya, once difficult to access, were revived and circulated. Alongside this scholarly renaissance, new grammars were composed by the learned. At the same time, the influence of Bauddha (Buddhist) tradition-under the spiritual protection of the great Nagarjuna-began to spread across the valley. While intellectually profound, this shift came with a disregard for older customs. The Buddhists, having triumphed in debates, rejected many of the rituals prescribed in the *NilamataPurana*, thereby marginalizing long-standing traditions such as Naga worship.

The result of this rupture was immediate and dramatic. Deprived of their customary oblations (bali) and reverence, the Nagas responded with nature's retaliation-intense snowfall fell year after year, destroying crops and causing suffering among the people. The calamity was so severe that the reigning king was forced to shift his court during winter to Darvabhisara and other nearby regions to escape the harsh climate.

But amidst this crisis, a miracle unfolded. Those few Brahmins who continued to uphold sacrificial rituals and offer oblations to the Nagas appeared untouched by the devastation, while the Bauddhas perished in large numbers. This divergence, interpreted as divine judgment, prompted a spiritual reawakening.

It was then that a Brahmin named Candradeva, descended from the great sage Kasyapa, undertook rigorous austerities to propitiate Naga Nila, the spiritual guardian of Kashmir. Moved by his devotion, Naga Nila manifested himself and granted a blessing: the cessation of the devastating snowfall and the restoration of the original rituals and rites as prescribed in the Nagas' sacred tradition.

Kalhana draws a powerful parallel. Just as an earlier Candradeva had rid the land of Yakas-a symbolic substitution for Pisacas-this new Candradeva ended the equally ruinous plague of the Bhikcus, the Buddhist monks.<sup>vii</sup> The symbolism is sharp and clear: neglect of Naga worship was a spiritual affliction; its remedy was religious

revival through traditional practice.

This shift gained formal sanction when King Gonanda III ascended the throne. Understanding the divine message in the natural crisis, he reinstated pilgrimages, offerings, and sacred ceremonies in honour of the Nagas, re-establishing the rituals as they had once flourished. As a result, both the Bhikcus and the snow calamities disappeared, restoring peace to the land and rebalancing its spiritual and ecological order.<sup>viii</sup>

Beyond these broad institutional reforms, Kalhana includes beautiful episodes that reflect personal and localized devotion to the Nagas. He describes a grove where a pond of clear, sweet water was known to be the sacred abode of the Naga Susravas.<sup>ix</sup> The peaceful setting near Vijayesvara evokes the quiet intimacy of local sacred geography.

One day, a young Brahmin named Visakha, weary from travel, arrived at this pond seeking rest in its shade.<sup>x</sup> What began as a simple moment of relief quickly turned spiritual, as Visakha became part of a larger divine design. He was told that during the upcoming pilgrimage festival of Takcaka Naga, held on the twelfth day of the dark fortnight of Jyecmha, he would recognize the Naga by the water dripping from his hair-tuft.<sup>xi</sup> This detail—a deeply symbolic image—still resonates in the living tradition of Zevan (Jayavana), where the Takcaka Naga is worshipped to this day.

Two Naga maidens, daughters of Takcaka, who conveyed this message, vanished after speaking, promising that they too would appear at the appointed time.<sup>xii</sup> As foretold, the great festival day arrived, filled with dancers, actors, musicians, and pilgrims, making it a celebration of both sacred ritual and popular devotion.<sup>xiii</sup>

Visakha, compelled by curiosity, made his way through the crowded celebration. Suddenly, he found himself face-to-face with Takcaka Naga, whom he instantly recognized by the divine sign.<sup>xiv</sup> The Naga, accompanied by his daughters, warmly greeted the Brahmin, completing the moment of divine-human connection with grace and reverence.<sup>xv</sup>

Through these narratives, Kalhana shows that Naga traditions were not relics of the past but vibrant and evolving. Their worship remained active in both formal state-sponsored rituals and in deeply personal pilgrimages and encounters. Whether through philosophical resistance, environmental warning, or mystical recognition, the Nagas continued to demand devotion, and those who heeded their call were rewarded with divine favor and spiritual harmony.

While rituals and festivals grounded Naga worship in the rhythms of seasonal life and communal devotion, the deeper layers of their significance unfold in the metaphysical and cosmological imagination of early Kashmir, where Nagas are not only guardians of land and water, but mediators between realms and forces beyond the human world.

### Metaphysical and Cosmological Significance of Nagas

Beyond their roles as geographical guardians and recipients of ritual devotion, the Nagas in the *Rajatarangini* also embody profound metaphysical and cosmological functions. They exist not only within the waters and valleys of Kashmir but occupy a luminal space between the human world and the deeper, often hidden, currents of spiritual and elemental power. Kalhana presents this dimension most strikingly in a mystical episode involving a king, a sorcerer, and a dream-vision of a captured Naga.

The episode begins not in ceremony but in a dream. The king receives a vision from a Naga who pleads for rescue. The Naga reveals that he is in danger—targeted by a Dravidian sorcerer who seeks to remove him from his lake in order to sell him for profit in a dry, barren region that lacks water. In this request, the Naga not only presents himself as a sentient being in peril but as a spiritual entity bound to his natural habitat—a symbol of life and fertility threatened by commodification and displacement.

In return for protection, the Naga offers a surprising reward: he promises to reveal the location of a gold-bearing mountain within the king's own territory—a hidden treasure, accessible only through divine favor. This pact, offered through a dream, underscores the Naga's connection not just to water and agriculture but to the deeper mineral and elemental forces of the earth itself.

Stirred by this vision, the king immediately dispatches spies in all directions. Eventually, the Dravidian sorcerer is captured and brought before the court. After being granted safety, he openly admits his plan and confirms all that the Naga had revealed in the king's dream.<sup>xvi</sup> Kalhana here highlights a fusion of the spiritual and the political: dream-visions are taken seriously by rulers, and magical realities are treated as part of governance.

The king, however, is puzzled. He questions the sorcerer: how could anyone possibly extract such a powerful Naga from the depth of a vast lake that stretches across many yojanas? <sup>xvii</sup> To this, the sorcerer replies confidently that the powers of magic are beyond comprehension, and offers to demonstrate their force.<sup>xviii</sup>

The scene that follows blurs the line between myth and metaphysics. The sorcerer approaches the lake with the king watching, seals all directions with magical formulas, and then fires enchanted arrows that dry up the vast waters, revealing the hidden bed beneath.<sup>xix</sup> There, wriggling in the mud, the king beholds a startling sight: a Naga with a human face, no longer majestic, but shrunken to the size of a span, surrounded by other small serpents. This image part divine, part vulnerable offers a rare glimpse of the Naga's concealed form and the spiritual toll of magical coercion.

The sorcerer, emboldened, moves to take the Naga away in this weakened state. But the king, struck by compassion and perhaps guilt, intervenes and forbids him from touching the Naga. This moment of restraint signals a crucial ethical dimension—an acknowledgment that divine beings, even when subdued by human magic, deserve reverence, not exploitation.

At the king's command, the spell is reversed. The sorcerer withdraws his magic, and the lake swiftly fills back to its former vastness, restoring the Naga's domain and dignity. The king pays the sorcerer and sends him away, but he now carries a lingering hope: since he has protected the Naga, surely the promised mountain of gold should now be revealed.

However, the metaphysical logic of the Naga world is not transactional. As the king muses over this unspoken debt, the Naga visits him once more in a dream not with gratitude, but with a subtle rebuke: "For what favour should the gold-producing mountain be shown to you?"<sup>xx</sup> This dream-question reflects the deeper cosmology of the Nagas. Their realm operates not on material exchange but on dharma, intention, and spiritual integrity.

In this entire episode, Kalhana uses dream, magic,

and sacred negotiation to portray the Nagas as entities enmeshed in the metaphysical fabric of the land. They are beings whose powers extend from lakes to gold, from rainfall to retribution. They can be both vulnerable and wrathful, both generous and elusive. And their presence is never to be reduced to material gain—they demand protection not out of weakness, but as a test of human virtue.

Through this dream-laden narrative, Kalhana affirms the Nagas as intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds, capable of influencing nature, revealing hidden knowledge, and testing the moral fiber of rulers. Their cosmological function is thus not simply to inhabit space but to imbue it with spiritual depth, reminding humans that dominion over nature comes with ethical responsibility and sacred accountability.

## CONCLUSION

The *Rajatarangini* portrays the Nagas not merely as legendary beings inhabiting Kashmir's lakes and rivers but as complex spiritual entities deeply intertwined with the valley's sacred order. As guardians of the land's geography, recipients of seasonal rites, and figures of cosmic power, the Nagas emerge as central to both the lived and imagined landscapes of early Kashmir. Kalhana's account, far from relegating them to the realm of forgotten folklore, weaves them into the moral and political fabric of his chronicle—whether through tales of divine retribution during ritual neglect, acts of royal restoration, or dream-visions that blur the line between the material and metaphysical worlds.

What becomes evident through this study is the multidimensional role that Nagas play in shaping Kashmir's religious life. They are not only honored through worship but serve as symbols of ecological balance, divine justice, and sacred reciprocity. Kalhana's narrative affirms that the vitality of Naga devotion lies not merely in memory or mythology but in its dynamic ability to mediate between land, kingship, and cosmology. In honoring the Nagas, early Kashmiris honored the sacred relationship between nature and the divine—a relationship that, even today, echoes in the cultural and spiritual memory of the region.

## END NOTES

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