

Naga Worship in Jammu & Kashmir

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Origin: Naga worship most properly referred to as Naga cult in India is one of the oldest and wide spread forms of religion¹. There is indication of snake worship in Egypt, Greece, and even in ancient Harappan culture of India². The evidence of their worship can be traced with the help of various sources like the Harappan figurines, the Vedic literature, Puranas, Epics, Buddhist literature. There is evidence to suggest of veneration of snakes by Indus valley people. Naga worship existed in the *Rigveda* and various passages of *Atharvaveda* refers to the group of serpents and one referring to six serpents as the wardens or protectors of six quarters represented as a charm to win the favor of the serpent of all the region under heaven. Various Puranas like *Matsya Purana*, *Padma Purana* etc., also glorified the cult. Even in Buddhist literature, they were represented as animals or supernatural beings and had been depicted in various *Jataka* stories as listening to the sermons of Lord Budhha³. Even *Alexander* had noted the worship of snakes by Indians. Since he had conquered only the North Western regions, such worship, as noted by *Arrian*, must have been a feature of Punjab and the lower regions of Kashmir⁴. Even Chinese pilgrims *Fa-Hian*⁵ and *Yuan Chwang*⁶ refer to Nagas many a time. *Abul Fazl* informs us that, there were seven hundred places sacred to the serpents in Kashmir⁷.

Nagas were the tribal people living on the mountain slopes of entire northern belt of the country⁸. The evidences from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan sites tends to suggest that snakes worship was a feature of the indigenous people of India whose branches had spread to the fair land of Kashmir⁹. Naga worship had-acquired a prominent position in early Kashmir receives confirmation not only from the account of Ceylon, China and Tibet but also from native literature¹⁰. The local sources such as *Nilamata Purana*, the *Rajatarangini* and the *Vasuki Purana* clearly witness the origin of Naga cult in the region of Kashmir. According to *Nilmata Purana* in 4th and 3rd century B.C. it might have been the principle religion of Kashmir¹¹. Naga's are set to have been born of *Kadru* wife of *Kashap*¹².

Hiuen Tsang relates that Kashmir was originally a dragon lake. A very detailed account of how *Majjhantika* rescued the valley from the Nagas has been presented in the Chinese *Vinaya*¹³. The N.P. records at great length how Kashmir was created out of a lake and was mentioned by the name of Sati-Des a in the text. This land left to the care of the Naga's of whom Naga Nila, the son of Rishi Kashap, was the chief. The Puranas further states that the Naga's were the original inhabitants of Kashmir, who were followed by the Pisacas and finally to enter the region where the Manav's¹⁴. The large number of temples, built near some of the famous springs and undoubtedly early origin of the pilgrimages directed to them clearly pointed out the popularity of the cult. Even now the names like *Vernag*, *Anantnag*, and *Sernag* etc. show traces of ancient Naga belief¹⁵. *Ksemendra* also refers to a *Taksak yatra* festival in his *Samyamatrka*, which is celebrated on the 12th day of waning moon of *Jyaishta*, the first month of summer¹⁶. The *Nilamata Purana* also gives analysis of the names of principle Naga's worshipped were 603¹⁷. The Nila was worshipped on the festival of the first snow fall. Nila and Nagas were also propitiated on the *Iramanjaripuja* festivity which took place in the month of *Caitra*. Another ceremony called *Varunpancami* was held on the 5th day of Bhado¹⁸ and was connected with the worship of serpent King Nila. Subsequently, In the *Rajatarangini*, the people of Kashmir have venerated them in the form of water spirits in order to get timely rain for their crops¹⁹. According to the *Rajrangini*, Kashmir was a land protected by Nila, the lord of all Nagas. Even when Buddhism had undermined the Naga belief, one of its early *King Gonanda* III is said to have reintroduced the pilgrimages, sacrifices and other worship in honor of the Nagas, as they had been before²⁰. Also in his work, the author has clearly mentioned that the royal house of the *Karakota* dynasty was closely associated with these Naga's. This dynasty has been mentioned to have their special tirtha, which is located somewhere near the mountain ridge on the *Tosha Maidan* road known as *Kakodar* which has been derived from the word "*Karkotaka*" and the village is called as *KarkotaDranga*²¹. It is suggested that the people from the South visited the north, particularly to pay homage to the shrines of the Naga's²². They were honored even with the introduction of Brahmanism. Subsequently, it came to form a distinct cult of its own²³. It is evident from many sources that how with the passage of time Naga cult in this region got assimilated into the

Brahmanical Pantheon. As a result of such as assimilations, the Naga-Cult and the major sects of the Brahmanical pantheon underwent several changes and thus, resulted into the absorption of certain elements of each other.

The picture presented by the literary sources which are related to the evolution of Naga cult in the valley, also helps in determining the influence of this cult in the adjoining area of Kashmir especially the Jammu region. Snake worship in Jammu region seems to have been introduced there from the North i.e. from the valley of Kashmir across Pir Panjal range probably through Kishtwar and Bhaderwah valley²⁴. Various Sanskrit works like the *VishnuDharamottarPurana*, *Nilmata Purana*, *The VasukiPurana*, *The Rajtarangini*, clearly witness the evolution and growth of Nag cult in Jammu region. In the *VasukiPurana*, it has been clearly mentioned how *Vasuki Nag*, the King of Nagas, acquire superior and miraculous position in the Doda district. Each family over there has separate Nag deities. Jatras and Kud are performed to get the blessings of Nag Devtas²⁵. Not only this, there exist various legends concerning the inception of Naga worship within the region of Jammu during the early century that are still prevalent in the different area of the Jammu region. One of the important legends dealing with the antiquity of this form of worship, is the interesting myth related to the *Basak Naga* in the hilly region of Bhaderwah who is worshipped all over the state as a snake god. He is also considered to be the patterned deity as well as the first raja of the valley of Bhaderwah, under the name *Bas-Dev*. As per the tradition, *Basak nag* or *Vasuki Nag* originally dwelt in Kashmir. But there arose some misunderstanding between the *Vasuki Nag* and the *Garuda* or Vehicle of Visnu. The enmity between them resulted into the migration of Naga's from the valley. Furthermore the legends enumerate that, when Garuda was chasing chief Nag Vasuki, then he took shelter on the *Kund Kaplas* peak, the highest peak in Bhaderwah. This legend probably refers to the time when Nag worship was being supplanted by *Vashvinism* and former had to migrate towards Bhaderwah²⁶.

In one of the accounts, the *Nilmata Purana* clearly speaks of the time when the enmity between Naga's and *Garud's* took place in Kashmir. Their chief *Vasuki* then approached Vishnu who granted them safety in *Satisar* an appointed Nag Nila as their king. The said legend further informs that one Naga named *Sadangula* used to kidnap the female concerts of men and thus, Naga king Nila exiled him from Kashmir, and allotted to him the *Mt. Usirak* in the land of Darva²⁷. Various shrines and temples associated with *Vasuki Nag* are situated in this region and various festivals like *NagPanchami* and *NagkaPuja* are celebrated in order to please him. Various Nag families are inhabited in the area of Kishtwar is evident from the Naga suffix with the name of the springs of Kishtwar namely *GodrasNag*, *MoolNag*, *DamerNag*, *GhumaiNag*, *BimmalNag* etc²⁸. The ejection of Naga cult to the region of Jammu has also been given in the other sources of Jammu region like the *VasukiPurana*. This source provides information regarding the evolution, growth and importance of Naga cult in various areas of Jammu region especially in Bhaderwah region. One version of the legend, states that Garuda pursued *Basak Naga* where ever he went. At last *Basak Naga* jumped into the lake referred to as by the name '*Kailash Kund*' in the *Purana's*. *Garuda* made a dent in one side of the lake and its water started drawing out. *VasukiNaga* immediately prayed to the goddess *Saraswati* whose lake is higher than that of the one in which *Vasuki* had taken refuge. At last *Vasuki's* prayer was heard and water from her lake began to flow in the *Kailash Kund* and thus, *Kund Kapalsh* Lake once again became full of water²⁹.

But the more popular version substitute goddess Kali in place of *Saraswati*. It narrates that goddess Kali was in possession when in his flight *Basak Naga* arrived in the valley. She took pity on him and granted him her own kingdom³⁰. Also, this legend explains the fact of *Kali's* temple exactly being behind that of *Basak Nag* in the region of Bhaderwah. Moreover, legends narrate the supremacy of *Basak Naga* over the entire region of Bhaderwah and thus, attained the status of the family or the tutelary deity of the people of this region till date³¹.

The major concentration of the Naga deities has largely been observed in the adjoining arrears of Bhaderwah and Kishtwar like Padder, Saroor, Nagseni, etc. and plane area of Jammu such as Kathua, Udhampur, Reasi, etc.: from an early period. Similarly, *Bhair devta* is the most important nag deity of Jammu plains. He is revered as *Kul* deity also by some of the major Brahmin and Rajput families of the Jammu region. He is credited with bringing river Tawi to Jammu. As the story goes, it is said that one day *Basak Naga* announced that any of his sons who would bring water to Jammu would be declared as his heir apparent. Therefore, his entire son's tried to bring water source to Jammu. *Bhair Devta*, it is believed, went to Kailash and bought tawi to Jammu. On the other hand, Kai, another son of *Basak* brought *chanderbhanga* 'Chenab', but while bringing it down to Jammu, he felt asleep at Akhnoor. When he woke up, he came to know that *Bhair* had already brought Tawi to Jammu. So he released *Chanderbhanga* in Akhnoor itself. Likewise many other Naga deities are also credited with having brought various water streams in one or other part of region. It would be worthwhile to mention here that most of the Naga deities of the region like *Bhair Devta*, *Kai Devta*, *Surgal Devta*, *Bhuddar Devta*, are considered as sons of the *Bask Naga*³².

Over a period of time, these Naga deities came to be symbolized through snake as a totem. It appears that later on human aspects was forgotten and deity came to be represented in the form of Naga. Since Naga's were also the rulers of region, many of them appear to have worked for the welfare of the people especially in the field of irrigation. After their death they were probably raised to the status of deity. Moreover, we also find that all these Naga deities reside near water resources. In many places the water resources itself is considered as deity especially in the form of waterfall or a pond e.g. dabber of *Bhair Devta* and the lake of *Mansar Devta* are considered as sacred and offerings are made to it.

The most notable thing is that, at all the water resources connected with Naga deities, the fish in there becomes sacred. No fishing is allowed there. *Bhair Devta* and *Mansar Devta* well are the examples, where people feed fish considering it as an offering to the deity. Those who indulge in harming the water life therein have to suffer the wrath of the deity. Another important Nag deity, *Baba Surgal* is worshipped in the form of *Burmi*. So where ever *Burmi* is found, it is considered sacred as the seat of the said deity and people feed the snake family therein with milk on special occasions and don't disturb them. This practice highlights the concept of peaceful co-existence of human and animal life and the awareness of the same among the people of the region. The nag deities are also worshipped for the purpose of agriculture prosperity, cattle wealth and family prosperity. Kudd Dance, which is the famous dance of the region, is performed by the devotees on the occasion of rituals and other ceremonies in the honor of these nag deities³³.

Moreover, the region of Jammu has witnessed the presence of Nag deities worshipped in various temples in the form of Nag gods, in shrines as water baolis, or in the form of icons, etc. the water baolis are closely associated with the Nag worship. Initially these baolis serves as natural source of drinking water to the people of Jammu region but slowly and gradually these became a mark of religious gesture and devotion of these people towards their respective deities. The example of few baolis depicting Nagas as deities are *Sumah Devta*³⁴, *Paap Nashi Baoli* of *Sudh Mahadev*³⁵, Baolis near the bank of River *Devika* and *Badi Baan* of *Chenani*³⁶.

Apart from the independent existence of the Nag deities in shrines and temples, naga's appear in the association with some of the gods of the Brahmanical pantheon like Siva, Vishnu, etc. and this can be evident from various Naga's sculptures which present fine artistic images of various deities which includes Vishnu lying on *Sheshnag*, Shiva displaying serpent around his neck, motifs of coiled serpents, etc. represented on water baolis in the Jammu region.

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