



Social Life of Nagas: A Case Study of Rajatarangini

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ABSTRACT

Kalhana's Rajatarangini, a twelfth-century chronicle of Kashmir, offers more than royal history—it presents a cultural vision where divine beings like the Nagas are deeply woven into the moral and social fabric of human life. This study explores the social life of Nagas not as distant mythological figures but as active participants in the emotional, ethical, and familial world of early Kashmir. Through a close examination of Naga-human relationships, inter-species marriages, and shared social customs, the paper highlights how Nagas serve not only as protectors or symbols but as figures embodying values central to Kashmiri society.

The Nagas in Rajatarangini form bonds of affection, assist kings in fulfilling their religious duties, and enter into marriage alliances with humans. These episodes are rich with meaning—demonstrating ideals of devotion, hospitality, gratitude, and moral courage. The union of a humble Brahman with a Naga princess, for instance, is not framed as an impossible fantasy but as a celebration of virtue over social status. Similarly, the king Jalauka's ability to perform daily worship, aided by a Naga's selfless service, reinforces the interconnectedness of divine presence and royal dharma.

Nagas are also portrayed as moral agents. They uphold ethical codes, shelter the wronged, and transform the lives of the virtuous. Their role extends into household settings, political disputes, and cultural memory, where divine intervention serves both to reward righteousness and punish injustice. These narratives do not merely entertain—they express the belief that divinity is lived, not distant.

In portraying Nagas as emotionally aware, ethically responsive, and socially engaged, Kalhana dissolves the line between myth and reality. The Rajatarangini thus reveals a Kashmir where sacred beings walk among humans, shaping the rhythm of daily life, upholding justice, and enriching the shared moral world of gods and men.

KEYWORDS: Nagas, Kalhana, Kinship, Dharma, Mythology, Marriage, Society, Ethics, Resistance

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I. INTRODUCTION

The history of early Kashmir, as captured in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, extends far beyond the chronicles of kings and dynasties. Written in the twelfth century, this poetic work blends historical narration with mythology, religious symbolism, and social commentary. Among its many compelling elements are the Nagas—serpentine deities linked to nature, protection, and fertility—who appear not merely as mythic figures but as active participants in human affairs. Far from being distant or symbolic, the Nagas are shown forming bonds with kings, entering into marriages, influencing moral decisions, and shaping the cultural ethos of the region.

This study explores the Nagas not merely as divine guardians or ritual figures, but as participants in the lived world of human society. By examining narratives of Naga-human relationships, inter-species marriages, and the broader social customs in which Nagas are embedded, this paper seeks to uncover the ways in which Kalhana portrays the Nagas as upholders of both cosmic balance and societal order. Their presence in *Rajatarangini* thus offers valuable insights into the blurred boundaries between the human and the divine in early Kashmir's moral and cultural imagination.

To understand the social role of Nagas in early Kashmir, this paper is organized around three key themes: their relationship with humans, their integration into family life through marriage, and their participation in the broader social customs of the time.

NAGA–HUMAN RELATIONSHIP AND THEIR SOCIAL EXISTENCE

The *Rajatarangini* offers compelling insights into the integrated and deeply layered relationship between Nagas and humans in early Kashmir. Far from being limited to mythological symbolism, Nagas are portrayed as divine agents actively involved in royal life, sacred geography, and even the physical support of kingship. These episodes reflect the belief that Nagas shared a sacred social space with humans, one that extended across realms of protection, devotion, and lineage.

In a time of crisis, when the land was overrun by Mlecchas, a devout king obtained a son from Siva Bhutesa by the power of his penance, to rid the land of its invaders.¹ This son, Jalauka, was hailed as a king comparable to Indra, whose radiant fame was said to purify the world.² His divinely empowered persona astonished even the Gods, a testimony to his supernatural attributes.³ Jalauka possessed a mystical alchemical substance capable of transmuting vast amounts of base metals into gold, signifying his divine association with abundance and transformation.⁴

What stands out remarkably in Jalauka's narrative is the direct assistance he received from a Naga. Rather than relying on horses stationed from village to village, a Naga himself carried the king over long distances to enable him to perform daily worship at distant pilgrimage sites.⁵ The journey between places like Vijayesvara and Jyesthesa in Nandiksetra was long—typically a four-day march—but with the Naga's personal intervention, the king was able to undertake it regularly. This portrayal is not only a miracle narrative but a symbolic statement of the Nagas' intimate role in enabling and sustaining royal dharma through personal service and divine goodwill.

The site of Jalauka's triumph over the Mlecchas came to be known as *Ujjhatadimba*, a name preserved by the people of Kashmir as a living reminder of the king's victory.⁶ The preservation of such names indicates how historical memory, sacred geography, and Naga involvement were collectively inscribed into the cultural consciousness of the region.

A deeper layer of this bond emerges in the revelation of a royal birth involving a Naga father. A later king is said to have been unaware that his true lineage stemmed from a union between his mother and the Naga Karkota, who appeared during her ritual bath.⁷ Far from being treated as a mythic aberration, this divine ancestry is presented as a source of sanctity and authority, reinforcing the idea that divine-human unions legitimized dynastic rule in Kashmir.

Such narratives do more than highlight isolated miracles or wonders—they reflect an enduring belief system in which Nagas were guardians of the land, facilitators of dharma, and contributors to royal legitimacy. Their presence is not only remembered in myth but imprinted onto the physical terrain of Kashmir, where mountain lakes, sacred springs, and regional traditions still bear their imprint. These cultural memories reveal a worldview in which the divine and the human coexisted within a shared moral and spatial order, sustained by mutual reverence and sacred interdependence. Building upon the close social interactions between Nagas and humans, the narrative further explores the emotional and familial dimensions of these ties through stories of inter-species courtship, marriage, and the shared values that defined domestic life in early Kashmir.

MARRIAGES, FAMILY LIFE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The *Rajatarangini* offers a unique lens into Naga-human social relations through vivid narratives of courtship, inter-species marriage, and the emotional texture of domestic life. These accounts do not merely romanticize mythological unions but reflect on values of virtue, hospitality, affection, and familial alliances that transcend both the human and the supernatural.

One such narrative begins with a king who enters the lakes of the Nagas after having mastered the flow of waters. There, in a strikingly poetic moment, he engages in loving unions with Naga-maidens, rejuvenating his youth through their company.⁸ This episode does more than celebrate sensual beauty—it sets the tone for how interaction with Naga women is framed as both rejuvenating and sacred, often occurring in liminal spaces like lakes, which symbolize transitions between worlds.

A more detailed and emotive portrayal of courtship is found in the story of a Brahman who, while resting under a shady tree and preparing a simple porridge meal, finds himself interrupted by an unusual and enchanting presence. The sound of anklets draws his attention just as it had earlier disturbed the swans on the lakeside, indicating a divine disturbance in the natural rhythm. Two strikingly beautiful maidens emerge from a grove, their eyes marked by delicate antimony, their movements compared to flags swaying in the breeze—an extended metaphor that captures both their elegance and otherworldliness.⁹

The Brahman, overwhelmed by their beauty, is struck with confusion and halts his meal.¹⁰ Watching discreetly, he notices the two women—later revealed to be Naga princesses—eating the pods of *kacchaguccha* grass growing on the valley meadows.¹¹ Moved by compassion and astonished that such beauty is met with such

austerity; he invites them to share his humble food.¹² His hospitality extends to fetching water in folded leaves and fanning them with improvised fans, actions that show the simplicity of care and mutual respect.¹³

Their ensuing conversation deepens the narrative. The Brahman humbly declares that perhaps his fortune to see such divine women was earned through good deeds in a previous birth,¹⁴ and respectfully asks about their family and misfortune.¹⁵ One of them introduces herself as Iravati, daughter of the Naga Susravas, and the other as Candralekha, her younger sister.¹⁶ Iravati is already promised in marriage to the lord of the Vidyadharas, yet both sisters are momentarily displaced, lacking sustenance and comfort—a reflection on the fallibility of even divine households.

When the Brahman inquires about their suffering, they defer to their father as the one holding the answers.¹⁷ Later in the narrative, when the Brahman prepares to return to his homeland, he receives Candralekha in marriage from Susravas, who honors an earlier promise and offers his daughter along with wealth.¹⁸ Significantly, this marital alliance occurs despite the Brahman's humble status, emphasizing the transformative potential of virtue and gratitude over social hierarchy.

Their union blossoms into a joyous life, marked by festivals and prosperity in the city of Narapura.¹⁹ The Naga princess, now a devoted wife, brings immense happiness to her husband—not merely through her physical beauty, but through noble conduct, exemplary character, and unwavering loyalty.²⁰ This depiction of marriage is not just an allegory; it expresses values of emotional compatibility, cross-cultural acceptance, and moral integrity that define the ideal domestic life.

Rather than portraying the Naga-woman as a fantastical or temporary presence, the *Rajatarangini* embeds her firmly within human social roles—she becomes a faithful wife, a symbol of good fortune, and a vehicle of moral excellence. These stories not only elevate the status of the Nagas in Kashmiri cultural imagination but also serve to highlight how marriage and family life were seen as spaces of spiritual merit and ethical fulfillment, regardless of one's origin.

While Naga-human marriages reflect the emotional and familial depth of their interactions, the *Rajatarangini* further expands this relationship by illustrating how Nagas participated in the everyday social customs, moral codes, and ethical responsibilities that shaped the broader fabric of early Kashmiri society.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND SOCIAL ROLES IN EARLY KASHMIR

The *Rajatarangini* offers a nuanced portrayal of early Kashmir's social ethos, where Nagas are not limited to divine iconography but are actively embedded in the same customs, values, and moral expectations as humans. The text vividly illustrates how Nagas participate in education, hospitality, moral restraint, domestic order, and community protection—showcasing a model of shared social space between humans and divine beings.

The cultivation of righteous kingship is shown to be grounded in scriptural learning. The king Jalauka receives his instruction from the sage Avadhuta, renowned for defeating the powerful Bauddha scholars of the time.²¹ This alliance between spiritual authority and royal duty reinforces the importance of orthodox Brahmanical values in shaping public order. Jalauka's moral discipline is further evident in his vow to worship Siva at sacred sites like Vijayesvara and Jyesthesa.²² These sites were geographically distant, yet he managed to visit them daily, aided not by ordinary means, but through the kindness of a Naga who carried him out of devotion.²³ This act, though miraculous, is embedded in a social ideal—of service, religious commitment, and humility.

The king also fulfils his dharmic obligation as a ruler by liberating Kashmir from the oppressive Mlecchas and extending his influence across the land.²⁴ Such accomplishments, framed within the collaboration between human virtue and Naga assistance, highlight how social and spiritual duties intersected in Kashmir's sacred imagination.

A different but equally revealing picture of social behavior emerges in the interaction between the Brahman and the Naga Susravas. When the Brahman asks about the misfortunes that have befallen the Naga, the latter initially refuses to speak of them, stating that dignified people do not expose their suffering unnecessarily.²⁵ He adds that noble minds grieve silently, whereas ordinary people tend to exploit others' misfortunes or give ill-informed advice that only deepens their pain.²⁶ He maintains that true wisdom lies in concealing one's joy and sorrow until both are ultimately silenced by death.²⁷

However, since the matter had already been exposed through the innocent talk of his daughters, Susravas chooses to speak openly, acknowledging the Brahman's sincerity.²⁸ This conversation reflects a strong ethical code surrounding emotional control, privacy, and interpersonal sensitivity, shared alike by humans and Nagas.

Moved by the Brahman's virtue, Susravas later brings him to his abode,²⁹ where he is honored and hosted by the Naga maidens.³⁰ Such scenes not only emphasize the ritual of hospitality but also the authority of elders, the duty of children, and the centrality of generosity—all core elements of early Kashmiri social life.

In another domestic episode, Candralekha—the Naga princess and now the Brahman’s wife—is seen standing atop her mansion, observing a horse eating rice left in the sun to dry.³¹ With the servants absent, she gracefully descends, jingling with anklets, and strikes the horse with her hand.³² The act leaves a golden imprint on the animal’s body.³³ This seemingly simple gesture sets off a chain of events that reveals deeper tensions within the moral order.

The king, already intrigued by tales of the Brahman’s beautiful wife, is overtaken by desire upon hearing this incident.³⁴ The golden mark on the horse becomes symbolic, inflaming his passion beyond restraint. The text compares the effect of the story to a storm intensifying flames and likens the king’s desire to a tide swollen by the moon.³⁵ Losing all decorum, the king sends messengers to seduce her,³⁶ and when this fails, shamelessly demands her from her husband.³⁷ Rejected again, he orders soldiers to abduct her by force.³⁸

Demonstrating courage and presence of mind, the Brahman escapes with his wife through another route and seeks refuge in the Naga’s abode.³⁹ In recognition of his steadfast virtue and as a gesture of alliance, the Naga transforms the Brahman into one of his own kind, granting him a place by a sacred lake thereafter known as *Jamadagnisar*, the “son-in-law’s lake”.⁴⁰

Here, the narrative shifts to moral reflection. The chronicler notes with irony how some rulers—likened to “gods of death”—pose as protectors while actually causing destruction. The king’s downfall becomes a warning embedded in the landscape itself: the site of his ruined town near Cakradhara and the hollowed pond nearby still serve as reminders of moral collapse.

The text openly critiques public tolerance toward royal misconduct, pointing out that people often minimize kings’ moral lapses. Yet in this case, the consequences were severe and historically unmatched—resulting from the violated dignity of a virtuous woman and a righteous Brahman. The chronicler concludes with a powerful moral: the wrath of even one wronged person—be it a woman, deity, or Brahman—can bring about cosmic ruin.⁴¹

These episodes together reveal the deeply humanized world of the Nagas, where divine beings live by the same moral standards and societal roles as their human counterparts. They educate, host, serve, resist injustice, and uphold values of loyalty, discretion, and family honor. The *Rajatarangini* thus constructs a sacred social vision where Nagas are not mere figures of lore but reflections of the ethical and emotional lives of early Kashmir’s society.

II. CONCLUSION

The social life of the Nagas, as depicted in *Rajatarangini*, reveals a world where divine beings do not remain aloof from human concerns but actively participate in them. Whether as allies of righteous kings, as affectionate family members, or as moral exemplars resisting injustice, the Nagas are woven deeply into the social ethos of early Kashmir. Their interactions with humans are not incidental but formative—shaping the course of events, offering ethical commentary, and embodying ideals of devotion, discretion, and dignity.

Rather than portraying Nagas solely through the lens of religious belief, Kalhaṇa presents them as socially grounded figures—capable of love, suffering, loyalty, and righteous anger. Their narratives affirm the interconnectedness of dharma, community, and divine will. In doing so, the *Rajatarangini* dissolves the separation between myth and history, offering a vision of society where the divine is not outside of social life but fully present within its moral and emotional structures. Through the lens of Naga-human relationships, we glimpse a Kashmir where sacredness is not abstract, but deeply lived.

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