

Sacred Ecology and Community Beliefs: Indigenous Environmental Ethics and the Conservation of Springs in Kashmir

Altaf Hussain Para

Associate Professor
Higher Education Department (J&K)

Abstract:

Human societies have historically depended upon the natural environment for survival, resulting in the emergence of complex cultural practices that regulated the use and protection of natural resources. Although the expansion of civilization and technological advancement significantly improved human living conditions, they also accelerated the exploitation of ecosystems and the degradation of natural heritage. In many traditional societies, however, indigenous belief systems and religious practices functioned as informal mechanisms of environmental governance by attributing sacred value to elements of the natural landscape. Such cultural perceptions often discouraged unsustainable exploitation and promoted long-term ecological stewardship. Focusing on selected springs and caves of the Kashmir Valley, this paper explores how religious beliefs, local traditions, and customary practices have contributed to the preservation of these natural heritage sites. It argues that sacred landscapes have historically served not merely as places of worship but also as effective instruments for community-based environmental conservation, offering important lessons for contemporary heritage management and sustainable resource conservation.

Keywords: Sacred ecology; Natural heritage; Indigenous belief systems; Environmental conservation; Freshwater springs; Sacred landscapes; Kashmir; Anantnag; Cultural heritage; Traditional ecological knowledge.

Introduction

The interaction between human societies and the natural environment has historically extended beyond economic dependence or material utilization. Across civilizations, landscapes have acquired symbolic, religious, and cultural meanings that profoundly influenced patterns of resource use and environmental management. Long before the emergence of formal environmental legislation or scientific conservation, communities developed customary institutions that regulated access to natural resources through religious beliefs, ritual practices, and collective moral obligations. These cultural mechanisms frequently functioned as informal systems of environmental governance, protecting forests, rivers, mountains, springs, and other natural features by embedding them within sacred traditions. Consequently, understanding the historical relationship between belief systems and environmental conservation has become an important area of interdisciplinary research encompassing environmental history, anthropology, religious studies, and heritage conservation. Modern scholarship has often portrayed religion primarily through the lens of

dogmatism, conflict, and resistance to scientific progress. Such interpretations gained prominence during the Enlightenment and continued to influence twentieth-century academic discourse, where religion was frequently regarded as an impediment to modernization and rational thought. Certainly, history offers numerous examples in which religious doctrines have been manipulated to legitimize intolerance, social exclusion, and political violence. Contemporary religious extremism has further reinforced this perception by presenting faith as a source of division rather than social cohesion. Nevertheless, such an understanding captures only one dimension of religion's historical role. Increasingly, scholars argue that religious traditions have also generated ethical frameworks that encouraged environmental responsibility, social cooperation, and sustainable interaction with nature (Berkes, 2018; Sponsel, 2012). The concept of *sacred ecology* has therefore emerged as an important theoretical perspective for understanding how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to biodiversity conservation and ecological resilience.

The contemporary environmental crisis has intensified interest in these traditional systems of ecological knowledge. Rapid industrialization, urban expansion, technological development, and unsustainable patterns of resource exploitation have resulted in unprecedented degradation of natural ecosystems across the globe. Air pollution, freshwater contamination, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change now constitute some of the most pressing challenges confronting humanity. According to the Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health, pollution remains responsible for millions of premature deaths annually and continues to impose enormous social and economic costs worldwide (Landrigan et al., 2018). While governments, international organizations, and scientific institutions have developed increasingly sophisticated technological and legal mechanisms to mitigate environmental degradation, these approaches frequently overlook the cultural and ethical dimensions of conservation. Consequently, there is growing recognition that sustainable environmental management requires the integration of scientific knowledge with indigenous traditions and community-based conservation practices.

Within this broader context, Kashmir represents an exceptionally significant cultural landscape. Since antiquity, the valley has been celebrated not only for its remarkable natural beauty but also for the sacred character attributed to its mountains, rivers, springs, caves, lakes, and forests. These landscapes have occupied a central place in the religious imagination of successive communities, including the followers of indigenous Naga traditions, Brahmanical Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Rather than replacing earlier cultural practices entirely, successive religious traditions often incorporated, adapted, and reinterpreted existing sacred geographies. This continuity created a distinctive environmental ethos in which natural features acquired spiritual significance that transcended changing political and religious identities. Among the various components of Kashmir's natural heritage, freshwater springs occupy a particularly prominent position. Springs have historically served not only as reliable sources of drinking water and irrigation but also as centres of pilgrimage, ritual activity, and communal identity. Literary sources, archaeological evidence, folklore, and oral traditions consistently portray springs as sacred spaces inhabited by tutelary deities, serpentine guardians (*Nagas*), saints, or supernatural beings. Such beliefs generated behavioural norms that discouraged pollution, restricted exploitative activities, and encouraged collective responsibility for maintaining the purity of water sources. Although these practices originated in diverse religious contexts, many continued to survive after the Islamization of Kashmir through processes of cultural adaptation and localization. Consequently, the conservation of springs cannot be understood solely in terms of environmental necessity; it must also be interpreted within the broader framework of religious belief, cultural memory, and social practice.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Kashmir's religious history and environmental heritage, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining sacred springs as institutions of indigenous environmental conservation. Existing studies generally discuss the mythology of Satisar, the Naga cult, the spread of Islam, or the ecological significance of Kashmir's water resources independently, without adequately exploring the intersection between religious belief and environmental stewardship. Likewise, contemporary environmental policies tend to prioritize scientific and administrative interventions while paying comparatively limited attention to the conservation potential embedded within local cultural traditions. This gap in scholarship highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical, religious, and environmental perspectives. The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating the relationship between belief systems and the conservation of natural heritage, focusing specifically on selected springs in the district of Anantnag. It argues that religious beliefs and customary practices historically functioned as informal regulatory mechanisms that contributed significantly to the protection of freshwater ecosystems. Rather than interpreting these traditions merely as expressions of faith or folklore, the paper examines them as practical institutions of community-based environmental management whose ecological consequences remain relevant even today. Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-analytical approach that combines literary evidence, historical narratives, local traditions, and contemporary cultural practices. Classical texts such as the *Rājataranginī*, the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, geological studies, and modern scholarship on Kashmir's cultural history are examined alongside surviving oral traditions relating to sacred springs. By placing these diverse sources within the broader framework of sacred ecology and environmental history, the paper seeks to demonstrate how cultural values shaped ecological behaviour over an extended historical period. The discussion is organized into two principal sections. The first reconstructs the historical origins of the sacred status attributed to springs by examining the Satisar tradition, the Naga cult, and the evolution of Kashmir's sacred geography. The second analyses the continuity and transformation of these beliefs within contemporary Kashmiri society and evaluates their contribution to environmental conservation. Ultimately, the study argues that indigenous belief systems should not be viewed merely as remnants of a pre-modern past but recognized as valuable cultural resources capable of informing present-day strategies for protecting natural heritage and promoting sustainable environmental stewardship.

Historical Origins of the Sacred Status of Springs in Kashmir

The reverence accorded to freshwater springs in Kashmir cannot be understood without examining the valley's cultural memory, mythological traditions, and religious evolution. Unlike many regions where water bodies are valued primarily for their economic utility, Kashmir developed a worldview in which springs were perceived as sacred manifestations of the landscape itself. Their sanctity emerged through the interaction of mythology, indigenous religious traditions, and historical transformations that collectively shaped the ecological consciousness of the region. The earliest and most influential narrative concerning Kashmir's origin is preserved in the Satisar tradition. According to the *Nilamata Purāṇa* and later literary traditions, the Kashmir Valley was once occupied by an enormous lake known as Satisar. The valley became habitable only after Sage Kashyapa, with the assistance of the god Vishnu, drained the waters by cutting a passage through the surrounding mountains, thereby liberating the land from the demon Jalodbhava (Nazki, 2018; Stein, 1900). Although modern geology interprets the Satisar narrative as a mythological explanation of geological events rather than literal history, scientific studies confirm that the Kashmir Valley was indeed once occupied by a vast lacustrine basin during prehistoric times (Pithawalla,

1953; Dar, 2017). Consequently, mythology and geology converge in recognizing water as the primordial element in the formation of Kashmir's landscape.

The symbolic implications of the Satisar tradition are particularly significant. Since the valley itself was believed to have emerged from a sacred body of water, the surviving lakes, springs, rivers, and wetlands came to be regarded as remnants of that primordial landscape. These water bodies were therefore not merely physical resources but sacred inheritances that embodied the memory of Kashmir's creation. Such cosmological beliefs elevated freshwater springs from ordinary hydrological features to objects of ritual reverence, encouraging communities to protect them from contamination and misuse. An alternative explanation of Kashmir's origin developed within the Islamic tradition following the gradual Islamization of the valley from the fourteenth century onwards. Muslim chronicles and local traditions associate the draining of the primordial lake with the Prophet Sulayman (Solomon), whose divinely bestowed powers enabled him to reclaim the valley for human habitation. This narrative is reflected in the historical name Takht-i-Sulaiman for the hill now occupied by the Shankaracharya Temple overlooking Srinagar (Pithawalla, 1953; Dar, 2019). Although differing in theological framework, both the Hindu and Islamic traditions emphasize the sacred origins of Kashmir's landscape and reinforce the cultural importance of its water resources. Rather than replacing earlier beliefs, the Islamic narrative reinterpreted an existing sacred geography within a new religious framework, illustrating the remarkable continuity of environmental symbolism across religious transitions. The sacred character of springs was further reinforced through the Naga cult, one of the earliest indigenous religious traditions of ancient Kashmir. Literary evidence suggests that serpent worship occupied a central place in the religious life of the valley long before the consolidation of Brahmanical Hinduism. The *Nīlamata Purāṇa* records numerous sacred springs associated with Nagas, while Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī* frequently depicts serpent deities as guardians of lakes, springs, and rivers (Stein, 1900). Water sources were therefore understood not merely as natural phenomena but as the abodes of powerful supernatural beings responsible for maintaining ecological balance.

The persistence of Naga worship is also evident in medieval historical accounts. Abu'l Fazl, writing in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* during the reign of Emperor Akbar, observed that Kashmir contained an extraordinarily large number of serpent shrines compared with temples dedicated to major Hindu deities. According to his account, the valley possessed nearly seven hundred locations associated with serpent worship, indicating that the Naga tradition remained deeply rooted within Kashmiri religious culture even during the sixteenth century (Abu'l Fazl, 1873). Although the precise numerical accuracy of this observation may be debated, it clearly reflects the remarkable prominence of sacred water cults within Kashmir's cultural landscape. An equally important indication of this historical continuity survives in the Kashmiri language itself. Unlike Sanskrit, where the term *Nāga* primarily denotes a serpent, the Kashmiri word *nag* commonly refers to a freshwater spring. This linguistic transformation demonstrates the intimate association between serpent worship and natural water sources. Whether the term preserves the memory of ancient guardian deities or represents a symbolic reinterpretation of sacred springs remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it illustrates how religious symbolism became embedded within everyday geographical terminology, reinforcing the perception of springs as living components of the sacred landscape. The transition from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam did not erase these deeply rooted cultural perceptions. Instead, many sacred sites retained their significance while acquiring new religious meanings. Springs that were once associated with Nagas or Hindu deities gradually became connected with Muslim saints, Sufi shrines, and local spiritual traditions. Such processes of cultural accommodation ensured the survival of sacred

environmental practices despite profound religious change. This continuity represents one of the defining characteristics of Kashmir's cultural history and provides important evidence for understanding the relationship between religion and environmental conservation. Thus, the historical evolution of sacred springs in Kashmir reveals that environmental protection was not solely the product of conscious ecological planning. Rather, it emerged from a complex interaction between mythology, religious belief, linguistic tradition, and cultural memory. Collectively, these elements transformed freshwater springs into sacred heritage sites whose preservation became a moral and religious obligation. This historical legacy laid the foundation for many customary conservation practices that continued to influence Kashmiri society well into the modern period.

Sacred Beliefs and Environmental Conservation: Contemporary Continuity

Religious conversion in Kashmir was not an abrupt rupture with the past but a gradual process of cultural negotiation in which many indigenous traditions were selectively retained and reinterpreted. While Islam eventually became the dominant religion of the valley from the fourteenth century onwards, the transition did not completely displace earlier cultural practices associated with the natural landscape. Instead, numerous pre-Islamic beliefs survived within local Islamic traditions, producing a distinctive form of religious culture in which sacred geography continued to shape human interaction with the environment. The reverence accorded to freshwater springs represents one of the most enduring examples of this cultural continuity. Anthropologists have long argued that religious beliefs frequently function as mechanisms of social regulation by establishing moral codes that govern community behaviour. In many traditional societies, sacred natural sites are protected not through legal sanctions but through religious obligations and collective social norms (Berkes, 2018). Kashmir provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. Springs are widely perceived not merely as sources of water but as spiritually significant places whose purity must be maintained. Their sanctity is reinforced through local customs, oral traditions, and communal memory, creating a cultural environment in which pollution is viewed not only as an environmental offence but also as a moral transgression.

One of the most persistent beliefs associated with Kashmiri springs concerns their intrinsic purity. Local communities traditionally regard spring water as naturally blessed and possessing exceptional qualities. Consequently, activities such as washing clothes, disposing of waste, or contaminating spring water have historically been discouraged. In many villages, elders continue to caution younger generations against polluting springs by invoking religious and supernatural consequences rather than environmental regulations. Such beliefs effectively function as informal conservation laws, encouraging responsible behaviour through deeply internalized ethical values. Islamic teachings themselves reinforce many of these practices. Numerous Prophetic traditions emphasize cleanliness (*ṭahārah*) and explicitly prohibit contaminating stagnant water or sources used by the public. However, the exceptional reverence attached to specific springs in Kashmir extends beyond normative Islamic jurisprudence. Individual springs are frequently associated with saints, miraculous events, or sacred narratives that originated in earlier religious traditions but were subsequently incorporated into local Islamic culture. This process illustrates how indigenous environmental ethics continued to survive through cultural adaptation rather than theological continuity.

Another significant conservation practice concerns aquatic biodiversity. In many sacred springs of Kashmir, fish have traditionally been protected from hunting or consumption despite the absence of any general prohibition in Islamic law regarding freshwater fish. Local belief maintains that harming fish

inhabiting sacred springs invites misfortune or divine displeasure. Although such perceptions may appear purely religious, their ecological consequences are evident. By discouraging exploitation of aquatic fauna, these customs contributed to maintaining ecological balance within fragile freshwater ecosystems. In modern conservation terminology, such practices represent community-based biodiversity protection achieved through customary institutions rather than statutory legislation. The ecological significance of these traditions becomes even more apparent when considered alongside the physical characteristics of Kashmir's springs. Springs constitute delicate freshwater ecosystems that are highly vulnerable to pollution, overexploitation, and habitat disturbance. Because many of them serve as primary sources of drinking water and irrigation, even minor contamination can have serious consequences for local communities. Traditional restrictions on polluting spring water therefore performed an important public health function while simultaneously protecting the ecological integrity of these habitats. In this sense, cultural beliefs produced practical environmental outcomes irrespective of their theological origins.

Historical continuity is also visible in the transformation of sacred geography following the Islamization of Kashmir. Springs that were formerly associated with Nāga deities or Hindu pilgrimage traditions gradually became linked with Muslim saints and Sufi shrines. Rather than abandoning sacred landscapes, local communities reassigned new religious meanings to pre-existing sites. This process allowed traditional conservation ethics to survive despite profound changes in religious identity. It also demonstrates that environmental values embedded within cultural landscapes often transcend formal doctrinal boundaries. Nevertheless, these customary conservation practices have experienced increasing pressure during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rapid urbanization, population growth, commercialization, changing patterns of land use, and declining dependence on traditional institutions have weakened many of the social norms that once protected sacred springs. Modern infrastructure development has resulted in the encroachment, pollution, and even disappearance of several historically significant water sources. Simultaneously, reformist religious movements have questioned the legitimacy of certain customary practices, regarding them as innovations (*bid'ah*) inconsistent with normative Islamic teachings. Although these theological debates concern questions of religious orthodoxy, they have also contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional conservation mechanisms that had historically benefited the environment. These developments underscore an important lesson for contemporary heritage management. Scientific conservation measures and legal regulations remain indispensable for protecting freshwater ecosystems, yet they are often insufficient when implemented without community participation. Indigenous cultural values can complement modern environmental policies by fostering voluntary compliance and strengthening local stewardship. International organizations, including UNESCO and IUCN, increasingly recognize the contribution of sacred natural sites to biodiversity conservation and encourage the integration of traditional ecological knowledge into heritage management strategies. Kashmir's sacred springs represent a valuable example of such community-based conservation practices. The persistence of these beliefs demonstrates that environmental ethics are not always articulated through scientific language or ecological theory. Rather, they are frequently embedded within rituals, oral traditions, religious narratives, and collective memory. Appreciating this cultural dimension broadens our understanding of conservation by revealing that environmental protection has historically depended not only upon technological interventions but also upon shared systems of belief that encouraged communities to value, respect, and safeguard the natural world.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the conservation of natural heritage cannot be understood solely through the lens of modern environmental science or statutory regulations. The historical experience of Kashmir illustrates that indigenous belief systems frequently functioned as effective mechanisms of environmental governance by embedding ecological values within religious and cultural practices. The sacred status accorded to freshwater springs generated powerful moral obligations that discouraged pollution, regulated human interaction with water resources, and fostered collective responsibility for their preservation. Consequently, many springs remained ecologically intact for centuries despite the absence of formal conservation policies. The historical evidence further reveals that the environmental significance of these traditions transcended religious boundaries. The mythology of Satisar, the Naga cult, Brahmanical sacred geography, and later Islamic reinterpretations collectively contributed to the development of a shared ecological ethos in which water occupied a central position within the cultural landscape of Kashmir. Rather than representing mutually exclusive religious traditions, these successive belief systems interacted through processes of accommodation and cultural continuity, ensuring that reverence for springs survived profound political and religious transformations. Such continuity highlights the dynamic nature of Kashmiri culture, where sacred landscapes retained their environmental significance even as their theological interpretations evolved.

From an ecological perspective, customary beliefs produced tangible conservation outcomes. Social prohibitions against polluting spring water, disturbing sacred sites, or exploiting aquatic fauna effectively minimized human pressure on fragile freshwater ecosystems. Although these practices were motivated primarily by religious conviction rather than scientific understanding, they nevertheless achieved objectives that contemporary environmental management seeks to accomplish through legislation and administrative regulation. In this respect, indigenous traditions functioned as informal but remarkably effective institutions of community-based conservation. However, the protective capacity of these traditional mechanisms has declined considerably during the modern period. Rapid urbanization, demographic expansion, changing patterns of land use, commercialization, and declining dependence on customary institutions have contributed to the degradation of numerous springs across the Kashmir Valley. Simultaneously, theological reform movements and processes of modernization have weakened many local traditions that historically reinforced environmental stewardship. As a result, several springs that once remained pristine now face pollution, encroachment, reduced discharge, and ecological deterioration. These developments indicate that scientific conservation measures, while indispensable, cannot fully compensate for the erosion of cultural values that historically encouraged responsible environmental behaviour.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that contemporary heritage conservation should adopt a more integrated approach that recognizes the complementary relationship between scientific management and indigenous knowledge systems. Rather than dismissing traditional beliefs as remnants of a pre-modern worldview, policymakers and conservation agencies should acknowledge their potential contribution to sustainable environmental governance. Community participation rooted in local cultural traditions can strengthen conservation initiatives by fostering voluntary compliance, environmental awareness, and a stronger sense of collective ownership over natural heritage. The conservation of Kashmir's springs should therefore be viewed not merely as an environmental priority but also as a cultural imperative. These water sources embody centuries of historical memory, religious symbolism, and collective identity while continuing to provide essential ecological services to local communities. Preserving them requires

safeguarding both their physical integrity and the cultural traditions that have historically sustained them. Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with contemporary conservation science offers a more holistic and culturally sensitive framework for protecting Kashmir's fragile natural heritage. Finally, the relationship between belief systems and environmental conservation explored in this study has implications that extend beyond Kashmir. Across South Asia and many other parts of the world, sacred natural sites continue to serve as reservoirs of biodiversity and cultural memory. Future research may therefore expand this approach through comparative studies of sacred springs, lakes, forests, and mountains, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of how religious traditions and indigenous knowledge can support contemporary strategies for environmental sustainability and heritage conservation in the twenty-first century.

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