

Tribes, Sacred Landscape and Environment in Early Kashmir: A Study of the Nilamata Purana and Rajatarangini

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between tribes, sacred geography, and environmental transformation in early Kashmir through a study of the Nilamata Purana and the Rajatarangini. The Nilamata Purana presents the Valley as a sacred space originally inhabited by indigenous tribes such as the Nagas and Pisachas, whose presence shaped its territorial and ecological identity. These tribes are closely associated with rivers, mountains, and settlement patterns, reflecting an early tribal-sacral order. In contrast, the Rajatarangini depicts a later stage in which many tribal groups occupied peripheral regions while centralized administrative and agrarian structures emerged within the core Valley. The paper argues that early Kashmir evolved from a sacred tribal landscape into a territorially organized polity. This transformation highlights the dynamic interaction between tribe, environment, and political consolidation in the region's historical development.

Keywords: Early Kashmir, Nilamata Purana, Rajatarangini, Nagas

I. Introduction

The early history of Kashmir presents a unique example of how geography, sacred imagination, and tribal identity together shaped a region's historical development. Unlike purely political chronicles, early Sanskrit literary traditions such as the Nilamata Purana and Kalhana's Rajatarangini preserve layered memories of settlement, ecological negotiation, territorial authority, and social transformation. These texts describe Kashmir not merely as a natural valley enclosed by mountains, but as a sacred landscape whose identity evolved through the interaction of tribes, environment, and emerging political structures.

This study seeks to examine how tribal communities participated in the sacralization of space in early Kashmir and how changing ecological and political conditions transformed their spatial location and authority between the Nilamata Purana and the Rajatarangini. By reading these texts as repositories of ecological memory rather than merely mythic or dynastic narratives, the paper situates early Kashmir within a broader framework of sacred geography and environmental adaptation.

In the Nilamata Purana, Kashmir appears as a sacred space originally inhabited by indigenous tribes, especially the Nagas and Pisachas, whose presence defined the Valley's earliest ecological and social order. Their distribution across rivers, mountains, and settlements reflects a worldview in which territory was sacralized through tribal guardianship. By contrast, Kalhana's Rajatarangini, composed in the twelfth century A.D., reflects a later historical stage in which tribal dominance within the core Valley had diminished and more structured administrative divisions and agrarian institutions had emerged. Yet,

even in this later period, tribal communities continued to shape the Valley's peripheral zones and frontier regions.

Through an examination of the tribes mentioned in these texts—Nagas, Pisachas, Khasas, Daradas, Bhauttas, Abhisaras, Gandharas, Sakas, Yavanas, Tantrins, Damaras, and others—it becomes evident that early Kashmir's history cannot be understood without considering the interplay between sacred geography, ecological adaptation, and tribal organization. The Valley's rivers, mountains, frontier passes, and fertile plains were not passive geographical features but active elements shaping settlement patterns, social hierarchies, and political consolidation.

In this sense, control over water sources, cultivable land, and mountain corridors was closely linked with ritual authority and social prestige, indicating that environmental management and sacred legitimacy were deeply interconnected.

The early history of Kashmir, as reflected in literary traditions such as the Nilamata Purana and Kalhana's Rajatarangini, presents a landscape shaped by tribes, sacred associations, ecological adaptation, and gradual political consolidation. These texts preserve detailed references to various tribal groups, their geographical distribution, their modes of subsistence, and their interaction with the Valley's rivers, mountains, and frontier passes. When read carefully, they reveal that the Kashmir Valley was not simply a natural basin enclosed by mountains but a culturally constructed sacred territory whose identity evolved through the presence and transformation of tribal communities.

II. The Tribal Role in the Sacred Formation of Kashmir

The earliest references situate Kashmir within a broader northern tribal world. The Atharvasamhita mentions tribes such as the Mahavrsas, Bahlikas, Gandharis, and Mujavats. Although there is no clear evidence that these tribes inhabited Kashmir itself, it is probable that they lived outside the Aryan region and formed part of the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan belt.¹ The Brahmanas and Upanishads refer to northwestern tribes including the Kekayas, Gandharas, Madras, and Ambasthas, but these texts do not indicate any direct interaction between these groups and the Kashmir Valley.² This absence suggests that Kashmir's early development followed its own trajectory within a larger frontier zone.

A more specific geographical reference appears in Varahamihira's Brhatsamhita, which classifies Kashmir as part of the northeastern division and mentions tribes such as the Abhisaras, Darvas, Daradas, Khasas, and Kirtas inhabiting this region. These references demonstrate that Kashmir was historically connected with a mosaic of mountain and frontier tribes occupying adjacent ecological zones. Historical records from other sources confirm the continued presence of these tribes in Kashmir and its surrounding areas during different periods.³

The Nilamata Purana accords central importance to the Nagas and presents them as the earliest inhabitants of Kashmir. According to the text, the Nagas were descendants of Prajapati Kashyapa and his wife Kadru, daughter of Daksha.⁴ This genealogical origin establishes a sacred legitimacy for their presence in the Valley. The Kashmir Valley, known as Satidesa in ancient times, was solely inhabited by the Nagas, indicating that they were the region's earliest settlers.⁵ This portrayal not only emphasizes indigeneity but also associates the Nagas with the original sacralization of the land.

The myth of the transformation of Satisara into habitable land may be interpreted as a symbolic memory of ecological reclamation, possibly recalling the draining of marshland and the conversion of water-dominated terrain into cultivable fields. Thus, sacred narrative encodes environmental change.

The text mentions various branches of the Naga tribe residing in different parts of Kashmir. A Naga named Sadangula was exiled from Kashmir to Usiraka in the land of Darva because of his misconduct.⁶ This episode demonstrates both moral regulation and spatial mobility within tribal society. Naga Mahapadma acquired the city of Chandrapuri from King Visvagasva by deceit,⁷ indicating that Nagas were associated with urban centers and political authority. Sodara Naga resided in Uttaramanasa, south of which flowed the great river Kankavahini.⁸ Such geographical specificity ties Naga presence to identifiable environmental features—rivers, cities, and valleys.

The Nagas are considered the indigenous inhabitants of the region, as they are described as the guardians of Kashmir in all four directions. Bindusara Naga is said to protect the eastern side, Srimadhaka Naga is positioned in the south, and Uttaramanas Naga is designated as the guardian of the northern direction.⁹ This fourfold guardianship symbolically maps the Valley and suggests that tribal authority defined sacred territorial boundaries. A verse further states that the Nagas built houses, temples, sacred sites, villages, and cities, settling in permanent dwellings.¹⁰ This clearly indicates a settled lifestyle rather than purely mythic existence. The Nagas were among the earliest inhabitants of Kashmir and northern India.¹¹ Kalhana refers to Naga Susravasa during the reign of King Nara and notes that many Nagas lived in the mountains surrounding Satisara and practiced agriculture.¹² This connection with agriculture reveals their integration into the ecological cycle of the Valley and supports the view that they represented early agrarian communities embedded within a sacred landscape. Their association with water bodies and springs further suggests that control over irrigation and fertility was sacralized through the figure of the Naga, blending ecological management with religious symbolism.

The Nilamata Purana identifies the Pisachas as another prominent group inhabiting Kashmir.¹³ They are portrayed as socially and culturally distinct from the Nagas and are described as allies of the Daityas, residing in an oasis surrounded by a vast desert. In Kashmir, they lived under the leadership of Nikumba.¹⁴ A curse placed on the Nagas by Kashyapa allowed the Pisachas to inhabit the Valley for six months each year.¹⁵ This seasonal arrangement may symbolize alternating access to resources or climatic adaptation.

The Pisachas are described as raw flesh eaters,¹⁶ reflecting subsistence practices different from settled agrarian communities. Their portrayal in the text is negative,¹⁷ indicating cultural tension. Unlike the Nagas, no fixed settlement is directly associated with them, suggesting mobility. Various sources indicate that they were likely a nomadic tribe active around the Hindukush region, including Himachal, Kashmir, and surrounding areas.¹⁸ Geographical names such as Kekaya, Kapisa (at the southern base of the Hindukush), and Nikumba have historical links to them.¹⁹ Their presence in northern and northwestern frontier zones reinforces the image of a mobile community inhabiting marginal ecological regions.

The struggle between the Nagas and Pisachas, along with the arrival of the Manavas, is extensively detailed. The Nagas were displeased with the entry of both groups but preferred coexistence with the Manavas over the Pisachas.²⁰ They refused to live alongside the Pisachas, whom they considered cruel and violent.²¹ The text describes an agreement between the Nagas and the Pisachas, allowing each group to reside in Kashmir for six months annually. This arrangement persisted until the Nagas, with the support of the Manavas, eventually succeeded in expelling the Pisachas from the region.²² The arrival of the Manavas appears to have played a crucial role in establishing permanent settlements and demographic stability.²³ The conflict likely reflected competition over ecological niches and territorial control.²⁴

In addition to the Nagas and Pisachas, the Nilamata Purana also mentions other tribes. However, the key distinction is that while the former two tribes are depicted as residing within the Kashmir region, the other tribes are more likely to have inhabited peripheral or neighboring areas.²⁵ The regions they occupied²⁶ are as follows:

1. The Khasas are believed to have inhabited the valley located just south and west of the Pir Panjal range, stretching between the middle course of the Vitasta in the west and Kastavata in the east.²⁷ Their center of power likely centered around the area of present day Rajouri. The Markandeya Purana describes the Khasas as a mountainous tribe, while the Mahabharata places them between the Meru and Mandara mountains near the river Sailoda. In the Brihat Samhita, they are grouped with the Kulutas (from Kulu), the Tanganas, and the Kashmiras.²⁸ The Rajatarangini refers to the rulers of Rajapuri (modern Rajauri) as Khasa, and their soldiers and lords are also called Khasas.²⁹
2. The Antargiris and Bahirgiris appear to have been hill tribes who inhabited the Great Himalayas and the Lesser Himalayas.³⁰
3. The Madras finds mention in the Astadhyayi, the Mahabhasya and the Jatakas. They must have inhabited the modern Sialkot (ancient Sakala) and the surrounding regions between the rivers Chandrabhaga (modern Chenab) and Iravati.³¹ The Brhadaranyakopanisad indicates that this tribe was well-versed in sacrificial rituals. They held the title of rajas and were known as a group of warriors. However, they are criticized in the Mahabharata for their close associations with the Vahikas.³² The Nilamata Purana also refers to the holy pilgrimage sites in Madra, which were abandoned and depopulated due to the demon Jalodhbhava.³³
4. The Sakas are believed to have settled in the southern part of the Kashmir region. After being driven out from the lands near the Oxus by the Yueh-chi, the Sakas moved south and occupied Ki-pin (Kapisa—present-day Kafirstan). Their branches spread across various regions, establishing several kingdoms, including Hiau Siun and Siun-tu (Sindh).³⁴ For a time, the southern part of Kashmir was ruled by Demetrius. Ptolemy mentions that Menander may have occupied Kashmir, as he refers to Kaspeiria, which was part of Menander's homeland.³⁵ A dialogue between Menander and Nagarjuna is also recorded to have taken place around twelve yojanas from Kashmir, as mentioned in the Milandapanha.³⁶
5. The Darvas were native to Darva, which is associated with the Jammu and Billavar districts. They are listed as a northern tribe alongside others such as the Daradas, Suras, Audumbaras, Kashmiras, and Trigartas in the Mahabharata and various Puranas.³⁷
6. The Abhisaras were situated between the Vitasta (Jhelum) and Chandrabhaga (Chenab) rivers, encompassing regions like Jammu and Punch. The Darva, along with Abhisara, often referred to as Darvabhisara in geographical terms, has been identified by Stein as a territory that includes the lower and middle hills between these two rivers.³⁸ These tribes were well-known for their resistance against Alexander the Great. Later, they formed an alliance with him, and Alexander confirmed their ruler's position with the title of Satrap. The term Darvabhisara is generally used to refer to a single, continuous region.³⁹
7. The Gandharas were the inhabitants of Gandhara, which is identified with the regions of Peshawar and Rawalpindi in north-western Punjab.⁴⁰ This ancient tribe is mentioned in both the Rigveda and the Atharvaveda. In the Mahabharata, they are listed alongside other tribes such as the Yavanas, Kambojas, Kiratas, and Barbaras.⁴¹ The strong connections between Kashmir and Gandhara are

- evident in the Jatakas and the Milindapanho. These ties were further solidified when the Kushan king Kanishka, who ruled Gandhara, also occupied Kashmir.⁴²
8. The Juhundaras seem to be the same as the Jaguda and inhabited the region around Afghanistan. They appear to be identical to the Juhudas of the Vayu Purana, the Jagudas of the Matsya Purana, the Jahutas of the Visnudharmottara Purana, and the Jagudas of the Markandeya Purana and the Mahabharata.⁴³ These tribes are listed alongside other tribes located to the northwest of India, such as the Lampakas (from Laghman), the Sulikas (Sogdians), the Avaganas (Afghans), and the Gandharas.⁴⁴
 9. The Mandavas appear to be the descendants of Mandu and are likely associated with the people from the northwest.⁴⁵
 10. Yavanas, the Nilamata Purana by mentioning a Naga Yavanapriya, refers to the Yavana the most honoured of the foreign people. They may have been identified with the Ionians. They are grouped with other peoples of Uttarapatha in ancient Indian literature.⁴⁶
 11. The Nilamata Purana mentions a Naga named Yavanapriya, referring to the Yavanas as the most respected among foreign peoples. They are likely associated with the Ionians and are grouped with other peoples of Uttarapatha in ancient Indian texts.⁴⁷ P.G. Bagchi has suggested their connection with the "Donki or the Tunguse," while Moti Chandra believes they inhabited the Kashgar region in Central Asia.⁴⁸ This indicates that they resided near Kashmir.

The way these tribes are described in the Nilamata Purana suggests that they were a dominant social group both within Kashmir and in its surrounding areas.⁴⁹ However, in the Rajatarangini, a different spatial arrangement is evident. The distribution of tribes has shifted, with a noticeable change in their habitation areas. Unlike the Nilamata Purana, which highlights the dominance of tribal communities in the region, the Rajatarangini, written in the 12th century A.D., shows that such dominance seems to have diminished.

III. The Changing Role of Tribes in Kalhana's Rajatarangini

The Rajatarangini mentions certain tribes, but the locations they are described to inhabit are noticeably different from those in the Nilamata Purana. It provides details about the geographical spread of these tribes.

Khasas: The Khasas inhabited the adjacent hilly regions in the south and west. According to various verses in historical chronicles, their settlement extended in a broad semi-circle from Kashtavar in the southeast to the Vitasta Valley in the west.⁵⁰ The Khasas controlled the hill territories of Rajapuri and Lahora, which are associated with the present-day Khakha tribe. Many of the minor rulers in the lower Vitasta Valley and the surrounding hills belonged to this Khakha tribe. Kalhana also records that the Khasakas, possibly related to the Khasas, resided north of the Vitasta Valley, extending up to the Kishanganga region.⁵¹ They are frequently mentioned in the Rajatarangini as raiders.⁵² Ksemendra, in his Desopadesa, describes the Khasas as living in simple cottages.⁵³ The Bombas are noted as their neighboring community.

Daradas: The term Daradas is ancient and frequently appears in early Sanskrit geographical texts.⁵⁴ According to the Rajatarangini, the upper Kishanganga Valley was home to the Daradas,⁵⁵ who were also recognized as the northern neighbors of Kashmir. The territory they occupied was known as Daradadesa.⁵⁶ Kalhana indicates that the Daradas had inhabited the hilly regions adjoining Kashmir since early times and were often a source of trouble for the Kashmiri rulers. Their settlements extended

northwest, covering areas like Chitral, Yasin, Gilgit, and the surrounding regions leading toward Kashmir. Kalhana groups the Daradas alongside the Bhauttas and Mlecchas, considering them impure for having deviated from the sacred law.⁵⁷ He also criticizes the Daradas for their excessive indulgence in wine.⁵⁸

Bhauttas: The Bhauttas inhabited the regions directly to the northeast and east of Kashmir.⁵⁹ They were likely connected to people of Tibetan descent and are associated with the modern Butt community of Dras, Ladakh, and the surrounding mountainous areas. Similar to the Daradas, the Bhauttas are believed to have invaded the Kashmir Valley before the Huna incursion and were described as having deviated from the sacred law.⁶⁰ This portrayal suggests that they were regarded as raiders and warriors who held a lower social status.

Mlecchas: In the Rajatarangini, Kalhana refers to events from his own time and mentions the presence of Mlecchas⁶¹ in the northern regions. He uses the term Mlecchasto denote indigenous tribes, foreign groups such as the Sakas and Hunas, as well as the Muslim invaders. Additionally, Kalhana equates Mlecchas with the term Yavana. The site where the Mlecchas, who had occupied the land, were defeated by Jaluka is known among the people as Ujjhataadimba.⁶²

The tribes mentioned in the Rajatarangini were settled around Kashmir in specific regions rather than within its core territory. This reflects a shift in their status from the period of the Nilamata Purana to the time of Kalhana's Rajatarangini. While these tribes held a dominant position in earlier times, by the era of the Rajatarangini, their presence had become more peripheral in relation to the region that had come to be recognized as Kashmir.⁶³

IV. From Tribal Authority to Agrarian and Military Power Groups

Beyond the tribal formations described above, the Rajatarangini also reflects the emergence of new socio-political groups within the Valley. These communities operated within an increasingly structured agrarian and administrative framework, marking a further stage in Kashmir's social and political transformation.

Tantrins: The Tantrins appear to have constituted a well-organized military group. They rose to prominence in the early tenth century A.D., particularly during the period of internal strife following Partha's succession and the downfall of Sankaravarman (906-936 A.D.). During this time, the Tantrins established themselves as a formidable mercenary force and reached the peak of their influence.⁶⁴ They wielded significant political influence, often playing the role of kingmakers while burdening the land with heavy demands. Over time, they became a crucial yet troublesome faction within the army, primarily serving as foot soldiers.⁶⁵ In multiple references within the Rajatarangini, they are distinctly identified apart from the cavalry and are mentioned as royal guards.⁶⁶ The term Tantrin has persisted in the tribal name Tantri, which is still carried by a significant portion of the Muslim agricultural population in Kashmir. Across the valley, families bearing the Tantric kram or surname can be found in numerous towns and villages.⁶⁷ Their primary occupations include agriculture and timber trade.

Ekangas: The exact meaning of the term Ekangas remains uncertain. However, in Books Five to Seven of the Rajatarangini, it is frequently used to describe an armed force. They are mentioned alongside Samantas (feudal lords), ministers, Tantrins, and Kayasthas (officials) as key figures influencing court and state affairs.⁶⁸ The Ekangas engaged in conflict with the Tantrins, who opposed them over matters of royal succession.⁶⁹ Later references suggest that while they were structured as a military force, their

primary role was in policing duties.⁷⁰ Stein characterizes the Ekangas as an organized militia, comparable in some ways to the Paltan Nizamats of the Muslim rule in Kashmir.⁷¹

Lavanyas: The numerous references to the Lavanyas as a group provide no clear information about their origins. However, these accounts indicate that many among them held positions of influence, either as landowners or tribal leaders. They played a significant role in the internal conflicts that took place in Kashmir during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁷² The Lavanyas seem to have been a prominent tribal faction within the rural population that eventually took up arms. Their name has persisted in the modern Kram of Lon.⁷³ They are also described as a tribe residing in the mountainous regions north of Kashmir.

Damaras: The Damaras were spread across the Kashmir Valley, indicating their diverse tribal origins.⁷⁴ In the Rajatarangini, they are identified as part of the Lavanya tribe,⁷⁵ residing in the mountainous regions north of Kashmir.⁷⁶ However, their presence was not confined to these northern mountains; they were also found throughout Kashmir, particularly in fertile areas such as Nilasva, Holada, Samala, Lahara, Sriddhaka, Utrasa, Jayanti, Bhangila, Khaduvi, Lohara, and Amarsvara.⁷⁷ The Damaras appear to have been territorial lords or feudal landowners.⁷⁸ In Kashmir, the Dars claim descent from the Damaras.⁷⁹

In this way, the changing position of these tribes mirrors the larger historical transition of Kashmir—from a landscape organized through sacred tribal guardianship to one structured by agrarian expansion, political hierarchy, and administrative control. Their continued presence, whether at the center or the periphery, underscores the deep and lasting imprint of tribal society on the historical formation of the Valley.

V. Conclusion

The tribal references preserved in the Nilamata Purana and the Rajatarangini collectively reveal a profound transformation in the sacred and environmental landscape of early Kashmir. In the earlier textual tradition, particularly in the Nilamata Purana, the Valley appears as a sacred ecological space dominated by indigenous tribes, especially the Nagas. Their genealogical connection to Kashyapa, their fourfold guardianship of the Valley, and their association with rivers, mountains, temples, and settlements indicate that tribal authority was central to the sacralization of territory. The Pisachas represent an alternative ecological and cultural order, whose seasonal presence and eventual expulsion reflect competition over resources and modes of subsistence.

By the time of Kalhana's Rajatarangini, however, a noticeable shift had occurred. Tribal groups such as the Khasas, Daradas, and Bhauttas were increasingly located in peripheral mountainous regions rather than within the core Valley. Administrative divisions such as Kramarajya and Madavarajya, along with the development of Mandalas, vishyas, and village units, reflect the consolidation of agrarian governance. Military groups such as the Tantrins and territorial elites like the Damaras further demonstrate the transformation of earlier tribal formations into structured political and feudal institutions.

Thus, the evolution from the world of the Nilamata Purana to that of the Rajatarangini represents more than a chronological shift—it marks the transition from a sacred tribal landscape to a territorially organized polity. The environment—rivers like the Vitasta, mountain ranges such as the Pir Panjal and the Himalayas, and frontier regions extending toward the Hindukush—was not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping social organization, settlement patterns, and political authority. The changing

position of tribes—from central custodians of a sacred land to peripheral communities within an agrarian state—encapsulates the broader historical process through which early Kashmir evolved into a structured and territorially defined society.

The comparison of these two texts therefore highlights not only political change but a reconfiguration of sacred geography itself—from a cosmologically protected basin structured by tribal guardianship to an administratively demarcated territory governed through revenue divisions and feudal authority. Early Kashmir's history must thus be understood as an evolving dialogue between tribe, terrain, and sacred imagination.

End Notes

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- ²² *Ibid*, VV. 217-235.
- ²³ Jamwal, Suman, *Social Geography of Kashmir as reflected in the Nilamata Purana*, *op.cit.*,p.123
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p.121
- ²⁵ Nila, *op.cit.*, VV. 82-83
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- 47 *Ibid*, p. 74
- 48 *Ibid*
- 49 Nila, VV. 82-83. For a detailed discussion on their places of habitation and their identification in terms of modern places, see *The Nilamata Purana, A cultural and literary study of a Kashmiri Purana*, Vol-I, Srinagar, 1988(second edition), pp.46-76.
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