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The sacredness of water: Religious and environmental values during ancient and Mughal rule in Kashmir

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Abstract

The earliest references to the belief system of the Kashmiri people in nature come from Kalhana's Rajatarangini and Nilamata Purana written by an anonymous author. Both argued that Kashmir was a large lake (Satisar) before it drained out from Baramulla gorge. The people were deeply attached to nature and had strong belief in the worship of Nagas (gods of water spring). They believed that the water springs were actually the abode of Nag Dev (serpent deities) and help devotees to purify their souls. Fishing from such springs was considered a sin. Even in modern times, Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims alike consider eating fish from water springs as Haram (forbidden). The faith of the ancient people of Kashmir was so strong that they built temples and buildings on these springs. Their belief in nature inspired them to conserve natural resources and sustain the environment. Mughal Emperor Akbar annexed Kashmir in 1586. He was very impressed by the natural beauty of Kashmir. He continued the old traditions of Kashmir and allowed people to build temples on these springs and also repaired old ones. His successor Jahangir went a step further to build pools and massive walls around these springs. These springs are main source of drinking water and river Jhelum. We do not know exactly what made people believe in Nag (water spring) worship, but faith and beliefs in nature certainly motivated mankind to maintain the sustainability of the environment.

Keywords: Nag worship (water spring), beliefs in nature, ancient Kashmir, Mughal approach to environment sustainability

Introduction

Geological studies show that the valley of Kashmir was a large lake before people inhabited it. The water drained out from valley from the gorge of Baramulla and the upper areas that first cleared off from water shows the traces of *Karewa* (elevated table land) formation, while the lower land was still under water. A similar argument is mentioned in the Nilamata Purana that the valley of Kashmir was called Satisar (a large Lake).

The Mughal Emperors were deeply concerned about the ecological conservation to prevent it from collapsing as result of human activities such as unsustainable agriculture and deforestation. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir was also so astonished by the natural beauty of Kashmir that he called it paradise on earth.

*agar firdaus bar-ru-e-zamin ast
hamiñ ast o hamiñ ast o hamiñ ast*

Translation- " *If there is heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here.*"

Conservation policies were adopted by the imperial government directly by the Mughal emperor and by governors (*Subadars*) at the provincial level. Individual steps were also taken by the princes and princesses of the royal harem. The women of the royal harem were very keen to maintain the sustainability of the environment and at their own expense they built canals, protective walls, and pools around the springs. In this paper we will look at the management, protection, and conservation policies of water bodies of Kashmir during Mughal rule. We will look at the constructions of canals, springs, and conservation of aquatic life, fauna, and flora. The people of Kashmir alike Hindus and Muslims also have deep faith in spring as holly spirits and considered it obligatory to keep it neat and clean. The springs in Kashmir are also known as Nag and people of Kashmir are famous as Nag worshipers. Temples were also built around springs in ancient times and the Mughal rulers continued this tradition by repairing these temples and taking further measures to safeguard these sacred places.

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The Mughal emperors appointed special officials to care of these springs.

Naga worship (Serpent deity) and water conservation

The Indian Sanskrit poet Kalidas praised the beauty of Kashmir in these lines ‘*the place is more beautiful than the heaven and is the benefactor of supreme bliss and happiness. It seems to me that I am taking a bath in the lake of nectar here*’^[1]. Hiuen Tsang informs us that Kashmir was originally a dragon lake^[2]. In both accounts, words like heaven, nectar and Dragon Lake are symbols of divine powers that they compared to Kashmir.

Naga worship or Serpent worship (Ophiolatry) is one of the oldest and most widespread forms of religious practices in the world. But Naga worship in Kashmir is purely associated with water springs^[3]. The Nilamata Purana mentions that the valley of Kashmir was called Satisar (large lake) which was occupied by Nagas since ancient times^[4]. The earliest tribes found in Kashmir were Nagas, Pisachas, and Yakshas. They settled around a lake (Satisar). Kashyap Rishi, a mythological Manasputra^[5] (mind sons) of Lord Brahma dug out water from the valley with the help of Nagas and made the valley a habitual place for people. Since the people were indebted to the Nagas for draining out the water from valley and making it livable place, it is possible that the people of Kashmir had a deep faith in Naga Worship.

Terms associated with Naga worship

Literarily, the people of Kashmir refer to the water spring as Nila (King Spring), Nag (large spring), and Nagin (small spring). *Nila*, *Naga*, and *Nagin* are the names of snake deities. While the first two are male deities and Nagin is associated with snake goddesses. Nila according to Kalhana was the lord of all Nagas who protected the earth and its people^[6]. The deities are not idolized but the natural springs are worshiped and dignified according to the size of the spring. Water coming out from springs takes the shape of snake is actually worshiped. In Indian Hinduism, the snake is considered one of the gods, and the worship of serpent gods was associated with springs in Kashmir. Kalhana mentions the importance and popularity of the Naga cult in the lives of the people of Kashmir in the eleventh century.

Offerings and Celebrations associated with Nagas

The Nilamata Purana refers that the people of Kashmir offered flowers, incense, food, fruits, and roots to these springs to ward off evil spirits^[7]. Even today, Kashmiri Muslims also offer food to Nagas (water springs) such as *Maayer* (rice boiled in milk with salt) and *Kokar tahaer* (rice and chicken cooked together) in ward off evil spirits. The famous sayings of the common people of Kashmir, *Nag gaad chhe Haram* (Spring fish is forbidden) or *Nag gad che wuchen halal khein haram* (Spring fish is permissible to see but not eaten) is a belief shared by both Muslims and Hindus. In fact, Muslims and Hindus alike do not eat spring fish in modern times. Religious beliefs associated with water springs also created a sense of environmental conservation. They believe that dev (Holly spirits) reside there and therefore consider it obligatory to keep it clean. Temples and building were also built around these springs to maintain its purity.

Most of the rites prescribed by Nila were related to the worship of popular deities^[8]. However, some festivals were

particularly connected with the worship of Naga serpent. Nila as well as other local Nagas were celebrated at the first fall of snow^[9]. These Nagas were also worshipped on the Iramanjari puja festival which falls in the month of March (chaitra)^[10]. Another ceremony called Varunapancami was celebrated on the fifth day of August (bhadra) and was associated with the worship of the serpent king Nila under the name of Dhanda^[11].

Locating places of Worship

The Nilamata Purana refers to six hundred and three sacred and important places in different parts of Kashmir dedicated to Naga worship^[12] and according to modern historian S.C. Ray, *Naga* worship might have been the original religion of Kashmir^[13]. Mughal historian Abul Fazl informs us that there were seven hundred sacred places for the serpents in Kashmir^[14]. Even now some of the modern towns, districts, and names of lakes in Kashmir like Verinag, Anantanag, Sheşanag, Kokernag show traces of ancient Naga beliefs^[15]. Aquatic life like fishes in these springs were not eaten by people as it was considered a sin and eating them angered the Nag Dev (Serpent deity).

The river Vitasta (Jhelum) and Verinag are two important and sacred places of Hinduism in Kashmir. According to Kalhana, the river Jhelum was an incarnation of Gauri (Parvati) which took the form of river Vitasta (Jhelum) which had its origin in Verinag. As the river Jhelum originates and is fed by Verinag spring it contains the divinity of lord Nila, because Verinag spring is said to have been the abode of Lord of the Nagas, namely Nila^[16].

Although Buddhism neglected the Naga belief in Kashmir, King Gonanda II of Kashmir (c.25-345 CE) revived the pilgrimages, sacrifices, and worship of Nagas as they had been earlier followed^[17]. Kalhana has clearly mentioned that the royal house of the Karkota dynasty in Kashmir (C. 625-855 CE) was closely associated with Nagas. They built various tirtha (sacred places) in honor of Nagas^[18]. Nilamata Purana informs us that the various temples were built near a spring which shows that people had a deep-rooted belief in Nagas^[19].

Conservation and perseverance during Mughal rule

The concept of water conservation and keeping water free from pollutants was also developed by Mughals in Kashmir. It was at this time that the Mughal historians took great interest in writing about the environmental history of Kashmir and through these writings the Mughals came to know about the geographical importance of Kashmir.

In 1586, Mughal emperor Akbar conquered Kashmir. Akbar was a benevolent and secular ruler. He was responsible for the well-being of all subjects, Muslims, and non-Muslims. He maintained the ancient rituals of Kashmir and allowed temple to be built on the springs^[20]. In medieval times, water springs were known as Chasmah, such as aab-e-Chasmah (water spring) in Persian. The Mughals named many springs in Kashmir as Chasmah, such as the famous Chasmah Shahi (royal spring) garden built around a spring by Ali Mardan Khan (governor of Kashmir) in 1632 AD. Some of the important spring temples associated with Nag worship were originally built by the Hindu rulers of Kashmir and repaired and patronized by the Mughals including

1. Machhi Bhawan spring.
2. Lukabawan spring.

3. Verinag spring.

Machhi Bhawan spring is located in the present village of Bijbihara where Akbar's servant Rai Bihari Chand built an idol temple ^[21]. Machhi is the Sanskrit word for fish and Bhawan abode which means abode of fish, ^[22] so it was commonly called Machhi Bhawan ^[23]. The purpose of conservation of Machhi Bhawan spring was to preserve the aquatic life of fishes and ancient Hindu beliefs ^[24]. Mughal noble Yamin-I-Daulah Asif Khan raised buildings, cisterns, canals, and garden around the spring as per ordered by Emperor Jahangir ^[25]. Inayat Khan had eulogized spring in these words '*in truth, the eye of heaven hath seldom seen anything on the face of the globe equal to the natural spring there*' ^[26]. Even today, the spring is true example of religious harmony in Kashmir. There is a beautiful temple in center of spring. People worship there and conduct traditional ceremonies to praise Nag Dev (serpent god).

Lukabawan spring was repaired by Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627 AD) and is located in Doru tehsil of modern Anantnag district. The emperor ordered a building worthy of the site constructed and the pool in front of the spring repaired ^[27]. There is a beautiful temple in center of spring.

The most important spring for which the Mughals took great interest to conserve water and thereby keep environment free from pollution was the Verinag spring (*Musaman Hauj*) ^[28]. It was eighteen imperial kos distant from the Srinagar city. Verinag spring has been the abode of Lord of the Nagas, namely Nila ^[29]. It is important to mention here that the main source of water of river Jhelum was Verinag spring ^[30]. The main source of drinking water in the Kashmir valley was river Jhelum. The Mughals took various developmental measures to conserve the water of the Verinag spring and keep the river Jhelum hygienic. Jahangir had a building ^[31] constructed here with arched walkways enclosing the octagonal pool spring the diameter of which is 40 cubits, each being 7 and the depth 14 ^[32] and beautiful garden in front of the building ^[33]. From the edge of the pool to the garden gate runs a canal ^[34]. There were many fishes in the pool ^[35]. On the both sides of the canal were avenues paved with stone and planted with plane trees. In and around the garden bitter herbs, aromatic herbs, dark green and pale green herbs all grow together ^[36]. About the purity of the canal and elegance of spring, Jahangir had written that '*in all of Kashmir there is no scenic spot as charming as this one*' ^[37]. The water in it was transparent to such a degree, that notwithstanding its depth, every little pebble at the bottom could be distinctly discerned and the different varieties of fishes that it contained exceeded the power of computation ^[38]. The addict Jahangir held usually wine parties in Kashmir with his royal servants mostly in water springs mention may be here Vernag spring ^[39] famous wine abode of Jahangir, where wine along with peaches as a relish were given to private attendants ^[40]. Besides wine parties, festivals were also observed at springs, as at the lovely spot of vernag on the 7th of Rabi II 1044 (30 September 1634) a festival in commemoration of this majesty completing his 44th lunar year (birthday) was held, attained with the august person (emperor) against gold and other articles ^[41].

At the back of Verinag spring stands a hill clothed with luxuriant vegetation and stately forest trees and here Mughal Emperor Shahjhan (1592-1666 AD) constructed a delightful garden (Bagh-i-Dilkusha) ^[42] provided with summer

mansions, baths, reservoirs, cascades and fountains, and he named the place Shahabad ^[43]. Haider Malik Kashmiri was made Darogha (supervisor) for these buildings to get completed ^[44]. The entire place was given to Her Highness princess Jahanara Begum Begum (Daughter of Shah Jhan) as sarkar (district administrative unit) property ^[45]. It possesses a spring of singular coldness and purity well stocked with fishes ^[46] and the spring was constructed by Shahjhan's command ^[47]. The female apartment and Daulatkhana here had been built during the reign of Emperor Jahangir ^[48] and later being old and faded, emperor Shahjhan ordered to build another building as its place studded with water falls and cisterns ^[49, 50].

Conclusion

Environment sustainability and conservation are challenges for the modern world. The United Nations organization and other international and national organizations are working on global warming emissions and environment sustainability. However, sustainability approaches towards environmental protection existed even in ancient times. People in Kashmir worship nature. For them, environmental sustainability and conservation was equivalent to worshiping the gods. Their beliefs in nature inspired them to preserve nature and its resources. The Mughals were more advanced in their sustainable approach to the environment. They adopted various techniques to preserve the natural trends of the environment. They created gardens, planted extensive trees, and dug canals, pools, and springs. Special officials were created to ensure health, hygiene, and environmental stability. We also need to return to the traditional value of nature and consider it our moral responsibility to adopt a sustainable approach towards our environment.

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