

Animating the Forest: Nāga Cults and the Sacred Ecology of Early Indian Religious Thought

SHIV YADAV

Research Scholar, CHS, JNU. E-mail: Shivyadav161@gmail.com

Abstract: For centuries, India has been portrayed as a land of serpent worship and snake charmers, a perception shaped largely by travellers and colonial observers. Snake worship is an ancient form of Indian folk religion. However, serious historical and scholarly study of serpent worship and Nāga cults began only in the late nineteenth century, when these traditions were examined within their proper religious and cultural contexts rather than as mere curiosities. This paper explores Nāga cults as an integral part of early Indian religious thought, focusing on their close association with forests, water bodies, and indigenous ecological worldviews. It argues that Nāga worship constituted a form of sacred ecology in which natural landscapes were animated by moral and spiritual agency. Drawing on archaeological evidence, textual sources, and historiography, the study examines how Nāga cults mediated human relationships with forest environments.

The paper further analyses the interaction of Nāga traditions with Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain systems, with special attention to Jātaka narratives and Buddhist Vinaya literature. These sources portray Nāgas as ethically responsive beings and highlight shared moral frameworks governing humans and non-human life. Overall, the study demonstrates that Nāga cults were central to early Indian environmental ethics and not merely marginal or folkloric traditions.

Keywords: Nāga cults, Sacred ecology, Forests in early India, Serpent worship, Jātakas, Buddhist Vinaya

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INTRODUCTION

Forests occupied a central place in the religious imagination of early India. Before the lifetime of the historical Buddha, the religious landscape of early India was already densely populated with nature spirits and demigods who occupied the trees, rocks, rivers, and ponds. It is different niches like the water areas were all said to have been guarded by certain mythic characters that were humans as well as super-human like the apsarās, kinnaras, gandharvas, nāgas, rakṣasas, yakṣas, etc.¹ The *nāgas* are a class of mythical beast, worshipped locally from pre-Vedic times in India, along with trees.² The tradition of snake worship appears to be even more ancient than Yaksha worship. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE) includes seals with serpent motifs and figures

surrounded by snakes, showing that the serpent cult was already well-established in prehistoric times. Megalithic cultures of South India also show cobra stones, indicating ancestral-serpent reverence. In contrast, Yaksha worship emerges much later, around the early historic period (600-300 BCE), with prominent Yaksha and Yakshi statues such as the Didarganj Yakshi and the Mathura Yakshas dating to the Mauryan and Post-Mauryan era. Among the most enduring religious traditions associated with forests in early India was the worship of Nāgas, serpent beings believed to inhabit forests, water bodies, subterranean realms, and sacred groves (**Fig. 1**). Serpents appear in the iconography and symbolism of Roman, Greek, Mayan, Iberian, Celtic, Egyptian, Turkish, Mesopotamian and South Asian, and Chinese civilizations, among others.³ They are feared, pacified and worshipped in folk cults and mainstream religions. Snake worship was integrated into every corner of India. They are represented and perceived as protectors and guardians and thus appears everywhere in the visual arts of India, like walls, doorways, ceilings, pillars and walls of temples and caves, as part of iconographic panels of plastic and graphic arts and also in the independent figures which alive under the trees and in the premises of any temples.⁴ Shrines dedicated to nature deities were commandeered and repurposed for Buddhist use, following a wider pattern of religious appropriation of sacred sites in South Asia. Snake (nāga) shrines were often chosen as sites for the new monasteries.

At Buddhist monuments across the Indian Subcontinent in the early centuries BCE, cobra beings called nāgas appear in the stone carvings and painted images. The study of the origin and use of images on the subcontinent has been a well-trodden path, but primarily from the perspective of anthropomorphic images as aids to devotion.⁵ Nāga cults were neither marginal nor isolated phenomena. They represented deeply rooted indigenous religious systems that shaped early Indian attitudes toward nature, fertility cycles, water, and ecological balance. Serpents, inhabiting anthills, riverbanks, and forested tracts, symbolized the life-sustaining forces of the earth. The persistence of Nāga worship across regions and historical periods suggests that serpent veneration articulated a powerful mode of understanding human relations with the natural world. This paper argues that Nāga cults constituted a form of sacred ecology in early Indian religious thought, in which forests and water bodies were animated by moral and spiritual agency.

By drawing upon archaeological evidence, early literary sources, epigraphic materials, and modern scholarship, this study examines how Nāga cults functioned as mediators between humans and forest environments. It further explores how these cults were gradually incorporated into Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, without entirely losing their ecological logic. Naga worship was accepted across Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions, illustrating a remarkable degree of religious accommodation. In Buddhism, Nāgas emerge as protectors of the Buddha and custodians of the sacred knowledge, while in Jainism they appear as guardian spirits (śāsanadevatās). This cross-traditional presence indicates that Nāgas functioned as trans-sectarian symbols, mediating between local cults and universal religious ideologies. The paper situates Nāga worship within broader debates on indigenous religion, environmental ethics, and the sacralisation of nature in early South Asia.

FORESTS AS SACRED AND LIMINAL SPACES IN EARLY INDIA

In early Indian society, forests were spaces of ambiguity. They existed beyond the cultivated village and the regulated city, yet remained integral to political, economic, and religious life. Forests supplied timber, medicinal plants, game, and routes of movement, while also serving as refuges for ascetics, forest dwellers, and non-conformist religious groups. Classical texts frequently portray forests

as dangerous zones populated by wild animals, bandits, and spirits, but also as sites of revelation, austerity, and spiritual power.

Romila Thapar has argued that forests in early India were conceptualised through a complex interplay of fear and reverence, shaped by the expansion of agrarian society into forested regions.⁶ As agrarian settlements expanded, forests increasingly came to be imagined as domains of non-human powers requiring ritual negotiation. This perception gave rise to cults focused on forest deities, yakṣas, nāgas, and local spirits who controlled fertility, rainfall, and disease.

The forest thus functioned as a sacred threshold space, where the boundaries between human and non-human, natural and supernatural, were blurred. Nāga cults emerged within this context, embodying the ambivalence and potency associated with forest environments.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NĀGA CULTS, FOREST RELIGION, AND SACRED ECOLOGY

Scholarly engagement with Nāga cults in early India has evolved through several distinct phases, shaped by changing disciplinary priorities and methodological frameworks. Early colonial scholarship tended to treat serpent worship as a survival of primitive animism, often positioning it outside the domain of classical Indian religion. Since the publication of *Tree and Serpent* worship by James Fergusson in 1868, scholarly interest in serpents and serpent worship in India has grown steadily, forming one of the earliest sustained enquiries into what later scholars would identify as popular or non-Vedic religious traditions. Drawing upon Buddhist, Brahmanical, and Jain textual corpora, alongside archaeological remains and ethnographic observations, scholars such as Fergusson, Pratap Chandra Ghosh, C. S. Wake, C. F. Oldham, and later D. D. Kosambi, tended to frame serpent worship as a totemic or animistic practice associated with specific racial or ethnic groups. In this view, Nāga imagery was frequently relegated to the status of “mere ornament” rather than recognised as an object of independent worship.⁷ From the early twentieth century onward, however, historians, art historians, and archaeologists began to challenge these reductionist models. Scholars such as J. Ph. Vogel (1908–09, 1926), B. M. Barua (1934), Joanna Williams (1976), Herbert Härtel (1976), Upinder Singh (1996, 2004), Julia Shaw (2004, 2013), and Pia Brancaccio (2005) undertook detailed studies of independent Nāga sculptures from sites such as Bharhut, Sanchi, and Mathura. Their work demonstrated that serpent worship was neither marginal nor isolated but was embedded within shared artistic idioms, sacred geographies, and ritual practices. These studies highlighted processes of negotiation and mutual accommodation between serpent worshippers and more institutionalised religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, thereby revealing a complex and interactive religious landscape. The moral agency of the animate non-human ‘other’ has rarely been discussed even at their interaction with human concerns of the same. The Indic corpus of stories from various viewpoints creates an opportunity to do so. A significant intervention in this direction is by Arindam Chakrabarti, who, drawing on fables of serpents, rodents, mongooses and birds in the *Mahābhārata*, argues for an agency that should be attributed to them. This calls for a reorientation in our reading of human moral concerns through what he calls a ‘trans-species point of view’. The narrative traditions that have survived through millennia sometimes present animals in anthropomorphic form and their composite, as well as animal bodies, are shown to have abilities to converse about common concerns that they share with humans like pain, anxiety, deception and so on. Despite corporal differences, there is a possibility that Chakrabarti finds in exploring possibilities for a shared human-non-human

moral agency.⁸ Thus, mining ancient texts remains relevant to come to grips with deep-rooted ethical issues that have implications for not only the way contemporary society is embroiled in them but also because it enables us to juxtapose the way tradition and ancient philosophies differ from similar issues of ethics and morality as have evolved in modernity. Scholars such as Edward B Tylor and J G Frazer interpreted Nāga worship through evolutionary models of religion, viewing it as an early stage in human religious development characterised by fear of natural forces. This approach marginalised indigenous ecological knowledge and reduced Nāga cults to superstition rather than recognising their social and environmental significance.

Rejecting earlier attempts to categorise Nāgas as a racial group, whether Aryan or non-Aryan, as a tribal community living on the fringes of an Aryanised society, as a political dynasty, as a caste category, or as a discrete religious sect, Robert DeCaroli has offered one of the most influential re-evaluations of Nāga worship in early India. DeCaroli emphasises the multiple levels of interaction between devotees of ophidian deities and Buddhist communities, arguing that Nāgas functioned as powerful liminal figures mediating between human and non-human realms, wilderness and settlement, danger and protection. Rather than being passively absorbed into Buddhist symbolism, serpent deities actively shaped Buddhist spatial practices, monastic settlement patterns, and ritual imaginaries.

Indian scholars writing in the early twentieth century offered more contextualised interpretations. R C Hazra's pioneering work on Nāga worship examined literary and epigraphic sources to demonstrate the antiquity and geographical spread of serpent cults in India. Hazra argued that Nāga worship represented a widespread popular religion that predated and later interacted with Brahmanical traditions.¹ His work shifted the focus from evolutionary primitivism to historical continuity.⁹

Mid twentieth-century historiography increasingly examined Nāga cults in relation to state formation and social integration. Scholars such as Romila Thapar and D D Kosambi highlighted how forest cults, including Nāga worship, were incorporated into expanding agrarian and political systems. Thapar emphasised that forest deities functioned as mediators between tribal communities and emerging states, facilitating processes of cultural assimilation and territorial control.¹⁰ Within this framework, Nāga cults were understood as part of a broader negotiation between forest societies and sedentary agrarian polities.

Art historical scholarship further enriched the field by analysing Nāga iconography and spatial placement. Susan L Huntington and Vidya Dehejia demonstrated that Nāga sculptures were often located near water sources, gateways, and liminal architectural zones, reinforcing their role as guardians of thresholds.¹¹ This visual and spatial analysis underscored the ecological symbolism embedded in religious art.

From the late twentieth century onward, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating anthropology and environmental history transformed the study of Nāga cults. Madhav Gadgil and V D Vartak's work on sacred groves provided empirical evidence that religious traditions associated with forest deities functioned as systems of biodiversity conservation.⁴ Subsequent scholars extended this framework to Nāga cults, interpreting serpent worship as an indigenous form of environmental ethics rather than a mere symbolic system.¹²

Recent scholarship has increasingly situated Nāga cults within debates on sacred ecology and religious environmentalism. Studies by B Devika, Landry Yuan, and other contemporary scholars demonstrate that sacred groves dedicated to Nāgas continue to shape human attitudes toward forests and wildlife.¹³ These works challenge the modern separation between religion and ecology, arguing

that early Indian religious thought integrated moral, ritual, and environmental concerns.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Much of the historiography still treats Nāga cults as ancillary to Brahmanical or Buddhist traditions rather than as autonomous systems of ecological knowledge. Moreover, the role of Buddhist narrative and monastic regulation in engaging with Nāga beliefs has not been sufficiently integrated into historical analyses. The present study seeks to address these gaps by foregrounding Nāga cults as central to early Indian sacred ecology and by incorporating Buddhist narrative and disciplinary sources into the discussion.

NĀGA CULTS IN BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Buddhist literature offers a distinctive perspective on Nāgas. Rather than being primarily antagonistic, Nāgas in Buddhist texts are often depicted as protectors of the Buddha and the monastic community. One of the most well-known episodes describes the Nāga king Mucalinda sheltering the Buddha from a storm while he meditated under the Bodhi tree.¹⁴

This narrative symbolises the harmony between enlightenment and the natural world. The Nāga here represents the moral agency of nature itself, recognising and supporting spiritual attainment. Buddhist texts also describe Nāgas as donors, guardians of relics, and inhabitants of sacred landscapes associated with monasteries.

The presence of Nāga imagery in early Buddhist art further reinforces their importance. Sculptural depictions of the Buddha protected by Nāga hoods appear at sites such as Sanchi and Amaravati. These images suggest that Nāga cults were integrated into Buddhist sacred geography, particularly in forested monastic settings.

NĀGA IMAGERY IN JĀTAKAS AND BUDDHIST NARRATIVE TRADITIONS

The Jātaka corpus provides rich narrative material for understanding Nāga symbolism and forest ecology within Buddhist thought. As stories recounting the previous lives of the Buddha, the Jātakas frequently situate moral action within forest environments inhabited by animals, spirits, and serpent beings. On the one hand, there are stories like King of Snakes Champak, Śaṅkhapāla, and Bhūridatta, in which snakes come under the moral influence of Buddhism and behave accordingly. Nāgas appear in several Jātaka narratives as morally responsive beings capable of gratitude, restraint, and ethical judgment.

In the Bhūridatta Jātaka, one of the most prominent serpent-related narratives, the Bodhisatta is born as a Nāga prince who practices ascetic restraint and moral discipline despite being subjected to extreme suffering.¹⁵ The story presents the Nāga as a being capable of advanced ethical cultivation, thereby challenging hierarchical distinctions between human and non-human life. The forest and riverine settings of the narrative emphasise the Nāga's intimate connection with natural habitats. At Sanchi's stupa, a relief on pillar 81 shows a central seated woman flanked by serpents, symbolizing the widespread belief that nāgas had the power to grant fertility. This idea is supported by Buddhist literature. The *Nāgarāja Jataka* describes a serpent king who received human worship and was believed to help people, especially by enabling them to have children. The *Champakā Jataka*¹⁶ further attests to this belief, explicitly stating that serpents being possessed the power to bestow fertility. These stories reinforce why serpent worship become important for women seeking offspring, a tradition that continues in parts of southern India through the building of *Nāgakals* (Nāga stones / Nāga slabs).

Other Jātakas depict Nāgas as guardians of water bodies and forest dwellers who interact with human ascetics. These encounters often involve themes of reciprocity and restraint, reinforcing the idea that moral conduct governs relations between species. The forest in these narratives is not a passive backdrop but an active moral landscape shaped by the actions of its inhabitants.

From an ecological perspective, the Jātakas articulate a vision of interdependence in which forests sustain life while demanding ethical responsibility. Animals and Nāgas respond to human behaviour, rewarding compassion and punishing greed. Such narratives functioned as moral pedagogy for lay and monastic audiences, embedding ecological awareness within Buddhist ethical teaching.

NĀGAS IN THE BUDDHIST VINAYA AND MONASTIC REGULATION

The Buddhist Vinaya literature provides further insight into how Nāga beliefs shaped monastic engagement with forest environments. The Vinaya contains several references to Nāgas as powerful non-human beings inhabiting monasteries, water bodies, and forested regions where monks often resided. These references reflect the lived realities of early monastic communities that depended on forest habitats for meditation and subsistence.

Vinaya narratives recount instances in which monks encounter Nāgas while dwelling in remote forest locations. In some cases, monks are instructed to negotiate respectfully with Nāga inhabitants, acknowledging their presence and avoiding actions that would cause harm or disturbance.¹⁷ Such instructions suggest an implicit recognition of shared space between monastics and non-human beings.

The Vinaya also regulates monastic behaviour in ways that indirectly protect forest ecology. Rules governing the use of water, the cutting of plants, and the disturbance of soil reflect a broader ethic of restraint. While framed in terms of discipline and non-violence, these regulations align closely with indigenous ecological values associated with Nāga worship. By discouraging harm to living beings and natural resources, monastic codes contributed to the preservation of forest environments.

ORIGINS OF NĀGA WORSHIP AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The worship of serpents in South Asia predates the emergence of textual religions. Archaeological evidence from prehistoric and protohistoric contexts indicates that serpents were associated with fertility, water, and protection. Terracotta figurines, snake motifs, and symbolic representations from sites such as Chirand in Bihar and various Chalcolithic settlements suggest early reverence for serpent figures.¹⁸

In the early historic period, more explicit evidence of Nāga worship appears in northern India. Archaeological finds from Mathura, Ahichchhatra, and Sonkh include stone sculptures of Nāgas and Nāginīs, often depicted as semi-human figures with serpent hoods. These sculptures are frequently associated with water sources, gateways, and sacred precincts, reinforcing the link between Nāgas and liminal spaces.¹⁹ The relief depicts Erāpatta Nāga Rāja (**Fig. 2**), one of the prominent serpent kings in early Buddhist tradition, shown in an anthropomorphic form with a multi-hooded serpent canopy rising above his head. Originating from the railings of the Bhārhut stūpa, the figure reflects early Buddhist engagement with local Nāga cults and water-associated deities.²⁰

The *nāga* shrine at Maniyar-Math, Rajgir, referred to earlier, was excavated from “the surroundings of the base stupa-like structure. It shows the site was a sacred abode of the *nāga* deity, Mani-Nāga, before the establishment of Buddhism.²¹ The sculpture is mutilated and carved on both sides with standing serpent deities in the *Nāgaraja* iconography. Mani-Nāga must have the tutelary deity of the place, honouring whom the place was named Maniyar-Math in Modern times (**Fig. 3**).

Epigraphic evidence further confirms the existence of organised Nāga cults. Inscriptions from Mathura dating to the early centuries of the Common Era record donations made to Nāga shrines by local elites and guilds.²² These inscriptions suggest that Nāga worship was not confined to marginal communities, but enjoyed patronage from urban and semi-urban groups as well.

NĀGAS AS BEINGS OF FOREST AND WATER

In early Indian cosmology, Nāgas were closely associated with water and subterranean realms. They were believed to dwell in rivers, lakes, ponds, springs, and underground palaces (*Nāgalokas*), often functioning as guardians of aquatic and fertility-giving spaces.²³ This association reflects the ecological importance of water in agrarian societies dependent on monsoon rainfall. By personifying water sources as divine beings, Nāga cults embedded environmental concerns within religious frameworks.²⁴

Textual traditions describe Nāgas as guardians of treasures and fertility. Their anger could cause droughts, floods, or disease, while their favour ensured agricultural abundance.²⁵ This moralisation of nature encouraged ritual respect toward water bodies and forest habitats, reinforcing practices of restraint and protection.

The connection between Nāgas and forests is particularly significant. Forests were often the locations of sacred ponds and springs believed to be inhabited by serpent deities. Cutting trees or disturbing such sites was considered dangerous, inviting supernatural retribution. In this way, Nāga cults functioned as mechanisms for regulating human interaction with fragile ecological zones.

SACRED GROVES AND NĀGA CULTS

One of the most striking expressions of Nāga-based sacred ecology is the institution of sacred groves. Known in different regions as Sarpa Kāvū, Nāga Bana, or Nāga Vana, these groves were small patches of forest preserved due to their association with serpent deities. Sacred groves are especially prominent in Kerala, coastal Karnataka, and parts of Tamil Nadu, though similar traditions exist across India.²⁶ Nagaradhana—the cobra worship, this kind of Serpent and cobra worship done by the people in South Kanara District is also called ‘Nagaradhana’. Nagaradhana is a special worship practice involving snakes or cobras that takes place in South Kanara District, particularly in the west coast region of Karnataka, India.²⁷ During this worship, participants engage in a unique dance, possess spiritual experiences, and seek answers to their questions while connecting with the serpent deity. This might even hold lit wooden sticks and direct them in various directions, including upwards.

These groves were traditionally left undisturbed. Cutting trees, hunting animals, or altering the landscape was strictly prohibited. The belief that Nāgas resided within these groves ensured their protection across generations.²⁸ Modern ecological studies have demonstrated that sacred groves serve as reservoirs of biodiversity, preserving endemic plant species and maintaining soil and water quality.²⁹

The ecological function of sacred groves highlights the practical implications of religious belief. Sarpa Kavus act as “mini jungles” that preserve rare medicinal plants and biodiversity. Rather than abstract environmental ethics, conservation was achieved through ritual fear and reverence. The grove was not protected because of scientific awareness, but because it was perceived as a living sacred space inhabited by powerful beings.

NĀGA CULTS IN VEDIC AND BRAHMANICAL LITERATURE

Early Vedic literature reflects an ambivalent attitude toward serpents. The Rigveda often portrays serpents as dangerous beings associated with chaos, most famously in the myth of Indra slaying the

serpent Vṛtra. However, this antagonistic imagery coexisted with ritual practices acknowledging the power of serpents.

The Atharvaveda contains several hymns addressing snakes, seeking protection from snakebite and appeasing serpent beings.³⁰ These hymns indicate popular fear and respect toward serpents within early Vedic society. Over time, Brahmanical literature increasingly incorporated Nāgas into cosmological and genealogical frameworks.

By the period of the epics and Purāṇas, Nāgas were portrayed as semi-divine beings with royal lineages and subterranean kingdoms. The Mahābhārata presents Nāgas as both dangerous and noble, capable of intermarriage with humans and participation in cosmic events. The narrative of Janamejaya snake sacrifice reflects Brahmanical attempts to domesticate and ritualise serpent power, transforming indigenous cults into manageable religious forms.³¹ Takṣaka is one of the most prominent Nāga kings in the Mahābhārata. He is famous for killing King Parikṣit, which led Parikṣit's son, Janamejaya, to attempt a universal snake extermination.

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NĀGA WORSHIP AND JAIN TRADITIONS

Jain literature also acknowledges serpent beings, particularly in connection with forest-dwelling ascetics and non-violence (*ahimsā*). Serpents appear in Jain narratives as beings capable of spiritual progress and moral understanding. The Jain emphasis on *ahimsā* encouraged restraint toward all forms of life, including snakes, reinforcing a shared ecological sensibility with Nāga cult traditions.³³

In some regions, Nāga deities were assimilated into Jain pantheons as protective yakṣas and yakṣīs, functioning as guardian figures attached to tīrthaṅkaras and sacred sites.³⁴ This incorporation reflects broader patterns of religious adaptation, where indigenous cults were reinterpreted within ascetic frameworks without being entirely erased.³⁵

REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS

Nāga cults display remarkable regional diversity. In the western Himalayan regions, Nāga deities continue to function as village protectors and controllers of weather. These Nāgas are believed to inhabit forests and mountains, and their rituals are closely tied to agricultural cycles.³⁶

In eastern and central India, Nāga worship overlaps with tribal cosmologies, where serpents are regarded as ancestors, totems, or territorial spirits. Such traditions challenge rigid distinctions between classical religion and folk belief, revealing a continuum of sacred ecological practices.³⁷ For example,

the railing pillar depicting **Nāga Mucalinda protecting the Buddha**, discovered at **Pauni in the Bhandara District of Maharashtra** and dated to the **2nd–1st century BCE (Fig. 4)**, represents one of the earliest visual articulations of Buddhist engagement with Nāga cults in central India.³⁸ The relief illustrates the well-known episode from Buddhist tradition in which the nāga king **Mucalinda shelters the Buddha with his coiled body and expanded hoods** during a violent storm shortly after the Buddha’s enlightenment.

These regional forms of Nāga worship highlight the resilience of indigenous religious systems. Despite processes of Sanskritisation and state formation, Nāga cults adapted to new contexts while retaining their ecological foundations.³⁹

NĀGA CULTS AND INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Nāga worship exemplifies an environmental ethic grounded in lived experience rather than abstract moral philosophy. The fear of supernatural punishment discouraged ecological destruction, while ritual offerings expressed gratitude and reciprocity. This system functioned as a moral economy regulating access to forest resources.

Recent anthropological studies indicate that communities associated with Nāga worship exhibit greater tolerance toward snakes and stronger conservation practices.⁴⁰ These findings suggest that religious belief continues to shape environmental attitudes in contemporary contexts.

By animating forests and water bodies, Nāga cults fostered a worldview in which nature was not inert matter but a community of living beings deserving respect. This perspective challenges modern anthropocentric models and offers valuable insights for environmental history.

ASSIMILATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN LATER HINDUISM

Over time, Nāga cults were increasingly absorbed into mainstream Hinduism. Serpent deities were incorporated into temple iconography, festivals such as Nāga Panchamī became pan Indian observances, and Nāgas were associated with major gods like Śiva and Viṣṇu, particularly in their roles as cosmic guardians and symbols of fertility and regeneration.⁴¹

While this process institutionalised serpent worship, it also preserved key elements of its ecological logic. Even today, sacred groves dedicated to Nāgas continue to function as protected forest spaces. The persistence of these practices demonstrates the enduring relevance of sacred ecology in Indian religious life.⁴² In Purāṇic cosmology, figures such as **Ananta-Śeṣa** and **Vāsuki** exemplify the elevation of Nāgas into the Brahmanical divine order, while retaining their older associations with subterranean and aquatic realms.

NĀGA CULTS AND SERPENT TRADITIONS ACROSS INDIA

Table 1: Regional Distribution of Nāga Cults in India

<i>Region</i>	<i>Nāga Deity / Cult</i>	<i>Key Locations / Sites</i>	<i>Cultural–Religious Context</i>	<i>Primary Sources</i>	<i>Major Scholarly References</i>
Kashmir	Ananta Nāga; Takṣaka; Vāsuki	Anantnag; sacred springs and lakes	Water guardians; fertility; tutelary deities	Nīlamata Purāṇa; Rājatarāṅgiṇī	R. C. Hazra; Romila Thapar
Punjab-Haryana	Village Nāga cults	Fields; wells; village boundaries	Agrarian fertility; folk religion	Oral traditions; Purāṇic allusions	D. D. Kosambi

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Uttar Pradesh	Takṣaka; local Nāgas	Gangetic plains	River control; fertility; early Buddhism	Mahābhārata; Pāli Canon	Romila Thapar; Johannes Bronkhorst
Bihar	Mucalinda Nāga	Bodh Gayā; Rājagrha; Nālandā	Protector of the Buddha; aquatic deity	Pāli Tipiṭaka; Jātakas	John S. Strong; Gregory Schopen
West Bengal	Manasā Devī	Rural Bengal; riverine tracts	Protection from snakebite; folk goddess	Manasā Maṅgal Kāvya	Asutosh Bhattacharya; R. D. Banerji
Odisha	Regional Nāga cults	Tribal and coastal regions	Rain; fertility; tribal worship	Local temple traditions	Hermann Kulke
Assam	Serpent spirits	Kamakhya region	Tantric-Śākta traditions	Tantric texts; local myths	David Kinsley
Nagaland	Clan Nāga symbolism	Nāga Hills	Totemic identity; ancestral cult	Oral traditions	J. H. Hutton; Verrier Elwin
Madhya Pradesh	Nāga Devatā	Forest villages	Earth spirits; boundary guardians	Folk practices	Nandini Sinha Kapur
Chhattisgarh	Nāga stones	Tribal settlements	Land and forest protection	Archaeological survivals	K. S. Singh
Maharashtra	Nāga Devatā	Rural shrines	Rain; fertility; protection	Nāga Panchamī rituals	M. N. Srinivas
Gujarat	Nāga cults	Semi-arid regions	Rain-making; drought protection	Folk traditions	R. S. Sharma
Rajasthan	Nāga worship	Desert villages	Water protection; fertility	Oral traditions	B. D. Chattopadhyaya
Karnataka	Nāgakallu tradition	Villages; sacred groves	Ancestral worship; land fertility	Stone inscriptions	S. Settar
Kerala	Sarpa Kāvu (snake groves)	Household and temple groves	Ecology; ritual purity; ancestry	Living ritual traditions	M. G. S. Narayanan
Tamil Nadu	Nāga stones	Under trees; village shrines	Rain; fertility; folk religion	Sangam-era survivals	Kamil Zvelebil
Andhra-Telangana	Nāgas with Śiva	Temple complexes	Śaiva integration	Purāṇic literature	Alexis Sanderson
Pan-Indian	Śeṣa (Ananta); Vāsuki; Takṣaka	Mythic-cosmic realm	Cosmology; kingship; eternity	Mahābhārata; Purāṇas	Wendy Doniger
Buddhist India	Nāga kings	Rivers; forests; monasteries	Protectors of Dharma	Pāli and Sanskrit texts	Richard Gombrich
Jaina India	Nāga hoods	Tīrthaṅkara iconography	Protection; ahimsā	Jaina Āgamas	Padmanabh Jaini

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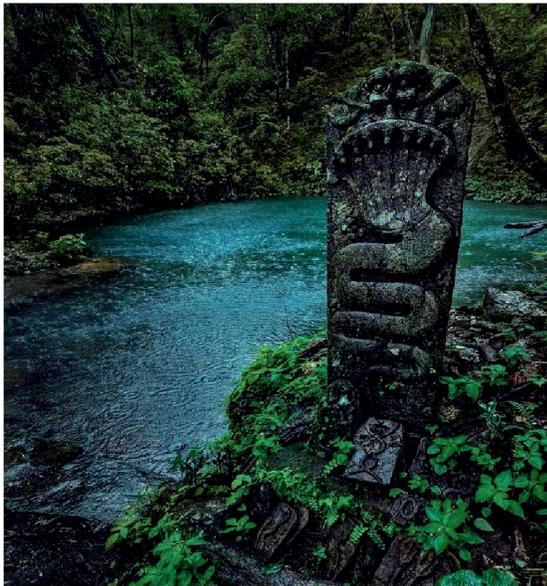


Fig. 1: Snake Shrine Kavaledurga, Tirthahalli, Karnataka, India⁴³

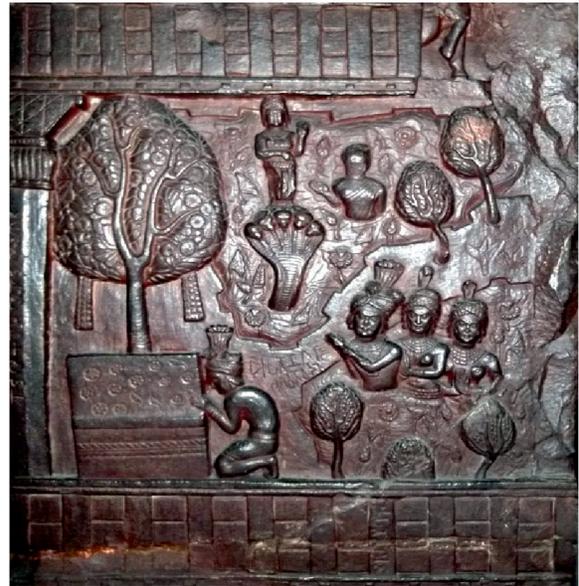


Fig. 2 Erāpata Nāga Rāja. Bhārhut. Ca. 2nd C. BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata



Fig. 3 Mañi-nāga, Rajgir, Bihar, India (1st - 2nd century CE). National Museum, New Delhi. (Photo taken by me on 24/10/2024; 3:34 PM)

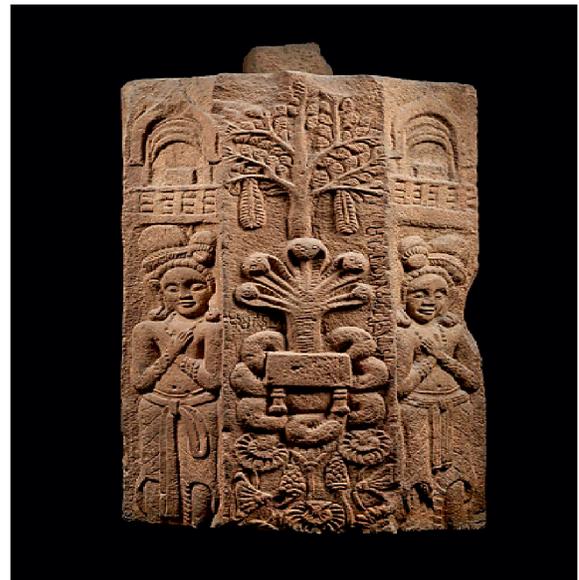


Fig. 4 Railing pillar with Naga Mucalinda protecting the Buddha, Pauni, Bhandara District, Maharashtra, India (2nd - 1st century BC).

CONCLUSION

Nāga cults were central to the religious and ecological imagination of early India. By sacralising forests, water bodies, and non-human life, these cults articulated a mode of environmental engagement rooted in reverence, fear, and reciprocity. Their integration into Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions reflects both the resilience and adaptability of indigenous sacred ecologies.

Understanding Nāga worship allows us to move beyond textual and doctrinal histories toward a more holistic appreciation of early Indian religion as lived practice embedded in specific landscapes.

In an age of ecological crisis, these traditions offer valuable perspectives on how religious worldviews can sustain ethical relationships with the natural world.

NOTES

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