

“No Cat’s Land”: The Animal World of Kashmir as Seen in the *Nilamata Purāṇa*

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Abstract

The *Nilamata purāṇa* was a very important text compiled in the early seventh to mid-ninth century, which illustrated the religious life in ancient Kashmir. This text described local religious order that was dominated by Brahmanism. This religious order under the Brahmanism served to maintain the caste system in ancient Kashmir, and also had significant impact on the social and cultural life. Many sacrificial rites on the religious calendar also offered animals as sacrifices, therefore the readers could figure out the natural ecology and animal world from the list of animal sacrifices. The list of these animals also manifested mutual relations among humans, gods, and animals in Kashmir. It seems that horses, cows, and goats were among the most visible animals for sacrificial rites, though other wild animals such as elephants, lions, and tigers were also well known to local people. Elephants and horses were instrumental to the political order too. In the meantime, horses, cows, and goats made crucial contributions to local economic life, yet other domesticated animals and birds were less important. However, the knowledge about animals in Kashmir often evolved with the historical development.

Keywords: *Nilamata purāṇa*, *Religious life*, *Ancient Kashmir*, *Brahmanism*, *Caste system*

Introduction

The animal world of ancient South Asia and Central Asia would have been vastly different from what we see today. On the one hand, this is due to significant changes in the local natural environment over the past thousand years, influenced by climate change and the expansion of human society, which have led to the extinction or disappearance of many species. For instance, swans once inhabited the Kashmir region for a long time but have gradually vanished in modern times. Similarly, tigers, which are no longer found in Kashmir today, are another example. On the other hand, human understanding of nature and animals has evolved with time. After entering the so-called modern era, humans have left a broader and deeper footprint, interacting more frequently with wildlife and developing more detailed and accurate zoological knowledge. This has led to significant advancements in the observation, identification, recognition, and classification of animals. Since modern times, narratives about animals often carry the imprint of Enlightenment thought, aiming for more scientific and publicly accessible knowledge dissemination. In contrast, ancient societies’ experiences with

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animals were not limited to factual or intellectual cognition; they were often imbued with speculation, imagination, and metaphor. To understand how ancient people perceived the animal world of the past, we often have to rely on fragmented literary sources. However, with the development of archaeology, we can also gain insights into the animal world that cannot be seen in textual sources. In light of the rising field of interdisciplinary animal studies, this paper combines manuscript sources and modern reports of scientific investigations for shedding new light on the changing animal world of Kashmir and its interaction with human society and religious life.

For Kashmir, the surviving textual sources are relatively limited and fragmented.² Through a close reading of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, a key document for understanding the ancient history of Kashmir, this paper seeks to explore the animal world it constructs and the socioeconomic factors behind this depiction, while also drawing on other related texts to shed light on the evolution of human understanding of the local animal world, from the interdisciplinary perspective. The *Nilamata Purāṇa* is a text steeped in religious significance, focusing primarily on the world of religious beliefs and the series of sacrificial rituals that construct this world, with much of its content narrated through the voice of a legendary Nāga named Nīla. Animals inevitably play roles and functions in these rituals, thereby entering human society, interacting with humans, and serving as a bridge between humans and gods, as well as between humans and nature. At the same time, animals are significant material resources in shaping social hierarchies. In ancient Kashmir, communication between humans and gods was facilitated through animal sacrifice rituals. The bridge between humans and nature, meanwhile, stemmed from economic production activities and the overlap between the expanding scope of human activities and the habitats of wild animals. The ownership of certain animals, such as elephants, horses, and cattle, by different social classes further shaped their economic and social status and identity.

Before delving into the detailed analysis, I will offer a brief note on the central primary source for this study. The discovery of the extant manuscripts of the *Nilamata Purāṇa* is credited to Georg Bühler and Aurel Stein. As early as the 19th century, Bühler acquired some birch bark manuscripts from Central Asia and identified them as written in the local script of Kashmir. During his travels in the Kashmir Valley, Stein also obtained numerous manuscripts, sending most of them to museums in Vienna, Tübingen, Berlin, Paris, and Oxford, with the Bodleian Library in Oxford receiving approximately 212 manuscripts. These discoveries drew the

² Khalid Bashir Ahmad traces the earliest documented records of the Kashmir region to the 12th century, specifically to the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* compiled by Kalhana; see *Kashmir: Exposing the Myth Behind the Narrative* (London, SAGE Publications, 2017), p. xvi; Contemporary scholars have utilized the *Nilamata Purāṇa* to explore the political and religious dimensions of the Kashmir region; see A. Sanderson, “Religion and the State: Śaiva Officials in the Territory of the Brahmanical Royal Chaplain (with an appendix on the provenance and date of the *Netratāntra*),” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 47 (2004), pp. 229-300; A. Sanderson, “The Śaiva Exegesis of Kashmir,” in D. Goodall et al. eds., *Mélanges tantriques à la mémoire d’Hélène Brunner* (Paris: EFEO, Institut français de Pondichéry, 2007), pp. 231-244; Judit Torzsok, “Tolerance and Its Limits in Twelfth Century Kashmir: Tantric Elements in Kalhana’s *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” *Indologica Taurinensia, The Journal of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies* 38 (2012), pp. 1-27. Kalhana’s historical writing dates to approximately the mid-12th century (1148–1150), later than the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, but its account of the Kashmiri royal lineage is particularly significant. For the differing nature of historical writing in various South Asian texts; see D. P. Chattopadhyaya, “Ithihasa, History and Historiography of Civilization,” in Chandra Gupta and D. P. Chattopadhyaya eds., *Cultural Otherness and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 43-73. For other studies, see Bernhard Kölver, *Textkritische und philologische Untersuchungen zur Rājatarāṅgiṇī des Kalhana* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1971); Shonaleeka Kaul, *The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

attention of local Kashmiri scholars, and the Srinagar Department of Archaeology began collecting such manuscripts, which later became a significant part of the collection at the Kashmir University Research Library (Witzel, 1994, 1-52). K. De Vreese first edited and published the preliminary Sanskrit version of the *Nilamata Purāṇa* in 1936 (de Vreese, 1936). Then, Ved Kumari utilized newly discovered manuscripts from Jammu and Kashmir to publish an updated critical edition in 1973.³ Between 1987 and 1991, Yasuke Ikari organized a reading group for the *Nilamata Purāṇa* at of Kyoto University’s Institute for Research in Humanities, and this reading group corrected some of Kumari’s misreadings and errors. Although the group members planned a better critical edition, but it seems yet to materialize. Given that the *Nilamata Purāṇa* primarily details local religious rituals and worship practices structured around a religious calendar, contemporary scholarship has focused on using it to explore local religious and spiritual life.⁴ Only Kumari briefly addressed the region’s cattle, wild animals, and birds in a page and a half (Kumari, 1968, 124-125).

In the first section of this paper, I will closely read the *Nilamata Purāṇa* as a local account for addressing the issues of animal representations in Kashmir, exploring the roles and functions of animals in the local social, economic, cultural, and religious life, and elucidating how interactions between animals and human society collectively shaped local history. This section is concerned with the following questions, focusing on both “present” and “absent” animals. Are these “present” animals the only ones in the Kashmir region? Are they present solely because they played critical roles and fulfilled specific functions assigned by humans in political, economic, cultural, and religious contexts? Are there also “absent” animals? Are these animals “absent” because human activities were limited in scope, preventing close interactions with human society? Or are other factors at play?

In the second section, I will draw on other sources beyond the *Nilamata Purāṇa* to further contextualize the questions raised earlier. I examine records of Kashmir’s animal world in various historical texts, focusing on “outsider narratives” rather than local Kashmiri sources, exploring descriptions of Kashmir’s animals by neighboring regions and modern European travelers and explorers. These narratives have undergone significant changes from ancient to modern times. After the Age of Exploration, human attention to the environment far surpassed previous eras, leading to more detailed and scientifically grounded understandings of animals. With the development of zooarchaeology, human knowledge of animals from early civilizations has also become richer. In short, animals have gradually “entered history,” becoming part of human society through being noticed, described, documented, and discovered by humans, transitioning from “absence” to “presence.” The ancient *Nilamata Purāṇa* does not mention cats, which led the depiction of Kashmir in its narrative as a “No Cat’s Land.” However, this does not mean that cats were absent in the region at that time; rather, they simply did not enter the narrative of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*. As human activities and narratives expanded, cats indeed appeared in the historical accounts, which ultimately transforms Kashmir from a “No Cat’s Land” to a “Cat’s Land.”

³ Ved Kumari, based on her 1960 doctoral dissertation at Banaras Hindu University, published a two-volume work as follows: *The Nilamata purāṇa*, Srinagar, J. & K. Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1968-1973. The first volume is a cultural and textual study of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, and the second volume is a critically edited text with an English translation.

⁴ For example, Mahesh Sharma, “Puranic Texts from Kashmir: Vitasta and River Ceremonials in the *Nilamata Purāṇa*,” *South Asia Research* 28: 2 (2008), pp. 123-145.

1. The Relationship Between Humans, Gods, and Animals in Kashmir as Seen in the *Nilamata Purāṇa*

Contemporary philologists prefer to date the *Nilamata Purāṇa* back the early 7th and mid-9th centuries CE (Ikari, 1994, i). However, its content is notably complex and draws from a wide range of sources, including early Vedic literature, the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, and other Purāṇas, while also incorporating elements from local Kashmiri customs and traditions, which can be manifested by its primary purpose for elucidating local religious beliefs and rituals.⁵ Therefore, the animals that appear in this text should be understood within this religious context, and a strong heritage of ancient Vedic literature can be seen. In closely examining the relevant passages and cross-referencing with other sources, we can explore the roles and functions of animals in the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious life of ancient Kashmir from the perspective of human-animal relationships.

The *Nilamata Purāṇa* reveals that the animal world of Kashmir, alongside its flora, constituted the natural ecology of the region during the medieval period. This ecological system intertwined with the political, economic, and cultural ecosystems of human society, collectively shaping the history of Kashmir. The diverse geographical features of Kashmir, such as valleys, hills, and snow-capped mountains, supported a rich array of ecological resources. The valleys were suitable for cultivating crops such as rice and wheat, while the varied terrain from valleys to hills and mountains provided habitats for a wide range of animal species. Despite the diversity of animals active in this region, not all of them left traces in human historical records. Only those animals that played significant roles or had a notable impact on human life were likely to be “remembered in history.” Moreover, animals that fulfilled different roles and functions in human society appeared with varying frequency and prominence in these records. This disparity primarily stems from the fact that the surviving written sources center on human life in the region, which reflects a typical anthropocentric textual tradition.

Given the strong religious tone of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, the animal world it portrays is closely tied to the religious sphere, with animals significant to religious life depicted in greater detail. However, the connection between this animal world and the religious world is primarily constructed through human ritual activities.⁶ Therefore, this paper is concerned with the interconnected relationships among humans, gods, and animals in the Kashmir region, far beyond human-animal relations.

⁵ There are many studies on the Purāṇas, among the more important ones are, for example, Ludo Rocher, *The purāṇas* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), this book provides detailed research on key issues concerning the Purāṇas, such as their importance, basic structure, origins, place in Indian literature, chronology, and so forth; Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); another important collection volume is Wendy Doniger ed., *Purana Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Chinese scholars have also introduced Purāṇic literature. See Xue Keqiao, *Yindu mijiao (Indian Esotericism)*, in *Xue Keqiao wenji (Collected Works of Xue Keqiao)*, South Asian Studies Series (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikewanshu chubanshe, 2017), chapters 3 and 4, which primarily discuss the Tantric-related rituals found in the *Kurma Purāṇa*, the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the *Agni Purāṇa*.

⁶ Trilok Chandra Majupuria compiled a list of sacred animals in India and Nepal, encompassing a far greater variety of animals than those mentioned in the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, including the cat, which serves as the mount of Shashti (p. 150). However, the author primarily draws on Vedic literature, epics, and the eighteen major Puranas, without referencing the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, a regional Purana specific to Kashmir; see *Sacred Animals of Nepal and India* (Lashkar: Devi, 2000).

The *Nilamata Purāṇa* does not intend to focus on the local animals but mentions them incidentally while describing religious life. In other words, animals enter the local history primarily because they serve human religious practices. Thus, the *Nilamata Purāṇa* reflects the traditional anthropocentric approach to animal representations in ancient Kashmir. In fact, animals frequently appear as metaphorical symbols in early South Asian literature. Ved Kumari analyzed the depiction of demonic beings, such as the Piśāca, in the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, noting that in Vedic literature, the war god Indra and the fire god Agni are both capable of destroying Piśācas. Agni is also said to grant strength to those who sing his praises, enabling them to vanquish Piśācas. In the *Atharvaveda*, Agni declares that he torments Piśācas in the same way a tiger threatens those who own cattle, and upon encountering him, Piśācas scatter like a pack of dogs fleeing from a lion (Kumari, 1968, 60-61). When considered in the context of the local natural environment and the distribution of wildlife, it is clear that the use of tigers, lions, cattle, and dogs in these metaphors is neither arbitrary nor coincidental.⁷ Rather, the compiler of the *Nilamata Purāṇa* was clearly aware of these animals’ explicit existence through hearsay, observation, or everyday experience and assumed the audience would understand their hierarchical roles in the food chain, making them apt choices for metaphors depicting the struggle between gods and demonic beings.

The *Nilamata Purāṇa* also recounts a story similar to one found in the *Bhagavata Purana*, in which an elephant lord, suffering from hunger and thirst in the Trikuta Hill region of Jammu, enters a lake to drink but is seized by a crocodile. The elephant prays to Lord Hari for help, and the crocodile subsequently releases it. This is, in fact, a metaphorical tale, where the elephant is said to have been a king devoted to Hari in his previous life (Kumari, 1968, 154). The *Nilamata Purāṇa* also references Vishnu’s man-lion incarnation, Narasimhāvatāra, who tears the demon Hiranyakashipu to pieces with his claws (Kumari, 1968, 147). In addition, the *Nilamata Purāṇa* mentions eleven forms of Rudra, including two that appear in animal forms, such as Aja Ekapād, the one-footed goat, and Ahirbudhnya, the serpent of the deep, both of which also appear in the *Rigveda*. Shiva sometimes manifests as a swan, while the god Dharma appears in the form of Shiva’s bull (Kumari, 1968, 222). In the context of the real-world ecology, swans are known to have inhabited Kashmir for a long time, though they have become extremely rare in the past century. According to a news report on November 20, 2020, whooper swans (*Cygnus cygnus*) reappeared in Kashmir after a century of absence, with four dead swans discovered locally (Hassan, 2020). Therefore, the use of these animals in metaphors cannot be simply dismissed as mere imagination; it is grounded in the reality of the local natural ecology.

In the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, the Kashmir region was extolled as a fertile land filled with rows of rice fields and fruit trees, where the people devoutly offered worship to the gods and were devoted to spiritual practice and contemplation. The Purana constructed an imagined world of harmony, in which Brahmins, as virtuous ascetics, dedicated themselves to Vedic texts; Kshatriyas wielded weapons to protect this world; Vaishyas diligently labored to provide the material foundation for society; and Shudras willingly served the other castes. This world was

⁷ In 1873, Ward witnessed a story in Kashmir about wild dogs being killed by a tiger. On the hills near the Pohru River, two wild dogs, with significant portions of their bodies eaten, were found. Local people told him that these wild dogs were likely troublemakers that frequently came down from the hills to harass sheep flocks; See A. E. Ward, *The Tourist’s And-sportsman’s Guide to Kashmir and Ladak, &c* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1896), p. 156.

harmonious, as the Purana proclaimed, because it was adorned with various temples and sacred sites, creating a so-called land of peace. This land was unconquerable by enemy states, and its people were born fearless. It was also rich in milk cows, horses, and elephants, ensuring protection from famine. Thanks to the blessings of numerous goddesses in the temples, the populace was safeguarded from threats posed by venomous snakes, fierce tigers, water buffaloes, and bears. The region was also abundant with various flowers, grasses, fruit trees, and medicinal herbs, and it was home to numerous wild animals (Kumari, 1968, 4-6).

The *Nilamata Purāṇa* depicts the so-called Kashmiri mandala (*Kāśmīramaṇḍala*), a world teeming with various wild beasts, milk cows, horses, elephants, venomous snakes, tigers, water buffaloes, and bears. Horses, elephants, and bulls were primarily used for transportation, with horses and elephants also forming crucial components of royal armies. The training and maintenance of horses and elephants were accompanied by specific ritual arrangements. In ancient Kashmir, elephants were widely utilized in economic and military activities, such as transportation and warfare. War elephants were significant assets for ancient kings, particularly in the plains. These elephants were typically protected with armor on critical areas like the head and joints. If their joints were struck by arrows, they could lose mobility, endangering the warriors riding them (Bamzai, 1994, 218-219). In Kashmiri folklore, ancient kings were often depicted as accompanied by elephants and eagles, symbolizing power (Knowles, 1888, 158–159).⁸ Although the primary sources of war elephants in ancient India are generally considered to be the forests of eastern regions like Vindhya, Assam, and Kalinga, local Kashmiri texts clearly indicate the presence of elephants in the region as well. According to Thomas R. Trautmann, ancient South Asia’s elephants primarily came from eight major regions, including the Pāñcanada forest in the northwest (Trautmann, 2015, 12–13).⁹

In the caste-based society of ancient South Asia, Brahmins enjoyed significant privileges, controlling other social classes, particularly through the development of increasingly elaborate sacrificial rituals. In these rituals, large numbers of animals were killed as offerings. Early Buddhism strongly criticized such extreme bloody killing, arguing that it not only hindered the development of cattle husbandry in South Asia but also contributed to the degradation of the local region’s social and ecological environment. The Buddhist text *Sutta Nipāta* states that in ancient times, there were only three afflictions—greed, hunger, and old age—but after the practice of cow sacrifice emerged, ninety-eight afflictions arose (Singh, 2019, 67-68). However, early Buddhism did not entirely prohibit the use or consumption of animals; it emphasized that killing for the sake of gourmet food was unacceptable. In Buddhist Vinaya texts, there are specific examples addressing the use of animals. For instance, the Buddha permitted monks to eat meat and drink blood when ill. Monks who were weak due to illness could consume the meat and blood of bears, fish, crocodiles, pigs, or donkeys. In colder regions, monks were also allowed to wear clothing made from goat or deer hides. However, when the Buddha learned that some monks, during times of famine, consumed the meat of elephants, horses, dogs,

⁸ J. Hinton Knowles, *Folk-Tales of Kashmir* (London: Trübner & Co., 1888), pp. 158-159; Regarding elephants as symbols of a king’s glory in the local context, similar indications are also found in other sources; see V. N. Drabu, *Kashmir Polity, C. 600-1200 A.D.* (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1986), p. 234; In the ninth century, there was even a king who lost 101 elephants while crossing a mountain pass near Surapura; see G. M. Rabbani, *Ancient Kashmir: A Historical Perspective* (Srinagar: Gulshan Publishers, 1981), p. 24.

⁹ Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 12-13, Wazirabad in the Punjab region was also an important center for the breeding of warhorses; see pp. 20-21.

snakes, lions, leopards, and hyenas, he deemed it inappropriate, particularly emphasizing that killing for the sake of meat was unacceptable (Singh, 2019, 56). Nevertheless, these Buddhist texts explicitly demonstrate that such animals were widely present in South Asia. It was common for the royal families of some princely states to own elephants and horses,¹⁰ which were not only symbols of military and economic power but also used in sacrificial rituals.

The Kashmir region features complex terrain and geology, encompassing valleys, hills, and snow-capped mountains. The melting snow from the mountains forms rivers in the valleys, which merge into the Indus River and flow into the Indian Ocean. Consequently, this region is renowned for its numerous majestic mountains and rivers, which, according to the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, are inhabited by various gods. These gods appear riding their respective mounts (*vahanas*) (Kumari, 1968, 124-125). For example, Hara (Shiva) rides a bull, Brahma rides a swan, and two Nagas appear in the clouds. Gaṅgā (the Ganges goddess) rides a crocodile, Yamunā rides a tortoise, Śatadru rides a bull, Sarasvatī (the goddess of knowledge) rides a water buffalo, Vipāsā rides a horse, Irāvātī rides an elephant, Candrabhāgā rides a lion, Sindhu rides a tiger, Devikā rides a wild buffalo, Sarayū rides a deer, Mandākinī rides a human, Payoṣṇī rides a goat, Narmadā rides a peacock, Gomatī rides a Saranga deer, Godāvarī rides a sheep, Kampanā rides a swan, Gaṇḍakī rides a male crane, Kāverī rides a camel, the holy Ikṣumatī rides a crocodile, the holy Sītā rides a female crane, Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) rides a Kamara deer, Vaṅkṣu rides a wild boar, Hlādīnī rides a partridge, Hrādīnī rides a rooster, Pāvanī rides a horse, Śoṇa rides a snake, Kṛṣṇaveṇī rides a cloud, and Bhuveṇā rides a hare (Kumari, 1968, 41-43).

Although this list of divine mounts stems from religious imagination, it is not without a basis in real life and likely reflects, to some extent, the ancient Kashmiri people’s understanding and imagination of the animals active in the diverse terrains of this region’s mountains and rivers. The animals listed as mounts can be broadly categorized into four groups: terrestrial animals, amphibians, aquatic animals, and birds. Terrestrial animals include bulls, water buffaloes, horses, elephants, lions, tigers, wild buffaloes, deer, goats, camels, Saranga deer, sheep, Kamara deer, wild boars, and hares. Amphibians include crocodiles, tortoises, and snakes, while birds include peacocks, swans, cranes, partridges, and roosters. According to many other sources, these animals were indeed active in the Kashmir region. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the naturalist A. E. Ward observed that while partridges were more common in the Himalayan region, they were rare in Kashmir at the time. Similarly, swans were present in the Wular Lake area of the Jhelum River basin in Kashmir but were not commonly seen, typically appearing in pairs or groups of three and not staying for long (Ward, 1896, 189, 191).

Since these gods were deeply embedded in the religious life of the local people, the primary function of animals was often as sacrificial offerings in rituals, which were believed to bring merit to the participants, absolve sins, and lead to liberation. The *Nilamata Purāṇa* mentions that Brahmins frequently received various gifts, and those who offered these gifts earned merit. The nature of these gifts varied depending on the season and the specific religious rituals. In addition to clothing and utensils, gifts could include animals, particularly cows, horses, and elephants, which were primarily offered to Brahmins on the twelfth day of the eighth month of the Indian calendar, Kartika. On the full moon day of this month, a bull was to be offered

¹⁰ For the study on animals in modern princely states, See Julie E. Hughes, *Animal kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

(Kumari, 1968, 81).¹¹ As part of their rituals, kings, belonging to the second caste, often released animals destined for slaughter. The household priest would arrange for the king to sit on an auspicious and beautifully adorned lion throne covered with tiger skin, holding various auspicious items. The king would then pay homage to umbrellas, banners, weapons, and rows of elephants and horses before mounting a decorated elephant to distribute wealth (Kumari, 1968, 218–219).¹²

The *Nilamata Purāṇa*, in addition to listing the gods of the Brahmanical pantheon, also includes several folk deities, such as Revanta, Surabhi (the cow goddess),¹³ Agni, Varuṇa, and Gaṇādhīpa (the elephant god),¹⁴ who are worshipped with offerings of animals like horses, cows, goats, sheep, and elephants (Kumari, 1968, 169).¹⁵ In the *Mahabharata*, Agni, Varuṇa, and Surya are associated with goats, rams, and horses, respectively. Among Shiva’s sons, Skanda appears in the *Nilamata Purāṇa* as a protector of children,¹⁶ with offerings dedicated to him including toys, roosters, goats, and the like. If every household’s children worship him, they were believed to be protected from diseases (Kumari, 1968, 166).¹⁷ From the list of animals used in these sacrifices, the importance of goats and sheep in the region is evident, suggesting that the demand for sheep was significant at the time, likely making sheep husbandry a prevalent practice.

The *Nilamata Purāṇa* also provides a detailed description of the Prasvāpana festival in Kashmir, celebrated during the month of Āṣāḍha to induce Vishnu to enter a state of sleep. The rituals for this festival involved lighting lamps at night, accompanied by hymns, dances, music, dramatic performances, and decorations to awaken Vishnu. During the half-moon of the Kartika month, offerings of food and ornaments were made to Vishnu’s idol, and on the twelfth day, the idol was bathed and offered the five products derived from cows—such as butter, ghee, honey, curd, and milk—along with various spices, pigments, flowers, incense, and food. Brahmins were also presented with clothing, ornaments, cows, horses, elephants, and money (Kumari, 1968, 192). The *Nilamata Purāṇa* further mentions a sacrificial ritual dedicated to the sage Agastya, which consists of three parts. Those performing the ritual must fast all day and, in the evening, honor the sage with various offerings, including food, flowers,

¹¹ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 1, p. 81. The scale of animal sacrifices in contemporary Bengal is significant, reflecting the types of animals produced locally. As Sufia Uddin notes, among Sufi Muslims in the Bengal region, the animals offered in sacrifice vary depending on the wealth of the sacrificer. Poor individuals typically offer chickens or hens, while wealthier pilgrims sacrifice goats, lambs, calves, cows, and other such animals; see Sufia Uddin, “In the Company of Pirs: Making Vows, Receiving Favors at Bangladeshi Sufi Shrines,” in *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, edited by Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), p. 96.

¹² Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 2, pp. 218–219.

¹³ The *Nilamata Purāṇa* states that those who raise horses must worship the god Pṛthvīdhara, and those who raise cows must worship the god Surabhi; see Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 2, p. 102.

¹⁴ For a brief history of the development of the Elephant God in South Asia, see Raman Sukumar, *The Living Elephants: Evolutionary Ecology, Behavior, and Conservation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 64–70.

¹⁵ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 1, p. 169. Ji Xianlin’s translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* includes an explanation of the god Surabhi; see *Ji Xianlin wenji* (Ji Xianlin’s Collected Works): *Rāmāyaṇa* (Nanchang: Jiangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), p. 720.

¹⁶ In other parts of South Asia, particularly in India, Bengal, and Nepal, the protector deity of children is Shashti, whose mount is a black cat. Shashti is also revered as the goddess who grants children and is typically worshipped on the sixth day after a child’s birth; see June McDaniel, *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women’s Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), pp. 47–49.

¹⁷ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 1, p. 166. Puranic literature frequently mentions the cult of Skanda, but its presence in the Kashmir region is noted after the 5th century; see Suba Singh Rana, *A Study of Skanda Cult* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995), p. 94; indeed, Skanda is also worshipped as a war god.

sandalwood, cows, bulls, clothing, jewelry, umbrellas, and shoes, while also worshipping fire (Kumari, 1968, 205). This festival highlights the critical importance of cattle and their products.

The worship of Kashmiri gods also involves the veneration of animals. The rituals began with an astrologer selecting an auspicious day and setting up a sacred space. Friends surrounded the worshipper, and offerings were made to the goddess of the earth, a pair of bulls, cows, horses, and deities such as Baladeva, Mahādeva, Vāmadeva, the Sun, the Moon, the god of medicine, Parjanya (the god of rain and thunder), Indra, Pracetas, Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Shesha, and others. Some of these gods governed aspects of the material world, such as earth, fire, wind, and sky (Kumari, 1968, 143). These rituals likely perpetuated the ancient animistic tradition of believing all things possess a spirit, reflecting humanity’s response to the challenges posed by the local natural environment. These deities controlled the order of agricultural production, which held significant importance for the region’s economy and social life.

The local people also made offerings to dogs and crows, though it was not specified whether these dogs were wild or domesticated. On the full moon day of the month of Āṣāḍha, the people worshipped Kashyapa, the founder of the Kashmiri kingdom, and also made offerings to the Rohini cow and other cows (Kumari, 1968, 188). On the day when the moon aligned with the Krittika constellation, or on the ninth day, people were required to worship horses, performing rituals to pacify and care for them. A fire was lit, and hymns were sung to praise the gods Vayu, Varuṇa, Vishnu, and Agni. Horses were to be controlled by those wielding weapons, and on this day, people should refrain from whipping or riding them (Kumari, 1968, 205–206). Similarly, when the moon aligned with the Revati star, people were to worship elephants in a manner akin to the horse rituals (Kumari, 1968, 207).¹⁸ These ceremonies underscored the significance of horses and elephants as vital material resources in political and economic life, where their scarcity could lead to serious consequences. Thus, even though these animals were used in rituals, they must be appropriately protected and valued.

When worshipping the goddess Durga, people were instructed to offer food balls to an eagle (Kumari, 1968, 209). According to the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, if a Brahmin failed to offer animals to Durga, they risked losing a son (Torzsok, 2015, 23).¹⁹ This is, of course, a rhetorical device of ancient religious tradition, used to emphasize the necessity of performing sacrifices.

On the last dark fifteenth day of the year, people should perform the Śrāddha ritual to honor their ancestors, offering food to dogs (Kumari, 1968, 148; Banerji, 1962, 185).²⁰ However, other texts outline more taboos related to the Śrāddha ritual, prohibiting the presence of disabled individuals, the dead, lepers, non-believers, roosters, pigs, dogs, and the like. Those conducting the Śrāddha must also avoid individuals deemed repulsive, impure, naked,

¹⁸ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 2, p. 207. The term “Śakra Nakṣatra” here refers to a constellation associated with King Śakra; this king is worshipped by scholars and the afflicted; see B. R. Modak, *The Ancillary Literature of the Atharva-Veda: A Study with Special Reference to the Parisistas* (New Delhi: Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan in association with Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993), p. 213.

¹⁹ Judit Torzsok, “Tolerance and Its Limits in Twelfth Century Kashmir: Tantric Elements in Kalhaṇa’s *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” p. 23.

²⁰ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 2, p. 148. Sures Chandra Banerji, *Dharma-sūtras: A Study in Their Origin and Development* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1962), p. 185. During the performance of śrāddha rituals, women who are menstruating and dogs must not be allowed to see it. Typically, barriers are set up around the ritual site, and sesame seeds are arranged for exorcism to prevent dogs and demons from entering; see G. P. Bhatt and G.V. Tagare, *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology* Volume 38: The *Vayu Purana* Part 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013), p. 643.

intoxicated, rogues, women during menstruation, those wearing green clothing, and heretics (Prasad, 1997, 82). The animals mentioned as undesirable in the Śrāddha context, primarily chickens, dogs, and pigs, were common domesticated livestock and poultry, reflecting the communal nature of the ritual. Such ceremonies were likely held within communities, where encounters with domesticated animals were frequent. The juxtaposition of humans with physical defects and these domesticated animals reveals a distinctive perception of “difference” or “otherness.” Even humans, if physically impaired and considered “other,” were categorized alongside animals as a distinct form of life.

Cows in the region are the dominant material resource, closely tied to people’s social status, to the extent that in the religious rhetoric of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, the amount of merit one gains is metaphorically measured by the number of cows owned. According to the *Nilamata Purāṇa* (verses 1199–1207), visualizing the incarnations of great gods, such as Shiva and Vishnu, Matsya and Kurma, Indra, Brahma, and the images of sages from Vedic literature, such as Kapila, yielded the merit of ten cows (Kumari, 1968, 304). In the dialogue between Jnanada and Dirghatamas, the sage Dirghatamas informed that ascending Mount Vulture Peak (Gṛdhrakūṭa) granted the merit of a thousand cows, and bathing at the confluence of the Jhelum River and the Madhumati River led to ascension to heaven (verses 1276–1277). Other ascetic practices also yielded the merit of a thousand cows. Bathing in the Telalā River and the Bhūrjalā River separately granted the merit of a hundred cows (verse 1286). Bathing at the confluence of these two rivers with the Madhumati River yielded the merit of one elephant (Kumari, 1968, 322–323). Bathing in the Uttaramānasa River granted the merit of a thousand cows. Bathing in Haramunda Lake yielded the merit of ten cows. Arriving at sacred sites such as Kālodaka and Nandikuṇḍa granted the merit of a hundred cows (verses 1294–1295). Acts that yield the merit of a hundred cows also included pilgrimages to sites dedicated to the worship of Brahma, such as Śakratīrtha, Devatīrtha, Brāhmaṇakuṇḍī, and Kātīrtha (verses 1298–1299) (Kumari, 1968, 324–325).²¹ Bathing in the Maḍavā River yielded the merit of a thousand cows, and reaching the source of the Paroṣṇī River, a tributary of the Jhelum, granted the merit of a thousand cows. Bathing in boiling water (Uṣṇodaka) yielded the merit of a thousand cows.

Most descriptions involved gaining merit through bathing in rivers or pilgrimages to sacred sites, as it claimed that those who gained fame on earth and went to pay homage to the goddess Jhelum, should prepare various bridges, adorn them with blue and red lotuses, fill them with the sounds of various cattle herds, fish and tortoises, and possess various bathing places with waters as delicious as nectar. A person who heard the glory of the Jhelum River goddess or the entire *Nilamata Purāṇa* gained the merit of ten cows (Kumari, 1968, 359–361).

Among the offerings, the most common animals were cows, sheep, and horses. Horses, bulls, and milk cows were also used in agricultural production, with ancient Indian agriculture largely sustained by cattle (Srivastava, 2008, 288).²² Farmers ascribed significant religious value to

²¹ Kumari, *The Nilamata purāṇa*, vol. 2, pp. 324–325. According to the *Mahābhārata*, these sacred sites are places where women who have miscarried can remove their sins through bathing; see *Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva*, Chapter 25, Stanza 60.

²² Vinod Chandra Srivastava, *History of Agriculture in India, Up to C. 1200 A.D.* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2008), p. 288. As early as the 1960s, the ecological anthropologist Marvin Harris pointed out that population growth and the important status of cattle in Indian economic life support the increase in the number of cattle, rather than relying on the ideology of non-killing; see Marvin Harris, “The Cultural Ecology of India’s Sacred Cattle,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7: 1 (1966), pp. 51–66.

them. Offering a bull allows the donor to more easily traversed the demonic paths to heaven and reside in the heavenly realm for as many years as there were hairs on the bull's body. The merit of offering a milk cow was similarly profound. Related to cattle husbandry was the wool industry, so the *Nilamata Purāṇa* also mentions shepherds and goat owners. Kashmir may have had sericulture, though references to local mulberry cultivation date only to the 16th century (Bamzai, 1994, 233). Whether sericulture existed in the 7th or 8th century remains unknown, lacking additional sources.

However, in light of modern archaeological discoveries, one can compare the role of animals in the economic life of ancient India with the accounts found in medieval sources. The main domesticated animals of early Indian civilization included cattle, buffalo, sheep, goats, and pigs. Yet the backbone of the Indian animal economy was cattle raising, primarily two types (the zebu cattle, *Bos indicus*, and the taurine cattle, *Bos taurus*). The main evidence for this comes from seal images and animal bone specimens unearthed in the Indus Valley Civilization. About sixty percent of the animal bones found there belong to domestic cattle. The two major functions of cattle raising were slaughter for food and the use of milk (Joglekar & Goyal, 2020, 417–424).

Laura J. Miller discussed the local economic activities of producing cheese, yogurt, and butter. Terracotta figurines unearthed at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro demonstrate that cattle were also used for transportation (cart-pulling) and agriculture (plowing). Sheep and goats occupied the second most important place after cattle in the Indus Valley Civilization. Although there were regional differences, goats were generally more common than sheep. Specimens of buffalo have been discovered, though not many, making their economic role in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization unclear. Bone remains found in the Dholavira area indicate the presence of both domesticated and wild buffalo. They were probably used mainly for milk, and to a lesser degree for meat, but did not play a major role in the Harappan urban economy. Traces of both domestic and wild pigs have been found in the Indus Valley. Since pigs could not provide renewable resources such as milk or wool, they held relatively low status in the local economy (Joglekar & Goyal, 2020, 446).

In addition to these animals, remains of horses, donkeys, camels, and dogs have also been found in the Indus Valley Civilization. Evidence for dogs comes from terracotta figurines unearthed at the sites. Some scholars have even interpreted an image on a brick as depicting a dog chasing a cat. Although the *Nilamata Purāṇa* did not mention cats, the presence of domestic cats in South Asia is supported by unearthed bone specimens. These cats were likely kept by rural households to catch mice (Joglekar & Goyal, 2020, 460). Aside from livestock, there have also been some discoveries of domestic fowl.

Wild animals included wild boar, wild asses, deer, spotted deer, hares, wild geese, porcupines, and so forth. Many of these wild animals were hunted by the people of the ancient Indus Valley, which explains their bone remains found in settlements. Remains of Indian bison (*Bos gaurus*), elephants, and rhinoceroses have also been discovered, and their images appear on seals excavated in the region. These archaeological finds reveal the fundamental roles played by domesticated animals and poultry in the economy and social life of the time. They also confirm that the animals mentioned in various *Purāṇas* were not mere fabrications, but had definite historical roots and real-life foundations.

2. Kashmiri Animals in the Eyes of the “Outsiders”: A Comparative Perspective

As I noted in the introduction, the animal world of Kashmir is vast and rich. Yet only a very limited number of animals entered human awareness, and those most likely to become part of “history” were the ones directly tied to various aspects of human social life, particularly those that became the objects of human recognition, description, writing, and imagination. Today, our main sources of information on local animals include textual records, field investigations, specimen collections, and archaeological discoveries. Looking back through history, one can see that different eras showed markedly different anthropocentric interests in particular animals. This section will mainly discuss the field experiences and narratives of “outsiders,” such as Chinese Buddhist pilgrims in search of scriptures and modern European explorers and scientists, to supplement the animal world of Kashmir reflected in the locally-produced *Nilamata Purāṇa*.

Early Chinese sources briefly noted that Buddhist pilgrims, on their westward journeys, passed through Kashmir, but almost never mentioned local animals. Their attention to the natural environment and ecology was extremely limited. For instance, Faxian’s *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* referred to his travels through Kashmir, but never once mentioned any real animals of the natural world. The “poison dragon” he speaks of is clearly legendary. He mentioned the Onion Range [Pamirs] was snow-covered year-round and there were poisonous dragons who would spew forth poisonous winds, snow, flying sand, and stones if they were disturbed by travelers. After having crossed this range, one entered Northern India. He did not note any wild animals in Kashmir and Northern India (T. 51, no. 2085, 857c-858a.). Faxian’s westward journey was primarily a quest for Buddhist monastic regulations. Though he sometimes mentioned the harsh natural environment, he paid little attention to the animals of the region. His accounts of local customs were primarily focused on matters of religion and belief.

Compared with Faxian’s journey, the later pilgrim Xuanzang also referred to Kashmir in his *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*:

“The country of Kashmir has a circumference of over 7,000 *li*. Its four borders are protected by mountains, extremely steep and precipitous, with narrow passes. Since ancient times, no neighboring enemies have been able to invade it. The capital city lies west of a great river, measuring twelve to thirteen *li* from north to south and four to five *li* from east to west. The land is well-suited for agriculture, producing abundant flowers and fruits, dragon-breed horses, saffron, fire-pearls, and medicinal herbs. The climate is cold and snowy, with little wind. The people wear woolen garments and white clothing. The local customs are frivolous, and the people are timid and weak. The country is protected by dragons and dominates its neighbors. The people are handsome in appearance but cunning in disposition. They are fond of learning and widely informed, yet they believe in both orthodox and heterodox teachings. There are more than a hundred monasteries with over five thousand monks. There are also four stupas, all built by King Aśoka, each containing over a *sheng* of the Buddha’s relics.” (T. 51, no. 2087, 886a; *Da Tang xiyuji*, juan 3.).

This description follows the style and content of the “Western Regions” sections in the dynastic histories, though it focuses more on the Buddhist customs that Xuanzang himself most cared about. Flora and fauna were only briefly noted. Although the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* was compiled earlier than the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, it cannot be used for comparison since it provides no description of the local animal world.

A later source, the tenth-century Persian geographical work *Hudūd al-‘Ālam min al-Mashriq ilā l-Maghrib* (*The Regions of the World, from East to West*), briefly mentions Kashmir in its description

of Hindustan and Tibet, but likewise gives no detailed account of the local ecology or animals (Minorsky, 1937). This makes the *Nilamata Purāṇa* a unique historical source for understanding the ancient ecology and animals of Kashmir.

By the nineteenth century, British missionaries traveling in Central Asia had begun to collect and record local folklore and legends. Interestingly, one story titled *The Cat Who Became Queen* involves the cat which was missing in both the *Nilamata Purāṇa* and Chinese travelogues in the medieval era. The story tells of a great king who once ruled Kashmir and the legend of his “daughter” (Knowles, 1888, 8–10). Although the king had many consorts, none bore him a son to inherit the throne. He threatened his consorts that if within a year they still failed to give him an heir, they would be punished. Desperate, the consorts prayed to the great god Śiva for help. Months passed with no result, so they sought another solution to preserve their place in the harem. They spread the rumor that one of them was pregnant, and before long, word spread that a princess had been born. In reality, however, it was a palace cat that had given birth to kittens. Unaware of the truth, the king was delighted and ordered that the princess be brought to him. The consorts, anticipating this, arranged for word to reach the king that a Brahmin had declared the girl must not meet her father before marriage. Although the king repeatedly demanded to see her, he was never allowed, and instead received reports that his daughter was beautiful and intelligent. Disappointed at not having a son, he nevertheless hoped that one day this daughter would marry a worthy man who could inherit the throne. When the “daughter” came of age, the king’s attendants indeed found a handsome and intelligent prince to wed her. The consorts, unafraid of exposure, revealed the truth to the prince, who willingly agreed to the arrangement and promised to keep it secret from his own parents.

On the day of the grand wedding, the consorts placed the cat into the bridal palanquin and safely delivered it to the prince. The prince hid the cat in his residence and treated it with great care, even keeping his mother from entering to see the bride. One day, when the prince was away, his mother came to visit her daughter-in-law. Standing outside the door, she spoke kindly to her. The cat, clever enough to understand her words, began to weep, which moved the mother deeply. She decided to discuss the matter with her son. Soon, however, the story reached the ears of the goddess Pārvatī, who went to Śiva to ask for compassion on the cat’s behalf. Śiva instructed that oil be rubbed onto the cat’s fur, which would transform it into a beautiful woman. Pārvatī immediately conveyed this to the cat, who rubbed oil on her fur and instantly turned into a stunning woman—though a patch of fur remained on one shoulder. When the prince returned that evening, he was overjoyed to see his wife in human form, and his worries about explaining the situation to his mother disappeared. Weeks later, the couple returned to the princess’s supposed homeland to pay respects to the king. The king fully believed this beautiful woman to be his daughter. The consorts rejoiced, convinced their prayers had been answered. Of course, the story was meant to highlight the greatness of Śiva, but the motif of transformation between human and cat is particularly noteworthy.

This legend mainly concerned transformations between humans and cats. However, European explorers paid little attention to the local wild and domestic cats, following the mode of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*. The British explorer Godfrey T. Vigne (1801–1863), who traveled in Central Asia, recorded many observations of local wildlife (Vigne, 1842, 14–22). His attention focused mainly on large mammals and bird species, while cats were hardly mentioned. He first noted the large numbers of Kashmir stag (*hangul*, *Cervus canadensis hanglu*). He consulted Dr. Falconer,

who regarded it as a new species, since no link had yet been found between it and the European red deer. Vigne saw pale ginger-colored specimens in Islamabad, about thirteen hands high, with one or two branches on their antlers. He observed that the antlers could be softened by soaking them in running water for several days, after which they were used to make decorative rings for saddles. Vigne considered the stag a beautiful ornament of the high mountains and pine forests of Kashmir, though it was found mainly in the southeastern valley and descended only in winter.

Another common animal of the surrounding mountains was the bear. Vigne described bears of Kashmir as falling into two categories, such as the brown bear (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*, i.e., Himalayan brown bear) and the black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*, i.e., Asiatic black bear). He thought the females were usually brown, while the males were pale dirty-yellow, with reddish tinges on the neck and shoulders. Brown bears often appeared in groups during certain seasons and raided fruit trees. Black bears were frequently captured and sent to the Punjab and the plains of Hindustan for display. A yellowish bear could stand six or seven feet tall, while the black bear was much smaller, less common, with shorter hair, a white collar around the neck, and more aggressive behavior. Modern scholarship, however, identifies three species of bears in the Himalayas, including the sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*), the Himalayan brown bear, and the Asiatic black bear. The black bear is the most common in the Himalayan foothills, including Kashmir, where adults may weigh up to 450 pounds, with females somewhat smaller (Govindrajan, 2018, 164; Charoo et al., 2011, 106–113; Sathyakumar, 2001, 21–29).

Vigne also mentioned that wolves were not common, and hyenas were rare. Leopards and wildcats, however, were widespread, with leopards inhabiting the mountains. The so-called tiger cat, common in the Himalayas, also appeared in Kashmir. Jackals were another common wild animal. He added that foxes were seen almost daily during his travels. Otters (*Udur*, in Persian *Sug-i-ab*, “water dog”) were extremely common, especially among ruins in Kashmir, though they also appeared under the piers of small town bridges. They were often killed for their skins. Flying squirrels were also widespread in the mountains. Vigne was surprised to find that hares were absent, perhaps because the climate was too cold for the Indian hare. On the Tibetan plateau, however, he saw plateau hares in rocky and sandy areas, and he believed that European hares might have been better suited to Kashmir’s environment. Other common species included the ermine and the porcupine. Monkeys, however, were entirely absent, and the last time Vigne saw one was on the road to Banihal, two or three days outside Kashmir.

Vigne gave detailed descriptions of birds. The Himalayan monal (Monal or Impeyan pheasant, *Lophophorus impejanus*) was also found in Kashmir. Jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*) were present as well. On the snowy Pir Panjal mountains on both sides of the valley, he noted the “royal partridge” (*Kabuk Deri*, in Persian *Bura*), a bird more common in Tibet. Larger than the English partridge by a factor of five, it was typically gray with light reddish-brown feather edges. Although Vigne did not specify its species, it was likely the grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*).

In Ladakh (so-called “Little Tibet”), Vigne hunted some chukar partridges, but he never saw them in Kashmir. During the winter months, many waterfowl appeared in the valley, most of them descending from Yarkand and Mughalistan, and returned northward in spring. Vigne did not see the little bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) locally, but did observe the woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) two or three times near the snowline, particularly in the western Pir Panjal. The common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and jack snipe (*Lymnocyptes minimus*) were frequently seen

in winter. Smaller species of pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*) were also noted. Kashmir had Bonelli’s eagle (*Aquila fasciata*) and the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

In Kashmir, the cuckoo was called *byal-kuk*. The word *byal* means “seed,” and local farmers said the bird told them when to sow their crops. Magpies (*Pica pica*), common in Ladakh, were absent in Kashmir; however, Ahmed Shah of Skardu told Vigne that if a magpie appeared near a man’s house, it meant he was extraordinarily fortunate. In terms of cultural meaning, the cuckoo and magpie were valued in ways strikingly similar to those in central China. The hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), as well as a Himalayan blue-black bird, were common. Vigne noted the absence of the nightingale, both in Kashmir and Afghanistan, though it was common in Persia. The white-eared bulbul (*Ixos leucogenys*), about seven and a half inches long, with olive-brown plumage and white patches behind the eyes, was also found in Kashmir. Its tail resembled that of the English blackbird, but its song was less pleasant. The spotted forktail (*Enicurus maculatus*), black and white with a spoon-shaped tail, was also present, common between valleys and plains. The wallcreeper (*Tichodroma phoeniceptera*) was numerous in the Punjab mountains, and Vigne heard that Spain also had similar birds.

In addition to mammals and birds, Vigne also recorded reptiles, though his identifications were often inaccurate. He claimed that the boa constrictor (*Boa constrictor*), locally called *Ajda-Mar*, lived in Kashmir, growing about five feet long, harmless, and common in wetlands and rivers. This was certainly a misunderstanding, since modern zoology confirms that boa constrictors are native only to Central and South America. He also mentioned two small venomous snakes, one of which was known as *gulawut*, said to be thrown into people’s throats.

Based on European accounts, the Indian wildcat (*Felis torquata*, also known as the waved cat) was first known to Europeans in 1826.²³ This wildcat is similar in size to a domestic cat, with a tail about half the length of its head and body. Its ears are rounded, though sometimes pointed. The fur is typically gray or brown. Anatomical analysis reveals that its internal head structure is similar to Indian and European domestic cats. A male specimen found in Kashmir measured approximately 22 inches from head to body, with a 12-inch tail. A female from Rajputana measured about 20 inches head to body, with a tail of approximately 10 inches. The Indian wildcat is generally found in the Himalayan region of Nepal but is widely distributed across North India. Its presence in Kashmir is considered unusual, and its habits may not differ significantly from local domestic cats (Blanford, 1888–1891, 85–86).

Large-scale scientific expeditions and specimen collection of wildlife in the Kashmir region by European and American scholars primarily occurred in the late 19th century. These expeditions were distinct from the casual, less scientific descriptions by missionaries and explorers, aiming instead to establish a modern scientific understanding of the biological world. Consequently, collected specimens were brought back to museums for detailed study, and precise measurements were recorded. These measurements were then compared with data from mammals in Europe and America to determine the species classification of these wild animals and establish a “scientific order” for the animal kingdom.

²³ This animal appears more tea-brown/dark brown and with fewer stripes, its head and body are about sixteen to eighteen inches long, and its tail is about ten to eleven inches long; see St. George Jackson Mivart, *The Cat: An Introduction to the Study of Backboned Animals, Especially Mammals* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1881), p. 420.

For instance, W. L. Abbott collected a series of mammal skins and skulls from Kashmir between 1891 and 1893. These were submitted to the Division of Mammals at the U.S. National Museum, and the division's director subsequently published a detailed catalog of these specimens in the *Proceedings of the U.S. National Museum* (True, 1894, 1–16). This collection included species such as the Nepal gray langur (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*), a subspecies of the Rhesus macaque (*Macacus rhesus villosus*), the Indian wildcat (*Felis torquata*), the Asiatic jackal (*Canis aureus*), the mountain fox (*Vulpes montanus*) (two specimens from Shigar Valley, Baltistan, and the Vale of Kashmir), the Siberian weasel (*Putorius canigula*) (from Sonamarg, confirming previous deductions by Blanford), the Himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), the Himalayan brown bear (*Ursus isabellinus*) (which seemed different from the brown bear described by Blanford), the Urial (*Ovis vignei*), the Siberian ibex (*Capra sibirica*) (specimens from Baltistan), the white-bellied flying squirrel (*Pteromys albiventer*), the Kashmir flying squirrel (*Sciuropterus fimbriatus*), the long-tailed marmot (*Arctomys caudatus*), the Kashmir long-tailed vole (*Mus arianus griseus*) (previously mentioned by Blanford, who considered it a close relative of European voles, and also recorded by Dr. Scully in the Gilgit region), the Bactrian mouse (*Mus bactrianus*), the common black rat (*Mus rattus*), the dwarf jumping mouse (*Sminthus concolor*) (which True believed originated from Gansu, China, making its discovery by Abbott at an altitude of 11,000 feet in Kashmir surprising), the common vole (*Arvicola fertilis*), the mountain vole (*Arvicola montosa*), the white-tailed mountain vole (*Arvicola albicauda*), the Tibetan hare (*Lepus tibetanus*), the gray pika (*Lagomys Griseus*), the common shrew (*Crocidura murina*), the middle shrew (*Crocidura araea*), the serotine bat (*Vesperugo serotinus*), the pipistrelle bat (*Vesperugo pipistrellus*), and the common bat (*Vesperugo murinus*). The specimen of the Indian wildcat was obtained from the Lolab Valley in Kashmir. Abbott noted that this cat was shot in a jungle near a local village and was likely domesticated. However, it was difficult to distinguish between domestic and wild cats due to their extreme similarity.

Regardless, modern scholarly knowledge of Kashmir’s wildlife has continuously expanded with the evolution of time. Early descriptions did not include very small animals, such as bees. However, modern scholars have noted local bee species. For example, Mani’s *Fauna of India*, which deals with Indian animals, points out the existence of a type of chalcid wasp (*Chalcidoidea*) in Kashmir (Mani, 1989, 290). This illustrates how contemporary scholars, through continuous field observation and collection, regularly identify new local species, a topic not further elaborated here.

Concluding Remarks

Now we can answer the question of whether Kashmir was a “Cat’s Land,” which really depends on the perspectives of philology, archaeology, and scientific exploration. Textually speaking, for the compilers of the *Nilamata Purāṇa*, it appears to be so. Neither domestic nor wild cats featured prominently in their worldview. Instead, large wild animals like lions, tigers, and leopards held greater symbolic importance in the region. Other animals were primarily relegated to sacrificial roles, thus finding a place in the historical narrative presented by the *Nilamata Purāṇa*.

While the exact timeline for the appearance of domestic cats in Kashmir remains unclear, archaeological evidence suggests that the broader South Asian region has had traces of

domestic cats since the dawn of civilization. From a perspective of scientific exploration, the existence of wild cats in Kashmir was only recognized by Europeans in the early 19th century. These wild cats were not considered indigenous but rather believed to originate from the wider Himalayan region. This paper has traced how human understanding of the animal world in Kashmir has evolved over time in accord with anthropocentric vision and interest. It demonstrates that the perceptions of the animal world in Kashmir have been driven by human needs related to politics, economics, culture, and religion. In the medieval era, religious activities seemed to play the most important role in introducing animals into the history of Kashmir; yet in the modern era, the expanded knowledge of animals has been influenced by the human pursuit of scientific understanding, particularly following the Enlightenment movement in modern Europe. Nevertheless, commerce, war, and military conquest during the era of colonialism further complicated the human knowledge and the fate of animals, which deserves more studies in the future.

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