

DEPICTION OF SNAKE IN THE INDIAN ART

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Snake worship is one of the earliest form of veneration, snake a limbless reptile is a member of vertebrates and is considered as a deity in nearly everywhere since prehistoric times. Most societies even today worship snakes because they are seen as the holders of strength, renewal and knowledge. The snake is the only animal that has the ability to shed the skin. He regains a new life by repeatedly changing his skin. The presence of *Nāga* worship among the primitive tribes in India and elsewhere amply proves an old age practice and development of such a belief. The *Nāga* civilization also known as *Sheshnāg* civilization was extended and developed much earlier than the Indus Valley. The worship of snake or *Nāga* testifies to their beliefs in animism. The '*Nāga*' are believed to live in the underground city of *Bhogavti*. In Mexico, the word '*Nagal*' describes a class of serpent guardian spirits. In Malay myths *Nāgas* are many-headed dragons of enormous size while in Thailand it usually has five heads, much like the Hindu *Nāga*. In Java and Thailand the *Nāga* is a Serpent god¹.

Significantly there is evidence of *Nāgas* in the Rigveda description and also the *Nāga* worship was known in the Yajurveda.² In the Atharvaveda and in the later Samhitas, Serpents appear as semi-divine beings and *Nāgas* receive adoration and worship. The folklore and its symbols indicate that the universe is categorised in the three parts in descending order: Devlok, Martya Lok and Paataal Lok. The world below the earth or *Martya Lok* is *Paataal lok* and Naag Vaasuki is the king of that world.³

The worship of serpents—*nāgas* and *nāgīs* (or *nāginīs*)—was an important aspect of religious worship that cut across religious boundaries. Snake worship found expression in both the Toltec and Aztec periods of prehistoric Mexican civilization. In Aztec mythology a half-divine, half-human being descended to earth for a while as the great teacher of mankind; the Aztecs called him the 'feathered serpent', the incarnation of the serpent sun. The dogma of metempsychosis appears to have grown out of the mysteries of death and reproduction which were associated with the worship of the serpent and *linga*.⁴ Adding that the ancient religion of Egypt was evidently from the same materialistic source. In Egypt, according to one authority, each temple had a reserved area where snakes were kept. In Greek religion the snake was frequently considered divine. Among the Greek Dionysian cults it signified wisdom and was a symbol of fertility. The Greek god most closely associated with snake worship is Apollo; the original name of Apollo's temple at Delphi was Pytho, after the snake Python. In Rome during the period of the empire, a sacred snake was kept within the city and was attended by the vestal virgins. The ancient Mesopotamians and Semites believed that the snake was immortal because it shed its skin and appeared in a fresh guise. But it would be difficult to quote another instance in which it takes such a prominent place in literature folk-lore, and art, as it does in India. Nor would it be possible to name another country where the development of this cult can be studied during a period which may be estimated at no less than three millennia. During so vast a space of time the deified serpents have haunted the imagination of the Indian

people. But even more astonishing is the endless variety of aspects under which the Nāgas appear in Indian literature and art⁵.

The Indians, Burmese, and Siamese worshiped the snake as a demon who also had good aspects. Vogel analyzed the three chief vaults of serpent -lore — the *Mahābhārata*, the *Jātaka* Book, and the *Rājataranginī* —and mentioned in his book.⁹ Primitive Hindu snake cults were incorporated into the worship of Krishna and eventually into the worship of Vishnu. Buddhist legends relate that Buddha was given the true Buddhism by the “king of the serpents” (often seen as the cobra), and Buddhists also revere the regenerative powers the snake exhibits. In China the serpent, in the form of the dragon, figures as a fierce but protective divinity. Hindus avoid killing of the snakes. They have a fear that its companion will avenge it . It may be the case of higher ethics of not liking to take life of any being. To drive away the fear of snakebite they use a plant called Sarpagandha. It is considered that if this is planted around the house, then snakes will never come. Not only snakes but also other venomous animals do not enter in the presence of this plant. In Pauranic traditions the nāgas and nāgīs were associated with water and fertility. The cooperation of Nāgraj Vāsukī during the churning of the ocean is a well-known truth. Similarly, in the catastrophe of Manvantara, it was Vāsukī who protected the seed of creation. The god Vishnu rests on sheshnag, the lord of all snakes is also worshiped with him though the vehicle of that great deity in ordinary practice is the vulture king garuda whose food is the snake. The snakes and Garuda are the deadly foe. Probably the writers wished to convey the feeling of peaceful coexistence of even traditional foes like Nagas and Garuda in the presence of Vishnu.

Anantha, Vasuki and Takshaka are the brothers. Kashyapa and Kadru (one of the daughters of Daksha) are the parents of all snakes.⁶ One school of thought holds that the snake represents the endless cycle of birth and death. And if one wants to free oneself from the vicious circle, one should take refuge in it with devotion and without ego. The

snake coiled around Shiva's neck also reminds the devotees to keep their ego under control⁷.

Rajtarangini by Kalhan confirms that the age-old naga cults still held their ground in India, as evident in the importance of the worship of Nilamatanaga in Kashmir during twelfth century C.E.⁸.

The glory and artistic manifestations of the serpent in the form of a deity have been going on from the Harappan period to the present period. In prehistoric rock paintings, there is the depiction of serpent in natural form with human engaged in various activities. The antiquities found from Mohenjodaro, Harappa have been marked with serpents. This is considered to be the oldest evidence of snake worship. The marking of snake figures is found in many caves of Mālwā.

In all the provinces in India, *Nāg Pūjā* (Snake worship) is being held for the protection of children and family. In Nepal and other Asian countries also, snake worship is done for the protection of children, family and nature. In the Indian art tradition, there is a diverse marking of serpents.

Evidence of the importance of the naga cult comes from the remains of an elaborate brick and stone naga temple (Apsidal temple no. 2) at Sonkh near Mathura. The structural phases of this temple ranged from the beginnings of the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE. Remains of a naga temple, the earliest structural phase of which seems to belong to the 2nd/1st century BCE, were also found at Maniyar Math near Rajagriha. Large numbers of naga images occur everywhere in the subcontinent. For instance, in the central Dec-can, Peddabankur and Kotalingala have not given any evidence of Hindu/Brahmanical temples or sculptures, but have yielded many yaksha and naga figurines as well as female figurines of possible cultic significance. Special reference may be made to an iron figurine of a snake found at Peddabankur. We can also note the fact that many people and villages mentioned in inscriptions were named after nagas and yakshas. The snakes were originally the focus of exclusive worship, but were in course of time absorbed into the dominant religions. In other words like the yakshas and yakshis, the

nagas and nagis were gradually dethroned from their position of importance as major foci of worship in the urban, public domain, though their worship continued to be important, as is evident from small stone and terracotta statuettes. The story of Krishna subduing Kaliyanaga can be interpreted as an allegorical reference to the ultimate victory of Vishnuism over the once very popular naga cult.

As the psychology of religion and the theory of symbolism permit the development of new modes of understanding some scholars are differentiating therianthropic images of the divine from those that are theriomorphic or anthropomorphic. It is sometimes becomes very difficult to segregate the zoomorphic figurines from theriomorphic one in the absence of any other evidence.

Zoomorphic figurines resemble an animal, anthropomorphic figurines resemble humans, and theriomorphic figurines are thought to have depicted gods in animal form. Contrary to anthropomorphism, which views animal or non-animal behaviour in human terms, zoomorphism is the tendency of viewing human behaviour in terms of the behaviour of animals. It is also used in literature to portray the act of humans or objects with animalistic behaviour or features. In religion and mythology, anthropomorphism is the perception of a divine being or beings in human form, or the recognition of human qualities in these beings. Ancient mythologies frequently represented the divine as deities with human forms and qualities. The idea behind anthropomorphism is that of attributing human characteristics to nonhumans — gods, animals, or inanimate objects. *Nāgas* are represented in art in Zoomorphic, therianthropic and also in Anthropomorphic forms. In statues and paintings, the marking of the snake is mainly found in three status: 1-In the form of an independent serpent statue, 2-As a subordinate deity with the main god and 3- As an ornament. The snake is also considered a symbol of time, which always sits around the neck of Shiva⁹.

ZOOMORPHIC FORMS

Significant presence of serpents is seen in Devāsura Sangrām. Asuras were counted among the most powerful enemies of the gods, but the serpents have been associated with both. Snake Vasuki was made the churner, an instrument in the Pauranic ‘Samudra- manthan’ story. The marking of Nāg Nāgin is found on the door branches and walls of ancient Indian temples. Vāsukī Nāg and Padya Nāgin are described as the king and queen of third world which is far beneath the human world and known as Pātāl lok or Rasātala”. Some times the serpents are being marked with each other as intervenen⁶ known as Nāg-Vallarī. There is a belief behind this, that seeing them at the time of entering the temple is considered a symbol of good luck and good fortune. From mythology to folklore, from prehistoric clay, sculptures and rock paintings to sculptures of different eras and styles, their highly artistic marking is found in the tradition of folk paintings.

It is proved from mythological and historical references, that the snake in India has been an important symbol of religion, mysticism, folk tale and culture. Like Hinduism, Nāgraj has been given sufficient importance in Buddhism and Jainism. Like Vishnu, Lord Buddha is depicted in many places under the umbrella of a seven-headed serpent⁶. The deity Singhnād Avalokiteshvara, is depicted holding a trident wrapped in a serpent or with serpents depicted in halo. Pārshvanāth, the twenty third Tirthankar of Jainism, is also depicted in the shadow of Nāgrāj, who holds the hood.

Their imposing nature and the technical finesse of their carving make it amply clear that they do not represent a simple folk or village cult. One of the most impressive of these is a seven-hooded nāga image found at Mathura with an inscription that places it in the early second century CE. An inscription found at the Jamālpur mound at Mathura indicates that a shrine dedicated to Dadhikarna, lord of the nāgas, once stood here, and records a gift made in its favour by the Chhandaka brothers who belonged to a family of stone masons of Mathura. The ‘great traditions’ interfaced not only with each other, but also with a myriad of local cults, beliefs, and practices. Stone and terracotta images of

various gods, goddesses, demigods, and demi-goddesses such as yakshas, yakshis, nāgas, nāgis, gandharvas, vidyādhara, and apsarās indicate other foci of popular devotional worship. The independent worship of yakshas and nāgas continued during these centuries. For instance, At Ajantā, a nāga shrine is associated with Cave number sixteen.

Recently, seventy-five painted rock-shelter / caves and twelve rocks in open air containing rock-paintings and engraving have been discovered by A. K. Prasad in the Bihar and Jharkhand. The rock-paintings discovered in Bihar are identical to the ones found in Central and Southern India. The paintings of snakes and other animals are in their naturalistic form here.¹⁰

Rock-shelter of Häté Gumphä (200 15' 79" N; 850 47' 13" E, Elev. 85m) in Udayagiri hill in the western outskirts of Bhubaneswar, the state capital of Odisha, is known for the famous inscription of king Khāravēla that in the year 2005 Sadasiba Pradhan have identified paintings and engravings in this shelter. However, the recent reinvestigation of this shelter has resulted in findings of few more motifs. The rock-shelter preserves pictures in engraving of serpentine, scooped foot-mark, a horned animal, animal paws, cupules.¹²

Many sculptures of four armed Ishana of early medieval times, preserved in Allahabad museum are depicted holding snake in one hand or two.

A mythical zoomorphic representation is also seen in Nadsur vihara cave 7. This is probably the largest representation of a mythical zoomorphic form from early Buddhist cave. Over the cell doorway, on the right wall of the Vihara is shown a five hooded mythical snake with its thick and coiled body extending at the lentil level up to corner of the cave. Almost contemporaneous to this is a natural zoomorphic representation of Naga in Nasik Chaitya hall (cave 18). There are in fact two single hooded cobra representations, one each on either side of the chaitya window above the entrance. They have a coiled body and a raised hood. This is the earliest and the pure zoomorphic representation of Naga on

the facade of a chaitya hall in Western Maharashtra.¹¹

However, the most dramatic of all the reliefs is the gigantic open-air relief at Mamallapuram carved across two boulders, about 15 m high and 30 m long. On the rock face are a profusion of figures— people, animals including elephants—all in near life-size dimensions. On special occasions, water probably flowed from a cistern on the summit into the natural cleft between the two rocks, in which are carved a naga and a nagini figure. The scene represented in this relief has been interpreted in two different ways—as the descent of the Ganga or as Arjuna's penance.

Snakes are depicted as ornaments several times. In Parashu Rameshwaram temple, the deity Ishana is adorned with Jatamukut, Sarpa Kundal and Sarpayagyopaveet.

In many modern movies, poems and idioms some peculiar characteristics of the snakes are highlighted. Examples of such movies are *Nāgin*, *Naginā*, *Nāgmani*, *Golmāl* etc. In these movies zoomorphic form of the snake can be seen. An avenger having good looks, short temper, alertness, high strength and tendency to involve easily in the spurious work due to egoistic nature is shown as the snake thus nothing is divine here. A phrase '*Aāstin kā sāp*' is used for such persons who are friendly but harm the dearest -nearest as per their own greed and need. Infact he is the enemy in the guise of a friend. Thus with the course of time some ideas are crept into the society which malign the image of the god Naag and need to be discussed and cured. Most of the Indian people celebrate Nagpanchami festival according to ancient thought currents and snakes are regarded as deity as well even today though some variations are found in the local traditions and the style of celebration. The above mentioned movies and phrases redeem their prestige and tend the people to be careless for them. So the conscious efforts are the need of the time to keep the Indian belief system integrated and to stop the misinterpretation of the ancient belief. The god Nag has come to rescue the persons many times. He is the savior and not an avenger. Nag

Dharnendra protected Tirthankar Parshvanath, Muchlind Nag protected Gautam Budhha and when Vasudev was crossing the river in the rainy night he protected child Krishna too¹².

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