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## SNAKE CULT IN INDIA: A LITERARY HISTORY

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### (Abstract)

*Animism* is a wholesome feature of the ancient religions around the world. In most of the worlds religion snake has played an important part in shaping the belief and perspective of humans towards the animal. Snake being a feared creature has always been an object of curiosity to the human mind. But to its fearful aspect most of the world religions have also payed snake a respectable position throughout the world. In this paper attempt will be made to study and understand how snake as a creature has transcended its animalism in human society and rose to the position of demi-god like position in the context of India.

**Keywords:** animism, snake worship, Indian Literature

### Introduction

The word snake has originated from the word *snaca* of English which cognate with the Middle Low German word Snake. In Sanskrit, the reptile was known *Naaga*. In Indian mythology we find a vibgyour of divine deities. The land of India is so culturally rich that here we can find many wonderful stories, philosophies. The origin of snake worship in India, by its characteristics was of non-Aryan origin but later on it was Aryanised and the cult of snake had a socio-religious and cultural impact on the people of India.

Snake worship is well known to Indian religious practices. The origin of snake worship in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization as far the archaeological evidences say us. The Indus snake seal that depicts a seated figure being worshipped by two devotees which can be interpreted from their posture, who were hooded by tow snakes (Plate I). The image of the seal provides some ideas about snakes that those were treated as some sort of sub guardian deity. The early form of snake worship was non-Aryan.

The early mention of snakes in Braminical literature is found in Rig Veda in the 'Indra-Vritra' myth, the protagonist of the myth Indra, the ruler of the Devas was depicted as the destroyer of Vritra, who is designated as AhiSarpa (snake). Another mention of Arbuda who was also designated as a snake and a foe of the Devas. Such mention leads to the interpretation that the description was a representation of the clash between the Aryans and the aboriginals, who were somehow connected to some form of snake worship.

In the later Vedic, the snake worship as a cult found its place in Yajur Veda. According to the 'Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics,' "snake worship in a fully developed form does not appear in the Rig Veda, but it is found as an element of religion in Yajur Veda"

The Atharva Veda contains charms against snakes, rites and other ritualistic stuffs and also the description of snake worshipping tribe such as Kiratas. A total of twenty seven shlokas has described snakes in various names such as Kasarnila, Ratharvi, Aghasva, Tiraschiraii, Dasonsi, Ghrtachi etc.

According to many scholars who opine that snake cult was basically a non-Aryan mode of worship. And later the cult was assimilated into the Aryan fold. The BrahmavaivartaPuran and Devi Bhagavad describe the origin of Sarpa-deviManasa, after a lot of struggle who was considered as the predominating deity of snakes. The inclusion of Devi Manasa into the Aryan fold was a representation of the aryanisation process of the non-Aryan deities. Manasa has an influential impact on the BrahminialLiteratures. Manasa's description in the epics of India mentions her as the sister of snake king Vasuki. She appeared in the Mahabharata prior to the great snake killing sacrifice of JanmajeyaIn the Epic phase snake race have secured their mythical origin with Sage Kashyapa as father and Kadru as mother. The term Naga is found in brahminical literature like the Mahabharata has suggested that Nagas were snake worshipping race who had opposed the early Aryans. This can be proved by the description of the Nagas in earthly realm, who were showed in the Mahabharata in an 'attitude. In many stories of Brahminical Literature, snakes were symbolised as evil and some type of 'destined to suffer. Some examples are that of Takashaka Nag, Kaliya Nag etc.

### Origin of Snake Worship in World and Indian Literatures

The depiction and narration of Snake has been quite a popular practice in World mythology and Art. Almost every mythological literature and ancient epics have depicted snakes being involved with the concepts of beginning, good and evil, fertility, semi-divine beings. Undoubtedly the cult of the snake has been one of the oldest cults to exist and survive till date. Ancient Civilizations like the Mesopotamian, Egyptian or the Sumerian holds snake in a very reverend position. People in ancient Mesopotamian civilization considered snake's skin shedding ability as a sign of immortality. Similarly other ancient civilizations have also positioned snake in a very high position. The attributes for which snake is worshipped is their ability to shed skin, its killing ability. Hence the similarity of these basic factors for worship is common among other snake deities of the world civilizations.

Ancient Egyptians believed in polytheistic religious beliefs. Among the ancient scripts and inscription ancient Egypt has also contributed a lot in archaeological sources. One striking feature of ancient Egyptian religion is that it is more of a polytheistic religion. With many deities and gods the core philosophy of ancient Egyptian belief system is, 'to raise godly qualities in thy life and afterwards resurrect into a new life. The belief system is somewhat common with the eastern or Asian belief system. For example in Hinduism, there is striking similarity with Egyptian belief system. Hindus believe that after death the soul has to pass the judgment of *Yama* the god of death before they can achieve heavenly abode.

As we know that in India snakes have been rewarded though not god-like but somewhat of a semi-god deity. These deities are commonly known as *Nagas*. These snake deities of India are oftenly associated with the Indian version of netherworld, *patala*. In Egyptian mythology like the other cultures of the world we find many snake entities or deities. These deities can be both benevolent and wrathful.

In Egyptian mythology we find the mention of *Apep*. Described as a snake the creature shares similar features like the Vedic *Vrtra*. *Apep* is mainly foe with the sun-god Ra. Much like the *Vrtra Apep* also disrupts the cosmic affairs. And in order to stop him sun-god Ra slays him and release the world from the darkness. Tittles like *serpent of the dark* have been given to *Apep*. Though *Apep* is considered invincible. The immortal snake emerges again and the battle with the sun-god continues. The battle can also be seen as a representation of the victory of light over darkness. Which might be a way of explaining for the ancient Egyptians the reason behind each occurring of day and night.

Apart from the demonic deity *Apep*, snakes have been positioned also in a very high position. Wadjet is an ancient snake deity of Egyptian mythology. The goddess was considered as the protector of the Lower Egypt. The distinguishing feature from which a pharaoh can be distinguished was by wearing a uraeus over their head. Uraeus is a small decoration that is often seen on the head of a pharaoh. The uraeus is depicted by the placing an image of cobra encircling over the pharaoh's crown.

The ancient Mesopotamian and the Sumerian civilization had a very rich history of snake worship. In the belief of ancient Mesopotamian snake was considered as an immortal creature. Civilizations of Mesopotamia and Sumeria have considered snakes as immortal or at least considered snake as an representation of immortality because of its ability to shed its worn out skin and emerge as a new one. The epic of Gilgamesh states that on a quest for attaining immortality Gilgamesh found a herb, possessing power to resurrect the dead, but later on the herb was stolen by a snake. Preventing the King to have his hand on the nectar. Similar stories of having snake connection with nectar has also been found in the Brahminical and Buddhist Literature also. The stealing of *Soma* by Garuda relates some kind of connection between the *naga* and shows their kinder towards nectar. *Naga* or snake people have also been mentioned in the Buddhist texts. A Buddhist tale mentions a similar incident where Buddha was offered a bowl of *payas* or sweet rice by Supriya, a naga maiden. And later the bowl was acquired by Indra. Some scholars point out that the bowl from which Buddha had partaken food was considered a great kind of holy object.

By the literary, pictorial and archaeological evidences about Indian Culture we know that snakes were an integral part of Indian beliefs and faith. In the present day we find the depiction of snakes in art and decoration. Many states have their own version of snake-deity. In Assam and Bengal a snake-goddess *Manasa* is worshipped and festivals relating to the goddess are celebrated. But the earliest archaeological evidences about the snake cult in India can be traced back to the days of Indus Civilization. Snakes were painted and depicted earliest in the seals and pottery of Indus Valley Civilization. Though we find various kinds of animals depicted in the Harappan Art the depiction of snake is very few compared to the number. In Indian religious practice snake or to be more specific the cobra and the python have been worshipped throughout the ages. It is not uncommon to any observer the display of snake in art and architecture of India. *The Stupa of Bharut* is one such example of the statement. Besides, numerous other temples were constructed entirely dedicated to the worship of snake deities. In India, the snake deities are generally known as Naga. Naga is a Sanskrit word which generally denotes a mythical serpentine creature often associated with enormous power and position. Shortly speaking the earliest literature like the Vedas provide a hint that the antagonism between the devas and the Dasyus, wherein dasyus were associated with snake in their physical explanation in the Vedas. The struggle between the parties was understood in many ways. In the primary understanding, we can imagine a picture of two clans containing different belief systems. In the later development of the literatures, specifically in the post-rig vedic era the Nagas achieved a position of a semi-divine being. Puranas have described them as possessors of wealth. In the Puranas, Nagas were a kind of being similar to Yakshas, Gandharvas and Kinnaras. They possess wealth in great abundance and live in magnificent cities. In the first and the fifth canto of the Srimad Bhagavatam, we find mention of the Naga cities. The translation and the shlokas have been mentioned below:

*As Bhogavatī, the capital of Nāgaloka, is protected by the Nāgas, so was Dvārakā protected by the descendants of Vṛṣṇi — Bhoja, Madhu, Daśārha, Arha, Kukura, Andhaka, etc. — who were as strong as Lord Kṛṣṇa. S.B 1.11.11*

*Beneath Rasātala is another planetary system, known as Pātāla or Nāgaloka, where there are many demoniac serpents, the masters of Nāgaloka, such as Śaṅkha, Kulika, Mahāśaṅkha, Śveta, Dhanañjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Śaṅkhacūḍa, Kambala, Aśvatara and Devadatta. The chief among them is Vāsuki. They are all extremely angry, and they have many, many hoods — some snakes five hoods, some seven, some ten, others a hundred and others a thousand. These hoods are bedecked with valuable gems, and the light emanating from the gems illuminates the entire planetary system of bila-svarga.*

### **S.b 5.24.31**

Nagas are the beings of netherland. According to Puranas such as Padma Purana, Vishnu Purana and Bhagavad Purana, the creation as a whole is divided into seven parts. Whereas Nagas rule of the lowest part known as *Patala*. We know from the Purana's reference the city they lived in is known as Bhogavati. Their cities has been described as second heaven. It has been mentioned in the shlokas that powerful Naga kings rule over the *Patala*.

Among the literatures of the ancient religions, Vedas has undoubtedly been the earliest. Apart from the vedic description of the snake the *Grihyasutras* mention various kind of worship procedures to appease the snake and same was for its reverence. Scholars have assumed that the snake was worship by en around the world just to avoid the wrath of the creature.

### **Conclusion:**

Snake Worship is an old sort of religious activity in India, dating back thousands of years. Within Hinduism, there is a contradiction between the terms "Sarpa" and "Naga," and each of these words has a distinct meaning. This discrepancy can be seen in the previous chapters that we studied. Individuals with a single hood are referred to as Sarpis, while Nagas are those who have several hoods (i.e. the many hooded). Serpents are also referred to as Nagas in certain cultures. According to another explanation, the terms "Serpent or Naga" had their origins in mythological forms, with the term "Snake" being used to refer to common reptilian species. However, Buddhism has adopted these terms as synonyms, and also provides a description of their hoods, stating that the Nagarajas (male Naga) all have three or more hoods, and the Nagins (female Naga) all have a single hood. Generally speaking, the word Naga is used to allude to either "Snake God" or "Serpent God" in both faiths. The Sanskrit term Naga may refer to either a "Snake" or a "Elephant," and it is believed to have been derived from the word Naga, which can refer to both a "Mountain" and a "Tree" in English.

The Brahminicalgod Naga has served as a significant source of inspiration for writers and artists working in Indian literature and art. For example, we can see from the literary depiction that the early literature of Hinduism characterised snakes as unfriendly and dark creatures, which is consistent with the modern interpretation. The tale of the Vrtra, which describes him as an adversary of natural sustainability due to his encasement in water, certainly depicts him as such. Nagas, on the other hand, were revered in Hinduism's later works for their ability to kill and were so respected. As a result, a significant amount of the Later Vedas is devoted to the use of mantras and charms to fend off evil and placate the snake. Various additional antidote-type mantras were also created throughout the development of the later vedic books.

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