



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

London, 1868

India

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112)

two histories, and from that time forward the Mahawanso teems with Naga legends; they seem, however, all to refer to the continent of India rather than Ceylon, and will be alluded to when necessary hereafter. The conversion of the island seems to have been complete in the time of Asoka, B.C. 250,* and as the earliest of the scriptures we have were not reduced to writing in their present form before the fifth century after Christ, we must not expect from Buddhist authorities any admission of a faith adverse to Buddhism existing in the island at that date.

This, however, is just one of those cases in which the monuments are so useful to supplement the "litera scripta." If they were examined we should see how far the conversion was radical, and to what extent the people still adhered to their old faith. My impression is, that after more than 2000 years, their conversion is still far from being complete. Whenever any competent person will look below the surface, I am very much mistaken if the old Serpent Worship is not found still practised by the aboriginal races in all remote parts of the island; but it is useless speculating when real information can be so easily obtained.

Whatever may be the result of the investigation into the Serpent Worship of Ceylon, there is no doubt whatever about the prevalence and importance of Tree Worship in that island. The legend of the planting of the Rājāyatana Tree by Buddha has already been alluded to, but the history of the transference of a branch of the Bo Tree from Buddh-gyā to Anurādhapura is as authentic and as important as any event recorded in the Ceylonese annals. Sent by Aśoka (250 B.C.) it was received with the utmost reverence by Devanampiyatisso, and planted in a most conspicuous spot in the centre of his capital.† There it has been revered as the chief and most important "numen" of Ceylon for more than 2000 years, and it, or its lineal descendant sprung at least from the old root, is there worshipped at this hour. The city is in ruins; its great dagobas have fallen to decay; its monasteries have disappeared; but the great Bo Tree still flourishes according to the legend, "Ever green, never growing or decreasing, but living on for ever for the delight and worship of mankind." Annually thousands repair to the sacred precincts within which it stands to do it honour, and to offer up those prayers for health and prosperity which are more likely to be answered if uttered in its presence. There is probably no older idol in the world, certainly none more venerated.‡

INDIA.

In every essential respect the religious history of India is extremely similar to that of Persia, but with one curious accidental difference, which influenced to a considerable extent their outward aspect and ultimate fate. From the accession of the Achæmenidæ till the old religions were practically swept away by the Mahomedan invasion, all the countries of Central Asia were united under one sceptre, and subject

* Throughout this work the year 250, as a date easily remembered, is assumed as that of Asoka. It is probable that the true date of his accession is 270, and as he reigned 35 years, his death took place in 235 B.C.; 250 B.C. is therefore a fair mean, and has the merit of involving no hypothesis as to the chronology of the period.

† Mahawanso, chap. xviii.

‡ Sir Emerson Tennent, Col. Forbes Leslie, Chapman, and indeed everyone who has written about Ceylon, mention the fact. The drawings of it also are numerous.

to one code of laws. The consequence is, that the Turanian, the Semitic, and the Aryan races, which successively occupied those countries known as Persia in its widest sense, all became more or less amalgamated into a homogeneous people, and their religions were also fused into one great whole. The Aryan religion of Ormuzd was united in bonds of most unholy matrimony with the Turanian form of Ahriman, and the Magian religion acted as a flux to unite the two, at least to such an extent as probably to defy all the efforts of modern analysis to separate them again into their original elements.

The case of India was widely different. No native tradition represents India as ever united under one rule. When the Greeks visited it they found it divided into 122 different nations,* and the number probably was never less, it may have been more, till towards the end of the seventeenth century, when the Moguls under Aurangzebe nearly succeeded in rendering their sway paramount in India; but just as the house of cards was about to be completed, it fell to pieces from the inherent want of cohesion in the parts.

This circumstance renders the history of the religions of India very much more perplexed and more difficult to follow; but once the subject is mastered the Indian form becomes not only more instructive, but also very much more interesting to the student of comparative mythology.

No Semitic element apparently ever existed among the populations of India, but from the earliest historical times we find two well defined and perfectly distinct races. One, the Aryan, or Sanskrit-speaking race, who entered India, it is generally supposed, across the Upper Indus, and eventually spread themselves throughout the whole of the valley of the Ganges, and the countries between the Vindhya and the Himalaya mountains. The other a Turanian race, known as the Dravidians, and speaking Tamul, or languages closely allied to it, entered India probably earlier than the Aryans, but across the Lower Indus, and now occupy the whole of the southern part of the peninsula nearly up to the Vindhya mountains.†

There seems to be no difference of opinion among Indian ethnologists with regard to these two great divisions of the people, but it is not quite so clear whether there was not a third occupying the countries north of the Vindhya and between them and the Himalayas, of which they were dispossessed by the Aryans. The language of the superior race has so completely taken possession of every department of literature at the earliest period to which our knowledge extends, that we have no written record of the existence of this aboriginal people; and the blood of all has in modern times been so mixed by migration and colonization, that it seems impossible to dig back to the roots through the jumble of languages and races that now exists in the valley.

The mode in which the question presents itself as bearing on the present inquiry is this:—It may safely be asserted that no Aryan race, while existing in anything like purity, was ever converted to Buddhism, or could permanently adopt its doctrines. If we take, for instance, the three leading features of that faith, atheism, metempsychosis,

* Arrian, *India*, VII.

† *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian family of Languages*, by the Rev. R. Caldwell, B.A. London, 1856.
(4799.)

and absence of caste, they are essentially Turanian, and found everywhere among people of that race, but are distinctly opposed to the feelings of the Aryans wherever they are found. It is quite true that the Indian Aryans may, during their 2,000 years residence, have become so mixed with the native tribes, and so impure, that some of their families may have temporarily adopted the new faith. Even this, however, seems hardly probable, when we consider how they cling at the present day to their old sacred books, and how many germs of the old faith still survive even in the filth and corruption of doctrine in which they are now immersed.

On the other hand, it does not appear that the Dravidian races ever were essentially, or to any great extent, serpent worshippers, or ever were converted to Buddhism. It may be too bold a generalization, in the present state of our knowledge, to assert that no race ever permanently adopted Buddhism who had not previously been serpent worshippers—but, if not quite true, it is nearly so; and though Serpent Worship can be detected south of the Kistnah, it is not, nor does it ever appear to have been, the national faith. In like manner, though there were Buddhists in Drávida-deśa, there are no traces of Buddhist buildings or establishments now to be found south of Amravati.

If this should eventually prove to be the correct view of the case, it becomes necessary to assume the existence in the valley of the Ganges of a people differing from Dravidians and more closely allied to the Thibetans, the Burmese, and other Indo-Chinese races. Some kind of Buddhism probably existed beyond the Himalayas before Śákya-muni's time. It still flourishes there, and seems indelible in all these lands. In India it did attain great prevalence and power during a thousand years, but it does not seem to have existed before the time of Śákya-muni; and it is now so completely washed out, that there probably does not exist a single Buddhist, certainly not a Buddhist establishment, between the Himalayas and Cape Cormorin.*

Assuming this view of the matter to be correct, we shall of course look in vain, in the Vedas or any of the earlier writings in Sanskrit, for any trace of Serpent Worship. Not only was it repugnant to their own feelings, but they so utterly despised the Dasyus—or by whatever other name they chose to designate the aborigines—that they would not even condescend to notice their superstitions.†

The traditions from which the Rámáyana was compiled also represent a state of Aryan society so comparatively pure, that, except in cases above alluded to (p. 55), there is probably no mention of Nagas there. But the heroes of the Mahábhárata were much less pure a race. Their origin, their polyandry, and other peculiarities, all point to the Himalayas; and from this work, consequently, we may expect some light on Serpent Worship. The poem, however, was compiled—in its present form at least—by Brahmans long after the events it describes; and although many ancient fragments are enusted in its more modern form, little even of its narrative can be accepted as true history.

* In a recent statistical report on the population of Bombay, I see "Boodists" enumerated among the sects. Who are they?

† M. Vivien de St. Martin, in his "Géographie du Veda," pp. 103—4, states that the Aryans ascribed to the Dasyus the power of controlling the elements, and of granting or withholding rain at their pleasure. If this were so, it was not to the people themselves, but to their Serpent God, that this power should have been ascribed by the writers of the hymns of the Vedas. I confess, however, that my reading of the work in Wilson's translation does not bear out this attribution.