



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

London, 1868

Mahâbhârata

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

MAHĀBHĀRATA.

One of the most remarkable coincidences connected with the subject of Serpent Worship arises from the fact that this great epic poem, which may practically be considered as one of the books of the Hindu Bible, opens, like the Pentateuch, with a curse on the Serpent. What is even more curious is that in both instances the same "equivocal" as to the name exists: read carelessly or in a translation, the curse in the Mahābhārata is on the reptile, not on its worshippers, just as happens in the Bible, where, however, the conciseness of the narrative does not enable us to rectify the meaning from the context. In the Hindu epic, however, the story of the great sacrifice for the destruction of the Serpents is so mixed up with historical and human action that it is evident at once that the ambiguity* about the name is only seized upon by the Hindu poets as an excuse for introducing the supernatural into an ordinary human transaction, and to enable them to give rein to that exuberance of fancy which is the curse of their poetic effusions. It is not of course to be expected that anything like real history can ever be elaborated out of such a mass of fables, but if any competent Sanskrit scholars were to apply themselves to the task, they might at least recover as reasonable a narrative as it is now possible to frame out of such materials as are available for the history of Greece before the fall of Troy.

Passing over the first canto, which is a general introduction to the whole poem, the next three (ślokas 657 to 2197), are wholly occupied by the affairs of the Naga race, commencing with the marriage of the two sisters Kadrū and Vinatā with the Rishi Kasyapa, and the strange desires of the two with regard to their progeny. These led to Kadrū, the eldest, being the mother of 1,000 Nagas, who were the progenitors of the whole serpent race. The names of her principal descendants are then given,† some of which have already been quoted, others will frequently be referred to in the sequel; such, for instance, as Śesha, Vāsouki, Airāvata, Takshaka, Karkotaka, Kāliya, Aila or Elāpatra, Nīla and Anīla, Nahusha, and others. Her sister, on the other hand, became the mother of Garuḍa, who, in consequence of the trick played by Kadrū on her sister, became the all-powerful enemy of the Naga race, and hence also the mother's curse, from which such fatal consequences flowed.

When divested, however, of its poetic garb, and all its mythological rubbish, the story of the Mahābhārata, in so far at least as Serpent Worship is concerned, does not seem difficult to understand, and may be succinctly narrated.

The Lunar race, to which the heroes of the great war belonged, were a second great horde of the Aryan race, who seem to have entered India across the Upper Indus at least 1,000 years after the purer so-called Solar race. The first seat to which we can trace them back seems to be Takt-i-Bahai, north of Peshawar.‡ Thence, passing

* In the Ādi Parva the word used for serpent is almost invariably "Nāga." In the Vana Parva, where Bhīma gets into trouble with Nahusha in the form of a real serpent or boa, it is as usually "Sarpa."

† Ādi Parva 1551, et seq.

‡ Bellew, Report on the Yusufzais, p. 136. Some very curious sculptures have recently been discovered at this place, but they are all long subsequent to the age of Bhārata, and betray a Bactrian; or at least a Western influence, which give them a character very different from anything found in India. They are all Buddhist; but with a strong infusion of Græco-Bactrian feeling.

through the Punjáb, we find them settled at Hâstinapura, between the Jumna and Ganges, about the thirteenth century B.C., when the real action of the poem commences.

The first transaction in which the Nagas appear, is the burning of the forest of Khândava.* Simply, it seems, that when the family at Hâstinapura became too numerous, it was determined to found a second capital, and for this purpose the spot where Delhi now stands was cleared by burning the forest which then occupied its site, and dislodging the Nagas who occupied the spot. The Nagas were protected by the Buddhist deity Indra. But, attacked by the Vedic god Agni, the Brahman poet represents them as all perishing except their king Takshaka.

Subsequent to this the relations between the Pândus and the Nagas seem to have been of the most friendly description. Arjuna, in his first banishment, marries first Ulûpi,† the daughter of a Naga king at the foot of the Himalayas, near Hurdwar; and shortly afterwards he formed a still more important connexion, by marrying Chitrângadâ, daughter of Chitravâhana, the Naga king of Manipur, by whom he had a son, Bhabra-vâhana, who played so strange a part in a subsequent episode, when his father, in the performance of the Aśwamedha, or horse sacrifice, again visited Manipur.‡ From these and other minor particulars it would seem that the author of the Mahâbhârata wished to represent the Aryans of that day as cultivating friendly relations with the aborigines. The real quarrel took place some time after the great war was ended, and in this manner:—Parîkshit, the grandson of Arjuna, had succeeded to the throne; and one day, while hunting in the forest, incensed at the contumacious silence of a hermit,§ insulted him by hanging the dead body of a snake round his neck. His son and disciple cursed the king for the insult to his father, and invoked the aid of Takshaka, the king of serpents, to avenge it. The consequence was, that on the eighth day from that time Parîkshit was bitten|| by Takshaka, who is always represented as king of Takshaśilâ.¶ It was to avenge this assassination of his father, that Janamejaya undertook the great sacrifice for the destruction of the Nagas.** Thousands—myriads—had already perished, when the slaughter was stayed at the intervention of Astîka, a Brahman, though at the same time the nephew of Vâsuki, the serpent king of the eastern Nagas.†† It is probable the remnant either, like Astîka, became converts, or at least promised submission to the dominion of the Aryans. We consequently hear no more of them for three or four centuries, till at last, about the year 691 B.C., we find a Naga dynasty on the throne of Magadhâ;‡‡ and it was under Ajâtaśatru, the sixth king of this race, in the year 623, that Buddha was born, and the great regeneration of the subject races was inaugurated.

* Âdi Parva, Fauche's translation, 8050, et seq.

† Loc. 7788.

‡ Wheeler's History of India, vol. I, p. 404. Professor Goldstûcker informs me that the version of the Aśwamedha adopted by Mr. Wheeler is not really a part of the original Mahâbhârata, but the facts are the same in both versions. (See Westminster Review, April 1868.)

§ Âdi Parva, 1696, et seq.

|| Idem, 1801.

¶ Idem, 678, 830, et seq.

** Idem, 2073, et seq.

†† Idem, 1025, et seq.

‡‡ Wilson's Vishnu Purâna, p. 467. Lassen's Ind. Alt. I. (2d ed.) App. p. xxxviii. et seq.

If we knew more of the local ethnology of India, all this narrative might probably be authenticated to an extent which it is now impossible to attempt. It is curious to observe that in Manipur, the scene of Arjuna's marriage with Chitrāngadā, and his slaughter by her son, that at the present day the peculiar god of the Royal family is a species of snake, called Pa-kung-ba, from which the family claims descent. When it appears, it is coaxed on to a cushion by the priestess in attendance, who then performs certain ceremonies to please it. This snake appears sometimes, they say, of great size; when he does so, it is indicative of his being displeased with something. So long as he remains of a diminutive form, it is a sign he is in good humour.*

In the immediate neighbourhood of Manipur there are numerous tribes of aboriginal people, still called Nagas. From their name and locality it might be supposed they must be serpent worshippers; but no one has yet observed that form of faith among them. The subject must, therefore, be remitted for further inquiries.

The locality of Janamejaya's sacrifice is said in the Mahābhārata to have been the Kurukshetra, the famous battle-field of the Pāṇḍus and Kurus, north-west of Delhi, but another and more probable site is still pointed out at Agrahaut, in Orissa.† There, within the precincts of a very old and remote, but now ruined, temple, may be seen numerous small models of temples, said to have been there placed by Janamejaya, to represent those princes who could not be present on the occasion. They are probably not so old; but it is strange to find the traditions of the Mahābhārata still clinging to these spots, and Serpent Worship still prevailing there. At least, not far from this—at Sumbulpore—in 1766, Mr. Motte and another‡ went to visit a great snake that had been worshipped there since the world began! They saw him emerge from his cave, which he does every seventh day,§ and accept the offering of a goat which his worshippers had provided. After devouring it, he took a bath in a canal that surrounded his dwelling place; and from the mark he left in the mud at the edge, Mr. Motte estimated his diameter to have been about two feet. He does not even guess his length, but it must have been considerable. When Major Kittoe visited Sumbulpore in 1836 he was still alive,|| and probably is so still; and I have no doubt but that numerous other deities of the same sort could easily be found if only looked for; but attention has never hitherto been directed to the subject.

RISE OF BUDDHISM.

As has been frequently suggested in other works,¶ the great characteristic of the ancient as well as of the modern history of India is the constant recurrence of one typical phenomenon which controlled the destiny of the nation in all ages to which our knowledge extends. From the earliest dawn of tradition to the present

* Account of the Valley of Munipur, by Major Maculloch: Records of Government of India, No. XXVII. 1859.

† Asiatic Researches, XV. 257.

‡ Asiatic Register, vol. I. p. 82.

§ Vide ante, note, p. 51. Is it possible that the

period of creation in Genesis being limited to seven days is a part of the primeval Ophite faith?

|| J. A. S. B. vol. VIII. p. 478.

¶ History of Architecture, by the Author, vol. II., p. 446, et seqq. &c.