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Tree and serpent worship

Fergusson, James

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Modern Worship Of Trees And Serpents In India

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possibly be applied with advantage. It is sufficiently vague, but perhaps it would be wiser to wait for more definite knowledge before applying any terms.*

The subject is only mentioned here because it will recur again and again in the following pages, and unless these generalizations are borne in mind, the sequel will hardly be intelligible. The sculptures at Sanchi and Amravati may not suffice to settle these questions, but if I am not mistaken they throw as much or more light upon them than any other documents that have yet been brought to light.

MODERN WORSHIP OF TREES AND SERPENTS IN INDIA.

Few probably have read the preceding pages without it occurring to them to ask the question, Does Serpent Worship exist in India at the present day, and if so, to what extent? If the inquiry were addressed to even our best-informed Indian authorities, the reply would probably be negative. We have actually possessed India now for more than a century. The Asiatic Society was established in 1784. Since then, with the branch societies in Madras and Bombay, and the Asiatic Societies of England, France, and Germany, some hundreds of volumes have been published, containing some thousands of papers. As not one of these is devoted to Serpent Worship, or even describes it as existing, it may well be argued that it cannot possibly now be found there.

To this line of argument the answer is plain. None of these thousand and one papers are devoted to the ancient worship of the Serpent, nor do any of them contain anything beyond the haziest allusions to the Naga or his previous influence. Yet, if I mistake not, before this work is concluded, it will appear that the Serpent did play an important part in the mythology of India, and that his worship not only prevailed, but considerably influenced forms of faith where we would least suspect his presence.

The truth of the matter seems to be that attention has not hitherto been specially directed to the subject, and till this is the case, the most obvious evidences might be passed by without being noticed.

As an instance of this, I may perhaps be allowed to quote against myself what occurred at Ajanta. I spent a considerable time in exploring these caves, but my mind was full of architecture. I measured everything, drew every detail, and familiarized myself with every architectural affinity. But neither then nor subsequently† did I note the presence of any Nagas. Now that my attention is turned to it, I find in drawings and photographs twelve or fifteen sculptured representations of the seven-headed Naga, and there may be many more. I now also recollect seeing Nagas in all the Jaina temples at Abu, at Sadree, and elsewhere, but I then passed them over. Now I cannot take up a photograph of any temple belonging to the group of religions which include the Buddhist, Jaina, or Vaishṇava faiths, without seeing snakes everywhere, but in places where neither I nor anyone else detected them before.

* It would take a volume to discuss, and an unlimited number of references to establish these conclusions. At present I will only refer to two inscriptions; that at Buddh Gyā, *Asiatic Researches*, vol. I. p. 284, and that of Belgola, vol. XVII. p. 270.

† I have twice published on the subject of these caves; first, on the Rock-cut temples of India, folio, 1845, and subsequently, a volume on the same subject in 1864, illustrated by photographs by Major Gill.

The same I believe to be the case with the living worship. In Forbes' Oriental Memoirs,* in Bishop Heber's Travels, and in fifty other places, allusions are made to the feelings of respect and reverence paid by the natives of India to snakes, and no one can reside long in the country without perceiving it; yet, except in Miss Frere's charming little volume, entitled "Old Deccan Days," I hardly know a book in which snakes, and especially seven-headed snakes,† play an important part, or which reflects the feelings of the natives regarding them. The stories of serpents there related are only an accidental selection out of thousands of similar legends, all which might easily be localized or traced to their source, and many of which will no doubt be investigated so soon as attention is really directed to the subject.‡

Two instances of Serpent Worship, at Munnipore and Sumbulpore, have already been mentioned (page 61). Two others are still more remarkable. In the great temple at Madura the three principal images in the Tosak Khâna are a golden (?) image of Hanumân, another of Garuḍa, the Vâhana of Vishṇu, but the terrible enemy of the snakes. Between these two stands an image of the seven-headed Naga, richly jewelled, and under a splendid canopy. In the great temple at Seringham, likewise, the principal images are two golden statues of the seven-headed Naga, larger apparently than that at Madura, and even more richly jewelled;§ and I have no doubt that many other such might be found, but they have not yet been looked for.

In the meanwhile the following two paragraphs, introduced incidentally in two works published in London during the present season, may serve to indicate the class of illustrations which will no doubt be found everywhere when looked for. "At the Nág Kûán or Serpent Well, in the city of Benares," says Mr. Sherring, "the Nág or Serpent is worshipped. In a niche in the wall of one of the stairs is a figure representing three Serpents (query, a three-headed Serpent), and on the floor is an emblem of Mahâdeva in stone, and a snake crawling up it. The well

* Vol. II. pp. 329, 384, &c.

† In the narrator's narrative (p. xxvii.), the following singularly naive and interesting passage occurs:—"All the cobras in my grandmother's stories were seven-headed. This puzzled us children, and we would say to her, 'Granny, are there any seven-headed cobras now, for all the cobras we see that the conjurers bring round have only one head each.' To which she used to answer, 'No, of course there are no seven-headed cobras now. That world is gone, but you see each cobra has a hood of skin, that is the remains of another head.' Although we often looked for seven-headed cobras we never could find any of them." Had they not been converted to Christianity they might have believed in them, even if they had not seen them.

‡ No one at all familiar with the subject, who reads these tales, can fail to be struck with the similarity that exists between them and many of those collected by the brothers Grimm and others from German and Scandinavian sources, and also with some of the more ancient Grecian myths. The usual mode of accounting for this identity, which can hardly be accidental, is to assume that the tales were originally invented by Aryan nurses beside the cradles of the race in Balkh and Bokhara, and that they were carried east and west by their Alumni when they set out on their travels some 4,000 or 5,000 years ago. The results of my reading have led me to conclusions widely different from this fashionable hypothesis. My belief is that all the serpents and dragons, all the dwarfs and magicians of these tales, all the fairy mythology, in fact, of the east and west, belongs to the Turanian races. These, as I have frequently had occasion to mention, underlie the Aryan races everywhere in Europe as in Asia, and occasionally crop up here and there through the upper crust, often when least expected. So far as I understand the idiosyncrasy of the two races, nothing can be more antagonistic to the tastes and feelings of the Aryans than these wild imaginings; while few things, on the contrary, could be more congenial to the comparatively infantile intellect of the Turanian race.

§ Both these groups were photographed by Captain Tripe, and published by him for Government with other views of the temples in which they are found. I had hoped to have obtained more information regarding them before publishing, but have been unsuccessful.

“ is visited for religious purposes only once a year, namely, on the 24th and 25th days of the month of Sáwan, when immense numbers of persons come to it from all parts of the city. The women come on the first day, the men on the second; they offer sacrifices both to the well and to Nágeswar, or the Serpent God.”*

The other relates to Tree Worship. “ In Beerbhoom once a year the whole capital repairs to a shrine in the jungle, and makes simple offerings to a ghost who dwells in a Bela Tree.” “ The shrine consists of three trees—a Bela Tree on the left, in which the ghost resides, and which is marked at the foot with blood; in the middle is a Kachmula Tree; and on the right a Saura Tree.” “ In spite of the trees being at the most 70 years old, the common people claim the greatest antiquity for the shrine, and tradition says that the three trees that now mark the spot neither grow thicker nor increase in height, but remain the same for ever.”†

There is no doubt whatever with regard to the worship of Trees in modern times, and numerous instances might be adduced if necessary. The Bo Tree at Buddh Gyá is worshipped now as it was in the days of Aśoka,‡ and the Tree at Anurádhapura is, as mentioned above, the principal object of worship in Ceylon at the present day. And all over India there are numerous examples which we may hope some day to see registered.§

Since this work was commenced I have made every effort to obtain from India information regarding the present existence of Serpent Worship, but though not so successful as I could have wished, I have been able to obtain several documents on the subject of considerable interest. One of these is by Dr. C. E. Balfour, of Secunderabad, whose long study of native manners and customs especially qualify him to speak on the subject. The other is from Colonel Meadows Taylor, so well known for his various literary works connected with India, and who likewise is especially competent, by long residence and intimate knowledge of the natives, to speak regarding their forms of worship. Both these documents, with several others of more or less importance, will be found printed in the Appendix. They are satisfactory as far as they go; but we shall never know exactly what we are to believe regarding the present position of Serpent Worship, till some qualified persons make a special study of it on the spot.

From these documents, as well as from such information as I have been able to gather from other sources that were available, my impression is that successive immigrations of non-worshipping races have nearly obliterated the religion of the Serpent from the valleys of the Ganges and Indus. I believe it still exists in Cashmere

* The Sacred City of the Hindus, by the Rev. M. A. Sherring. London, 1868, p. 89.

† Annals of Rural Bengal, by W. W. Hunter, B.C.S. London, 1868, p. 131.

‡ Buchanan Hamilton, in Martin's Eastern India, I. p. 76.

§ The following instance of Tree Worship which I myself witnessed is amusing, even if not instructive. While residing in Jessore I observed at one time considerable crowds passing near the factory I then had charge of. As it might be merely an ordinary fair they were going to attend, I took no notice; but as the crowd grew daily larger, and assumed a more religious character, I inquired, and was told that a God had appeared in a Tree at a place about six miles off.

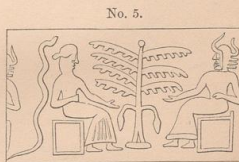
Next morning I rode over, and found a large space cleared in a village I knew well, in the centre of which stood an old decayed Date tree, hung with garlands and offerings. Around it houses were erected for the attendant Brahmins, and a great deal of business was going on in offerings and Pôjá. On my inquiring how the God manifested

and Nepaul, and in the hills generally, but not in the plains. Though I have no proof of it, I cannot help suspecting its existence also in the hills north of Sylhet. I feel nearly certain it will be found throughout the valleys of the Nerbudda and Tapti, and among the hill tribes perhaps as far East as Burdwan. It probably is also more or less prevalent all along the western Ghauts down as far as Travancore, and sporadically over the whole of the Madras Presidency. Its existence in any particular spot now must not be taken as a proof either of its presence or absence at an earlier period. Its presence may show either that a Serpent-worshipping tribe have not been disturbed or may have migrated to that spot, and its absence may equally be taken to prove either that it never existed there, or that it has been obliterated by other forms. All this will require much care and study before it can be satisfactorily mapped out; but the subject is one of great interest, as bearing on one of the oldest forms of faith that the world knows, and would amply repay any pains that might be bestowed on its investigation.

NOTE.

The annexed woodcut—which ought to have been inserted on page 42—is interesting, not only as showing the Tree and Serpent in juxtaposition, and honoured on a Babylonian cylinder, but because the Tree is of a form with which we are familiar* on the earliest types of Indian coinage, as will be explained hereafter.

The cylinder from which the representation is taken is in the collection of Mr. Steuart, and is engraved in Lajard's *Culte de Mithra*, Plate VI., Fig. 4., but without any indication by which its age could be determined. My impression is, that many of these cylinders, and this among the number, are more modern than is generally supposed, and may come down to Achæmenian times. In itself this representation is perhaps not of much importance, but it may be well to quote it, in order that those who are familiar with similar objects may turn their attention to them as sources from which information may be obtained regarding Tree or Serpent Worship. This is certainly not a solitary example.



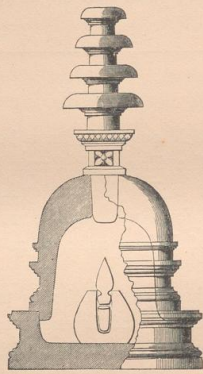
CYLINDER, WITH TREE AND SERPENT.
From Lajard.

his presence, I was informed that soon after the sun rose in the morning the Tree raised its head to welcome him, and bowed it down again when he departed. As this was a miracle easily tested, I returned at noon and found it was so!

After a little study and investigation, the mystery did not seem difficult of explanation. The Tree had originally grown across the principal pathway through the village, but at last hung so low, that in order to enable people to pass under it, it had been turned aside and fastened parallel to the road. In the operation the bundle of fibres which composed the root had become twisted like the strands of a rope. When the morning sun struck on the upper surface of these, they contracted in drying, and hence a tendency to untwist, which raised the head of the Tree. With the evening dews they relaxed, and the head of the Tree declined, thus proving to the man of science, as to the credulous Hindu, that it was due to the direct action of the Sun God.

* J. A. S. B., vol. VII., Plate XXXII.

No. 6.



RELIC CASKET, FROM MANIKYALA,
In the possession of General Cunningham.
No. 6.