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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Appendix D. - Memoranda On Modern Snake Worship In India

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## APPENDIX D.

THE Hindu races worship three classes of deities,—the Grāma devatā, or village god; the Kula devatā, or household god; and the Ishta devatā, the personal or patron god.

Snake Worship is general throughout peninsular India, both of the sculptured form and of the living creature. The sculpture is invariably of the form of the Nag or Cobra, and almost every hamlet has its Serpent deity. Sometimes this is a single snake, the hood of the Cobra being spread open. Occasionally the sculptured figures are nine in number, and this form is called the "Nao nag," and is intended to represent a parent snake and eight of its young, but the prevailing form is that of two snakes twining in the manner of the Esculapian rod.

Some Hindus hold that the living snake is not worshipped as a devatā by any Hindu sect, but is revered in commemoration of some ancient event. If this be correct, it has, perhaps, relation to some astronomical occurrence. Others, however, maintain that it is as a devatā that it is worshipped; but whatever be the origin of the adoration, the living snake is worshipped everywhere throughout Southern India. On these occasions the worshippers resort to the snake's residence, called in Urdu the سانپ کی ہوت Sāmp kī hūt, which they ornament with streaks of vermilion and daubs of turmeric, and of wheat flour, and they hang garlands of flowers near, strung on white cotton thread, and laid over wooden frames. Also, in the ninth Sravan, which occurs in the rainy season, the "Nāg panchamī" festival occurs, on which Hindus go in search of snakes, or have them brought to their houses by the "Sanpeli," the snake charmers who snare them. The snakes are then worshipped, and offerings are made to them of milk, and in nearly every house figures of snakes, drawn on paper, are fixed on the walls and worshipped. Those who visit the snakes' hūts, plant sticks around the hole, and wind white cotton thread around and over the sticks. The Mahratta women go, a number together, to the snakes' hūt, and, joining hands, circle five times round and round it, singing songs, and then prostrate themselves. They pour milk into the hole (they ought to give it to the snake). They hang festoons of Chernhela flowers and cucumber fruit, and sprinkle a mixture of sugar and flour (Sakr Suji).

On the 25th January 1868 I halted in the temple of the Grāma devatā of Assaye, where Sir A. Wellesley defeated the Bhonslah. I there saw Hanuman with a lingam, and Basava, the bull, and the tulsi plant, and on the western wall of the temple was a cobra snake, drawn in white, which the worshippers said was travelling to Ceylon or Lankā. They laughed when I said he would be long on his journey.

In Southern India the deity under whose name the snake is worshipped is Subrāmānī, whose shrine is said to be in the western part of Mysore, and the image there is described as a shapeless lump of earth.

I have only once seen living snakes in the form of the Esculapian rod. It was at Ahmednuggur, in 1841, in a clear moonlight night. They dropped into the garden from over the thatched roof of my house, and stood erect. They were all cobras, and no one could have seen them without at once recognizing that they were in congress. Captain Havelock, to whom I showed these remarks, mentioned in reply that he once, in broad daylight, in the jungles, saw pythons, just as I have sketched them,\* in the singular form of the Esculapian rod, but many natives mention having seen this sight. Natives of India believe that it is most fortunate to witness snakes so engaged, and they believe that if they can throw a cloth at the pair to touch them with it, the cloth becomes a representative form of Lakshmi of the highest virtue, and is taken home to their houses and preserved as such.

\* A sketch of the serpents in this attitude accompanied the letter, but not sufficiently perfect to enable a woodcut to be made from it.—J. F.

No Hindu, ordinarily, will kill a snake, but turns aside on seeing it. Young men who have been educated at English schools, however, have no such reserve, and a Mahratta Brahmin has informed me that he has killed three of them.

Snakes are kept in houses in Ceylon and Guzerat, partly seemingly as objects of worship, and partly to destroy rats, but no similar practice prevails in the south-eastern parts of peninsular India.

CH. ED. BALFOUR, M.D.

Secunderabad, 23d January 1868.

MEMORANDUM ON SNAKE WORSHIP.

On the Nág Panchmee festival, which occurs, I think, on the fifth day of the Hindu month Bhadoon, in the rainy season, Nágs (Cobras) are worshipped by most of the lower classes of the people in the Deccan, and more particularly in the Shorapore country. The principal of those classes in Shorapore are the Beydars, who are decidedly an aboriginal tribe, which is numerous in Mysore and in the southern Mahratta country. The Shorapore class came from Mysore and settled in Shorapore and the Rachore Doab, under chieftains who were originally servants of the Rajahs of Beejanugger, but who became subjects of the Kings of Golburgah and Beeder, and of Beejapoor after the fall of the Beejanugger state. The Beydars have not mingled with other Hindu castes, and though they profess to be Hindus, they adhere to many of their original superstitions and ceremonies, which have nothing to do with Hinduism; they have little or no reverence for Brahmins, what there is indeed being sparingly afforded, except by the higher classes among them, who have adopted them as priests. The Snake festival, therefore, has very little of the elements of Brahminism in it, if there are any. The ceremonies are very simple: the worshippers bathe, mark their foreheads with red colour, and in small parties, generally families who know each other, go to places where Cobras (Nágs) are known to live or to frequent. There are generally sacred stones in such places, to which offerings of flowers, ghee, &c., are made, and the stones are anointed with red colour and ground turmeric, prayers and invocations being made to the local spirit of the place and to the Serpents. Small new earthen saucers, filled with milk, are then placed near the stones, or near the Snake's hole, if there be one. Cobras are fond of milk, and are believed to watch the ceremony, coming out of their holes and drinking the milk, even while the worshippers are near, or sitting at a little distance to see if their offering is received. Should the Snake appear and drink, it is esteemed a very fortunate circumstance for the worshippers. Should the Snake not appear, the worshippers, after waiting awhile, depart, and visit the place next morning, when the result is anxiously examined; if the milk has disappeared, the rite has been accepted, but not in so marked a degree as if the reptile had come out at once. These ceremonies end with a feast.

Snake Worship is especially resorted to on behalf of children; and the women and children of a family invariably accompany the male head, not only at the annual festival, but whenever a vow has been made to a Serpent Deity. The first hair of a child which is shaved off when it has passed teething, and other infantine ailments, is frequently dedicated to a Serpent. On such occasions the child is taken to the locality of the vow, the usual ceremonies are performed, and with other offerings of flowers, &c., the child's hair is combined. In every case a feast follows, cooked near the spot, and Brahmins who attend receive largess and alms, and relations and friends receive invitations.

In the Shakti ceremonies, Poorna-abliskék, which belong, I think, to aboriginal customs, the worship of the Snake forms a portion, as emblematical of energy and wisdom. Most of these ceremonies are, however, of an inconceivably obscene and licentious character. They are not confined to the lowest classes, though rarely perhaps resorted to by Brahmins; but many of the middle class sects, of obscure origin and denomination, practise them in secret, under a strange

delusion that the divine energy of nature is to be obtained thereby, with exemption from earthly troubles.

Although Snake Worship ordinarily belongs professedly to the descendants of aboriginal tribes, yet Brahmins never or rarely pass them over, and the Nâg Panchmee is observed as a festival of kindly greeting and visiting between families and friends—as a day of gifts of new clothes or ornaments to wives or children, &c.

The worship of Grâm Deotas, or village divinities, is universal all over the Deccan, and indeed I believe throughout India. These divinities have no temples nor priests. Sacrifice and oblation is made to them at sowing time and harvest, for rain or fair weather, in time of cholera, malignant fever, or other disease or pestilence. The Nâg is always one of the Grâm Deota, the rest being known by local names. The Grâm Deota are known as heaps of stones, generally in a grove or quiet spot near every village, and are smeared some with black and others with red colour.

Nâg is a common name both for males and females among all classes of Hindus, from Brahmins downwards to the lowest classes of Sudras and Mlêchhas. Nâgo Rao, Nâgojee, &c., are common Mahratta names, as Nâgappa, Nâgowa, and the like among the Canarese and Telugoo population.

No Hindu will kill a Nâg or Cobra willingly. Should any one be killed within the precincts of a village, by Mahomedans or others, a piece of copper money is put into its mouth, and the body is burned with offerings to avert the evil.

It is, perhaps, remarkable that the Snake festival is held after the season or at the season of casting the skin, and when the Snake, addressed or worshipped, is supposed to have been purified. Some Brahmins always keep the skin of a Nâg in one of their sacred books.

In reference to the lower castes alluded to, I may mention those who practise Snake Worship with the greatest reverence:—1. Beydars. 2. Dhungars or shepherds, Aheers or milkmen, Waddiwars or stone-masons, Khungins or rope-makers, Brinjaras and other wandering tribes, Mangs, Dhêrs, and Chumars, Ramoosees, Bhils, Gonds, and Kôles, all which I believe, with many others, to be descendants of aboriginal tribes, partly received within the pale of Hinduism.

Lingayets, who are schismatics from Hinduism, and who deny *in toto* the religious supremacy of the Brahmins, are nevertheless Snake worshippers, many of them bearing the name Nâg, both male and female.

I cannot speak of the North of India, but in the whole of the South of India, from the Nerbudda to Cape Comorin, Snake Worship is now existent.

MEADOWS TAYLOR, Col. M. N. I.

The festival of the Moonsa Poojah takes place each year about the end of August.

The tribes that I have seen present at it were Bhowries, Dhangas, and Santhals, and the locality was at a large jungle village beside a range of low hills, to the west of the hill Beharinath, and to the south of the hill of Pachete.

The snake catchers and charmers, at this period of the year, assemble and make a tour of the neighbouring villages, carrying snakes twisted around their necks and bodies, the chief of the procession being either carried on men's shoulders, or riding on a buffalo. He generally has a rock boa or python hanging over his shoulders. The usual amount of beating of the Nagara, playing the flute, and singing, attends the procession, and large quantities of the favourite spirit "Mowha" and sweetmeats are consumed.

Presents are also made to the snake bearers, and general dissipation prevails.

A. VANS BEST, M.D.

Bengal Establishment.

## NOTE.

In August last, when this work was going to press, Professor Goldstücker brought me a note on the Naga tribes of Cashmere which he had received from H.S.H. Prince Frederick of Schleswig-Holstein, who was then residing in the valley. My intention was to have added this note to this Appendix, but it now turns out most unfortunately that it has been mislaid and cannot be found. This is to be regretted, not only because it was an account of the Nāgas of the present day by a most intelligent and competent observer, but also because the Prince insisted most strongly on the medical qualities of the tribe, and their possession of nostrums which had been handed down from remote antiquity. This retention of the Esculapian character by the snake worshippers is one of the most curious points connected with the subject, but it is one that, now that attention is directed to it, will I trust meet with full elucidation from some inhabitant of the valley.

J. F.

## APPENDIX E.

THE Amravati inscriptions are similar to those on the Railings and Gateways of the Buddhist Stupas and Monasteries at Bhilsa and other places. They are all written in the Pali language; and, where not injured by weather or breakage, they are generally clear and legible. With two exceptions they have been all copied by myself from the sculptured slabs, and have since been compared with the photographs. The two exceptions are Nos. II. and XI., which have been taken from Colonel Mackenzie's drawings. The former is a good copy, and is mostly legible; but the latter is unfortunately a very corrupt transcript of the most important of all the Amravati records, as it certainly contains the name of a King, which, if it had been faithfully copied, would most probably have enabled us to fix the date of the inscription.

The following translations are not offered as critical renderings of the inscriptions, but simply as free versions conveying their general meaning, which is usually confined to the specification of certain gifts made to the sacred edifice by various individuals, both priests and laymen, in which they were frequently joined by their wives and children. The same practice is still common in Burmah and in other Buddhist countries.

Some of the words which are of unusual occurrence require explanation. In No. IV. I have rendered *gharami*, by "wife," that is, the mistress of the house. The present Hindi form is *gharvāti*. The word *paṭā* occurs three times in Nos. II., XI., and XX., and the word *pataka* three times in Nos. IV., XIV., and XX. As both words are combined with figures in No. XX., I take them to be the names of the particular gifts thus recorded, and consequently that they refer to the sculptured stones themselves. *Paṭā* is most probably the same word as the present Hindi *Paṭao*, which means a "broad stone slab," and is specially applicable to the Amravati railing stones, in which the breadth is equal to three times the depth. Both names are derived from the Sanskrit *pāṭa*, breadth, from the root *paṭa*, to spread or extend. The word *pataka*, or in No. XX. *bataka*, is spelt with the dental *t*, and is most probably therefore not connected with *paṭa*, which invariably has the cerebral *ṭ*. I conclude that it must be the name for a railing pillar, because it is found in Nos. IV. and XIV. recorded on the tops of two of them. The name used for a square or octagonal pillar is *ṭhabho* (see No. III.) from the Sanskrit *stambha*. In No. XX. we have a record of two *Paṭas* and three *Patakas*, which I believe to refer to three broad slab pillars of the railing, and the two architrave slabs that covered them. I cannot suggest any explanation of the word *vetika*, which occurs in No. XI., but I conclude that it is the name of some one of the sculptured slabs, as it is coupled with *paṭa*.