

NAG PANCHMI: SNAKES, DRAGONS AND CULTURES

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(English Version)

The month of Shravan brings joy to poets and also to farmers, but it also brings numerous snakes out of their flooded homes, triggering both fear and worship. This explains why many Indians celebrate Naga Panchami on Shravan Shukla Panchami, on the 7th of August this year. The snake is more than just an awe-inspiring creature: it actually marks different stages in the gradual evolution of the Indian mind, over centuries and millennia.

We could begin from Janamejaya who personified the Western-Aryan hatred for the serpent, but we will reach a stage when the same animal found veneration, as Naga-*raja* or *Manasa*. The two, incidentally, are quite different, as one is a male snake and the other is surely a female deity. One can forgive this mistake, because it is not very safe to get too close to examine a snake's gender, even while worshipping. The serpent bears evidence of many conflicts, like the one between the wheat-eating Indo-Europeans of the West and the rice-loving civilisations of the East. After all, rice cultivation was hardly possible without water and this necessitated a better adjustment with eco-systems where snakes lived in plenty, but were not usually aggressive or venomous, unless attacked. In its legends are traces of the perennial struggle between 'formal' and 'folk' cultures. *Manasa* in Bengal was primarily folk, but later formalized as *Padmavati*, who was born from Shiva's semen that fell on a lotus plant. In many parts of western India, deities like *Goga* associated with snakes are worshipped in this period but they are all male, not goddess like *Manasa*. We see also the dichotomy between the domineering

patriarchy of west and north India and the historically more liberal or matri-centric culture of the east and south.

In the Mahabharata, we have interesting conflicts, like the one between the eagle-king Garuda, son of Vinata, and his snake-cousins, children of his aunt Kadru. Like the Adi Parva, large parts of the epic give a rather negative portrayal of snakes, as either evil or dangerously mysterious. Towards the late Vedic stage, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda had incantations to protect from snakes, but the later Grihya Sutras also mentioned annual rituals for honouring snakes. Aryans could hardly decide whether 'Nagas' stood for snakes or the indigenous opponents of Arya-Vedic culture, who were portrayed as 'amphibians' as they had adapted well with their river-based landscape. Vedic and post Vedic civilisation took a rather long time to come to terms with the real India that lay east of the Yamuna, and one deterrent was the swampy terrain of forests and rivers of the Gangetic plains that was infested with wild animals and dreadful snakes. Arya-putras were often at a loss as to how to deal with the obvious skill of Naga men and the enticing beauty of their women. Arjuna braved it and married Ulupi, the princess of snakes, but his grandson Parikshit died from snakebite. Arjuna's great-grandson,

Janmejaya, conducted the powerful Sarpamedha Yagna to consume all snakes in its fire, but he was halted by Astika, the nephew of the great serpent king, Vasuki. These stories actually betray the very nervous relationship that early Aryandom had with the formidable civilisation of the Gangetic valley.

Vedic culture had declared Varuna as the king of the Nagas who lived in patala bhoomi, it did not click as not all stories can become box office hits. The first images of reconciliation appear at least three centuries before the Christian era, in the images of the Buddha or Jaina Tirthankaras where a canopy of Panchanagas actually protect the divinities. Some images of snakes were found in the much-older Indus valley sites, but we cannot still connect them to the Gangetic

civilisation. When images of the Vedic Vishnu finally emerged, we see him in his Anantha Sayana posture, reclining over a massive Sesha-naga, who also shaded him with the same protective royal canopy. Shiva entered dramatically with a more active and hissing Vasuki wrapped around his neck. We thus see how the dreaded Nagas of the past evolved into protectors of both Vedic and anti-Vedic gods, representing thereby the harmony that Indian civilisation ultimately achieved over irreconcilable dogmas.

Buddhism was exported from India, without any copyright issues, and it assimilated other snake-worshipping cultures abroad. A notable Naga of the Buddhist tradition is Muchalinda, and the Tibetan Naga was the guardian of lakes and treasures. Early Chinese dynasties from the 11th century BC considered the dragon to be worshipped as part-crocodile and part-snake, with some other features as well. The first Chinese emperor, Huangdi, used the snake as his symbol and the Hong dragon appears as a rainbow serpent, while the Bashe dragon looks like a giant python. In Japan, the sacred Yamata-no-Orochi dragon is actually an 8-headed, 8-tailed giant snake, as is Amaterasu-kami, the Shinto god. A similar culture prevails in Korea, where dragon mythology venerated gigantic serpents or reptiles, and Vietnamese dragon tradition combines several reptiles: the snake, crocodile and lizard, with a bird.

The Christian tradition of glorifying St. George slaying the dragon is just the very opposite, but we also find that serpent-worship actually existed in ancient Europe, Persia, West Asia and North Africa before Semitic religions declared the snake to be 'Satan' or shaitan, the devil. Far away in old Mexico, the Aztecs also worshipped Quetzalcoatl (Ketsol-Kutel), the feathered serpent. Returning to India, we find that during the Naga Panchami, sisters in the South pray for the protection of their brothers, while their North Indian counterparts do the same 10 days later, with Raksha Bandhan. The martial Nairs of Kerala have a strong serpent tradition

and most Malayalees venerate the sacred sarpa-kavu groves during this period. In many old temples of the South, cobras are still fed by priests and worshippers, while Sarpa-dosha, or the curse of the snake, is treated with both Brahmanical and quack remedies. A hundred years ago, Edgar Thurston had even reported a 'snake mosque' at Mannarghat near Nilgiri.

India's adaption to the snake that took place some 3500 years ago appears to have been reasonably smooth. Our thoughts finally go to Vasuki, whose body was used in the Samudra-Manthan contest between Devas and Asuras. We wonder whether the poor creature has recovered from his body bruises in this tug of war between opposing forces, that were ultimately reconciled in this great civilization.