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Making Wonderous Forms: Serpents Imagery in the Sacred Landscape of Early India, up to c. 500 CE

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Keywords:

Serpents
Ophiolatry
Naga
Sacred Landscape
Deities

Abstract: For long, India captivated the imagination of the world as the land of snake-charmers and serpent worshippers. This interest wasn't properly studied until the late 19th century. Archaeologists, historians, and art historians have studied ophiolatry in India since then. Many scholars regarded ophiolatry via the "great tradition" because of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain literature and art, as well as archaeological and ethnographic studies. This has given India a prejudiced and clichéd view of ophiolatry. It is seen as a totemic belief of a particular race or ethnic group and as a "local", "folk" and "rural" belief while its relationship between contemporaneous religious traditions is understood in terms of subjugation and assimilation. Textual connections to *nagas* are used to explain serpent worship, although serpent imagery in their monuments has never been considered an object of worship. Such an approach dilutes the underlying human-animal link, simplifies religious dynamics, and rules out the notion that a sacred environment was shared by multiple religions.

This article uses art, archaeology, inscription, and literature to show the significance of serpents, serpent worship, and the emergence of serpent iconography in early India till c. 500 CE. It also shows a vibrant religious interaction and shared holy environment in which serpent veneration was prominent. The research investigates how ophidiophobia, a primordial human feeling, made ophiolatry ubiquitous in India.

Introduction

India, described by Aelian in the second century CE as "the bane of snakes" (McCrindle 1901: 140) is home to numerous species of snakes. Equally numerous are the meanings,

ISBN: 978-93-5786-608-8 (E-book); 978-93-5810-902-3 (Print)

Cite as: Ete, Duli (2023) Making wonderous forms: Serpents imagery in the sacred landscape of early India, up to c. 500 CE, in *Animals in Archaeology: Integrating Landscapes, Environment and Humans in South Asia* (*A Festschrift for Prof. P.P. Joglekar*) Volume 2 (Pankaj Goyal, Abhayan G.S., and Sharada Channarayapatna Eds.), pp. 743-761. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala.

metaphors, symbolism and similes bestowed on serpents, such that they surpass other animals of the zoological kingdom in their ability to arouse fascination and repugnance. In India, they are not merely a class of reptiles which crawl on the ground and endanger lives but are considered powerful supernatural beings that possess human qualities while at the same time assuming the status of a god and yet remain distinct from both. They are featured in things as sophisticated as the philosophy of Emptiness of Mahayana Buddhism and as regal as the ancestries of the Ningthoujas of Manipur and the Pallavas of South India. They adorn things as sacred as the railings of *stupa*s and the door-frames of temples, and as mundane as people's names. They succinctly explain something as subtle as the idea of reincarnation and function as an analogy to something as trivial as the luscious black curls of women. Indeed, the significance attached to the serpent is so extensive in India that it can virtually explain everything.

This common animal has been viewed with such ambivalence in India that the *nagas*, the supernatural counterparts of earthly cobras (*Naja naja*) are an embodiment of polarities. The *nagas* symbolise life-giving water, but they also represent death. They are believed to be the denizens of the aquatic paradise, but they breathe out fire, control the atmosphere and could haunt heaven and earth. They are believed to be the most generous beings who grant material prosperity, but they could also annihilate prospering cities (Ete 2017). These ambiguities abound in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu texts have contributed to how ophiolatry has been approached by archaeologists, historians and art historians since the nineteenth century. This is further complicated by the fact that ophiolatry in India has not left behind any textual records, unlike its sophisticated contemporaneous religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. However, its importance in the sacred landscape of ancient India is clear from the many images, symbols, and archaeological remains of serpents that can be found all over the subcontinent.

This essay is divided into five sections. In the first section, a historiographical overview is presented to show how ophiolatry in India has been treated by historians, archaeologists and art historians. The second section is devoted to ophidiophobia and its manifestation in Early India. In the third section, an attempt has been made to trace the evolution of the serpent in sacred visual culture from prehistory to c. 500 CE. To highlight the religious dynamism of early India, one of the serpent iconographies, namely, the *Nagaraja* iconography shared by Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, is discussed in the fourth section, while the fifth section explores the sharing of a sacred landscape between Buddhism and ophiolatry.

I) Historiographical Overview

Since the publication of *Tree and Serpent Worship* by James Fergusson (1868), the scholarly interest in serpents and serpent worship in India has been growing consistently. Born in the nineteenth century, a period marked by oriental curiosity, antiquarianism and the rediscovery of the ancient Indian past, this interest was bound to have racial and elitist prejudices. Backed by Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain literature and art as well as archaeological and ethnographic studies, scholars including James Fergusson (1868), Pratapchandra Ghosha (1870), C.S. Wake (1873), C.F. Oldham (1891) and D.D. Kosambi (1956) to name a few, saw ophiolatry as a totemic belief of a particular race or ethnic

group and hence, "mere ornament" and never an object of worship (Ghosha 1870: 219). Although the indispensability of the serpent deities in the ancient Indian religious milieu is acknowledged, the affiliated serpent imagery in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu material culture was seen by Alexander Cunningham (1879) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1931), among others, as "reluctant concessions to the masses" (DeCaroli 2004: 07). The independent *Naga* sculptures, which had been worshipped as deities on their merit, have been seen as a "rural" (Vogel 1908-09: 162) and "folk" (Agarwala 1970) phenomenon, ruling out the possibility of religious interaction between many contemporaneous faiths.

However, there have been efforts by historians, art historians and archaeologists such as J.P. Vogel (1908-09, 1926), Barua (1934) Joanna Williams (1976), Herbert Härtel (1976), Upinder Singh (1996, 2004), Julia Shaw (2004, 2013) and Brancaccio (2005). They have studied independent *Naga* sculptures of the Bharhut, Sanchi, and Mathura areas; highlighted the negotiation of serpent worshippers with more sophisticated and institutionalised contemporaneous religious traditions; and have also proposed their shared artistic and sacred landscape. While rejecting the views on the *Nagas* as a racial group- Aryan or Non-Aryan, as a tribal community living on the fringes of an Aryanised society, a political dynasty, a caste category or as a religious sect, Robert DeCaroli (2004, 2009, 2011) has underlined a complex interaction operating at many levels between the worshippers of ophidian deities and Buddhists in early India.

Amidst these different views and opinions, the fear of serpents, or ophidiophobia, an emotion so crucial to ophiolatry, has been mostly neglected, if not ignored altogether.

II) Ophidiophobia and Ophiolatry

Why do humans fear serpents? How deep-rooted is ophidiophobia in human beings? Why are serpents despised and venerated by humans in diverse ways that cannot be equated with fear and veneration of other animals? Answers to these questions are likely to be inconclusive. However, a survey of various theories, psychological and behavioural experiments, and cross-cultural studies of ophidiophobia and ophiolatry conducted by Balaji Mundkur suggests that ophidiophobia is evolutionary (Mundkur 1978). It is endemic to all adult primates. Human beings are no exception. Mundkur suggests that very early on, in their evolution, humans, with their symbol ascription and myth-making propensity, translated the fear of serpents into veneration of the serpent. He traces the antiquity of serpent veneration from the Upper Palaeolithic art of central Siberia (Russia) and notes the global distribution of serpent veneration, which extends as far as the Arctic Circle in the north to the tip of South America in the south. He, however, notes that the clear-cut evidence of serpent veneration emerged from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, when human societies were rapidly changing owing to the invention of agriculture. The ancient civilizations bestowed serpents with symbols and supernatural powers, wove them into their mythologies and represented them in their arts, thereby providing solid evidence of serpent veneration. He further observes that "the serpent's power to incite symbolic, mental associations is rooted in man's biological past and only secondarily is governed by fickle cultural idiosyncrasies, ophiolatry acquires additional significance as one of the earliest of animal cults" (Mundkur 1978: 152).

Many scholars such as Fergusson (1868: 1-16), Wake (1873: 373-390), Ghosha (1870: 199-232), and Vogel (1926: 7) have pointed out that the fear of serpent was the motivating force which gave birth to serpent veneration. Ghosha has rightly remarked that fear is "an active agent in the invention as a necessity" (Ghosha 1870: 199) as the fear of serpents has not only created a universal faith of ophiolatry but has also led to the invention of diverse mythologies and fascinating iconographies of serpents across the globe. In other words, ophiolatry is a universal phenomenon (Fergusson 1868: 1-84; Wake 1873: 373-390; Wilder 1877: i- 48; MacCullough 1916: 399-411; Mundkur 1978: 125-158). Yet, it is culturally specific. The subtle ways, in which the fear of serpents is observed, the preference given to specific species of the serpent for veneration, how the serpent veneration is manifested, and the specific purposes for its veneration differ from one society to another.

If we narrow it down to India, the answer to the question of why serpents are venerated in India can be answered with some precision. Surprisingly, the answer came in the nineteenth century itself, when the Orientalists fantasised about India as the land of magic, mystics and snake charmers. In writing in 1872 on zoological mythologies, Angelo de Gubernatis, an Italian scholar, sympathetically explained:

> The serpent, [therefore], is not only monstrous and maleficent in Hindoo tradition, but also at once the learned one, and he who imparts learning; it sacrifices itself to let the hero carry away the water of life, the water of strength, the health-giving herb or the treasure; it not only spares but it favours the predestined hero; it destroys individuals, but preserves the species; it devours nations, but preserves the regenerative kings; it poisons plants, and throws men into deep sleep, but it gives new strength in its occult domain to the sun, who gives new life to the world every morning and every spring. . .Hence the worship in India of the serpent, who is revered as a symbol of every species of learning (Gubernatis 1872, II: 405-406).

It has been argued that serpent worship is very prevalent and widespread in India because about 450 species of snakes are found in the Indian subcontinent itself (Crooke 1916: 412). However, it must be pointed out here that not every species of snake is worshipped in India. In major parts of India, only the cobras (*Naja naja*), the most venomous among snakes, are worshipped, while in the north-eastern state of Maṇipur and neighbouring states, the Meiteis worship *Pakhangba*, which may be identified as a python or its personification. In Southern India, the veneration of the serpent is reflected in *Nagakals* (or carved serpent stones) and the *Nagamandalam* ritual. In Kashmir, serpents are honoured by naming springs and lakes after them, but in Manipur, any outward expression of *Pakhangba* is considered a taboo. The most common associations in which serpents figure in ancient societies across the globe are in the myths of creation, cosmology, fertility and weather (Mundkur 1978: 136-137).

In India, ophiolatry is complex because ophidiophobia is manifested in interlacing two forms. The first is the inherent fear of the poisonous fangs of real snakes, and the second is the perceived fear of not offending the supernatural *naga*, who, if angered, were believed to have the power to bring climatic catastrophes. Robert DeCaroli has

argued that the presence of supernatural beings like *nagas* and *yaksha*s in monasteries not only functioned as a bulwark against the incoming ghostly attacks but also scared the monastic members into following the *Vinaya* rules (DeCaroli 2004: 142). This argument can be well extended to the larger lay community as well. The images of *naga* deities standing on a hill, field, near a river, dam, or shrine affirm, through their presence, a sense of being protected. But at the same time, it also serves as a reminder to the general public that "Big Brother is watching you." And with these embodied extreme emotions of fear and appeasement, the *nagas* functioned as the upholders of the moral order by punishing evildoers and rewarding the virtuous.

III) Evolution in the Sacred Landscape of Early India

To understand the permeation of ophiolatry in the sacred landscape of early India, it is imperative to contextualise the serpent imagery. Broadly, there are two contexts: the first context includes serpent imageries which are affiliated to the Buddhist, Hindu or Jaina monuments and sites (Bloss 1973; Chakrabarti 2001; Sharma 2014). In this context, *nagas* are represented as guardian deities, submissive demonic devotees, and form part of composite scenes sanctioned by their literature and as ornamentation on their sacred monuments. The second context comprises those serpent imageries which are not affiliated with any religion, monument or site but are found in an independent context. These independently affiliated *naga* sculptures were worshipped as agricultural or fertility deities.

These two contexts have been seen as mutually exclusive categories to the extent that the relationship between ophiolatry and its contemporaneous religions is understood in terms of subjugation and assimilation. For example, Ananda Coomaraswamy argues that the presence of the popular deities, which include the *nagas*, in "Buddhist sites" was not only due to the pressure of the laity who donated to the *sangha* but also to the Buddhists' desire to completely subvert these "earlier animistic practices" (Coomaraswamy 1931, I: 9-10, 32-33). G. H. Sutherland also argues that the incorporation of the popular deities into Buddhism was a handy solution to "more readily meet the needs of an unlettered laity" (Sutherland 1991: 26). DeCaroli (2004: 10) argues that this position "runs the risk of viewing the *sangha* as clever manipulators playing the public for the sake of greater donation". He rightly remarks that such a view "greatly oversimplifies the process and fails to recognise that the monks and nuns themselves were participants in the culture that surrounded them" (DeCaroli 2004: 10). The argument of Coomaraswamy and Sutherland completely downplays the human-animal relationship and negates the primal human emotion of ophidiophobia. It also dilutes the human desire for fertility and prosperity, which the serpent deities were believed to have imparted, and hence, worshipped in ancient India.

Early representations

In the prehistoric rock art of the Indian subcontinent, serpents are conspicuous by their absence (Neumayer 1983: 15). The earliest representations of serpents come from the Harappan Civilisation, dated to the late Harappan phase, c. 2000 BCE (Härtel 1976). Harbert Härtel has identified six representations of serpents (Härtel 1976: Plate I).

Because of this limited representation of serpents, Härtel asserts that serpents, unlike other animals represented on the Harappan seals, did not play an important role in the Harappan Civilisation. These snakes appear to be cobras and are rendered naturalistically with a single head. Of these six representations, Härtel assigns only one scene depicted on a potsherd from Mohenjo-Daro, which he believed "furnishes the only authentic evidence of the *Naga*-cult in the Harappan Civilisation" (Härtel 1976: 665-666, Plate 1f). He treats two representations, one on the faience seal and another on an amulet from Mohenjo-Daro, as "indirect evidence of the existence of snake worship" (Härtel 1976: 666, Plate 1d and 1e) because the seated human figures flanking the central figure in these scenes are supplemented with serpents rising behind their backs, making them "personified *nagas*" (Härtel 1976: 664). What Härtel did not notice is that these "personified *nagas*" are canopied by a serpent in the way the Buddha, Parsvanatha and Vishnu are shown canopied by serpent kings such as Muchalinda, Dharanendra and Ananta, respectively, in the post-Mauryan art. These representations of the "personified *nagas*" from Mohenjo-Daro may be regarded as the forerunners of the Nagaraja iconography which became popular from the post-Mauryan period (Ete 2017).

Given the association of serpents with water and its significance to agricultural societies, which has been pointed out by Balaji Mundkur (1978), K. M. Shrimali (1983) and Julia Shaw (2004), serpent worship in Harappan Civilisation seems plausible. The Harappan Civilisation was an agricultural society based on riverine systems and the sites, namely, Harappa, Lothal and Mohenjo-Daro, where serpent representations have been found, are located on the river banks. However, it may be assumed, from the minimal serpent representations, that ophiolatry was not as pervasive in the Harappan Civilisation as it became in the later period.

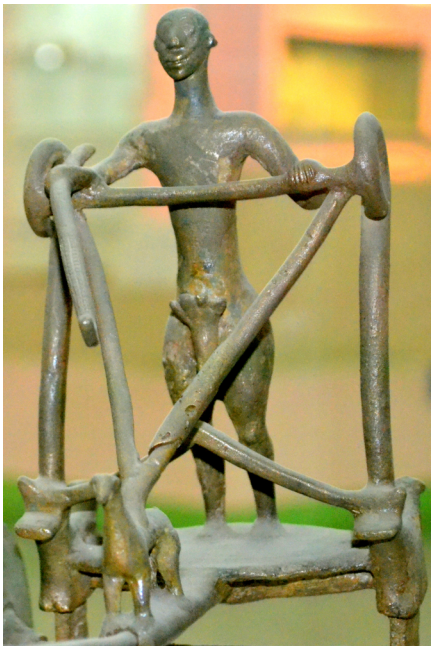

Fig. 1: A four-headed serpent substituting the penis of the naked charioteer, Daimabad Bronze, Chalcolithic period. National Museum, New Delhi (Photo: Duli Ete)

After the Harappan Civilisation, a significant representation of a serpent comes from a hoard of metal objects discovered from the Chalcolithic site of Daimabad in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra (Fig. 1). The hoard comprises, among others, a man driving a chariot pulled by two oxen, dated to the late Harappan phase (Sali 1986: 477-479). What makes this hoard fascinating is that the rider is a naked man and has a four-headed cobra with its expanded hoods substituted for the man's penis, which rises till his abdomen. The implications of this representation of Indian serpent iconography and serpent worship have not been noted before. Unlike Harappan representations, which are natural serpents, this representation is a supernatural depiction, suggesting that serpents had started to be seen as possessing supernatural powers. The hoard seems to have ritualistic significance. Moreover, supplementing a four-headed cobra for a penis indicates that serpents were considered as a fertility deity in the agricultural society like Daimabad.

This supernatural depiction of the serpent with four-heads or hoods is the precursor of yet another iconography which became very conspicuous in post-Mauryan art (Ete 2014). However, it must be pointed out that the even number for serpent hood was not followed in the later artistic traditions. From the post-Mauryan arts, serpent hoods vary according to religious and regional affiliations, but they are always uneven (Vogel 1926: 38). Another point worth noting is the continued association of this iconography with fertility. From this sculpture of Daimabad to the present-day *nagakals* (independent sculpted serpent stones) of Southern India, the iconographical type has been the dominant form of worshipping serpents as fertility deities.

Between the Chalcolithic representation of serpents and its resurfacing during the post-Mauryan visual culture based on stone, there is a gap of at least 1700 years. This period is marked by the absence of serpent representations in any form. However, the literary sources such as the Vedic literature, the epics and the Buddhist literature compensate for this vacuum and provide an insight into the minds of early Indians and their attitudes towards snakes during this long period. It enables us to gauge how, from the simple Vedic society to the complex urban societies of the post-Mauryan period, the fear of serpents had been articulated and its veneration manifested.

The *Rig* Vedic poets, in praising their warrior god Indra for slaying the cloud serpent Vritra and releasing rain, reveal that serpents were seen as powerful creatures that have control over rain. The Vedic Indians bestowed the serpent with supernatural powers so that it not only haunted the earth and the underworld but also the heavens and the sky. A passage in the *Yajur Veda* (IV. 2.8) pays homage to them:

> "Homage to the serpents, which are on the earth, the serpents in the atmosphere, in the sky, to those serpents homage. Those that are there in the vault of the sky, or those who are in the rays of the sun, those whose seat is made in the waters, to those serpents honour. Those that are the missiles of sorcerers, or those that are among the trees, or those that lie in the wells, To those serpents honour."

The *Atharva Veda,* the latest of the Vedas, which contains magical charms and spells, has two-fold references to serpents. The supernatural serpents were elevated as divine beings and invoked to seek protection from serpents, as is clear from this prayer: "Let

not the snake, O gods, slay us with our offspring, with our men; what is shut together may it not unclose; what is open may it not shut together: homage to the god-people. Homage be to the black [snake], homage to the cross-lined, homage to the brown constrictor; homage to the god-people" (The *Atharva Veda* VI.56.1). While, on the other hand, some charms were composed which were meant to neutralise the poison of the much-despised serpent. Besides fear and appeasement of serpents, these verses also reveal that the deification of serpents had already begun. Paying homage to serpents with personified names such as "black snake", "the cross-lined" and "the brown constrictor" and invoking them by calling them "god-people" to seek protection from serpents clearly emphasises that. The *Grihyasutra* provides special impetus to this twofold purpose of honouring serpents and seeking protection from serpents by prescribing a four-month-long rite called the *Sarpabali* (Vogel 1926: 11).

Interestingly, the *Atharva Veda* contains the earliest literary reference to the serpent's association with fertility, however indirect. In a charm devised to gain virile power, an analogy is drawn with a serpent. In a way, that seems to be a versified rendition of the Chalcolithic bronze sculpture of the naked charioteer from Daimabad, whose penis is substituted by a four-headed cobra. The verse goes, "As the black snake spreads himself at pleasure, making wondrous forms, by the *Asura*'s magic, so let this *arka* (a thread or an amulet made of *Arka* tree, *Calotropis gigantea*) suddenly make thy member altogether correspondent, limb with limb" (*The Atharva Veda* VI. 72. 1). This verse alludes that the black serpents (probably cobras) were considered as possessing magical powers to assume "wondrous forms." Invoking such powers in charms meant for virility suggests that the black serpent came to be seen as a potent being of fertility and virility.

The reference to "the black snake", its "wonderous forms", and its virility or fertility context is significant. The black snake in this verse, identifiable as the cobra, seems to explain the transition of the serpent from *sarpa* to *naga*. In the Vedic literature, serpents are referred to by a generic term, *sarpa,* a term that means anything that moves (Mandalik 1869: 183; Ghosha 1870: 205). But in the epics and the Buddhist literature, serpents are referred to as *Nagas*, implying them to be a superior class of *sarpa* (Mandalik 1869: 183). By the implication of this distinction, *naga* not only becomes a synonym of the *Cobra de capello*, the most vicious of serpents, but also becomes an epithet of a class of ophidian demigods. The black serpent of the *Atharva Veda* narrows down to *naga*, the cobra, and the two-fold meanings of serpent reflect that serpent veneration had reached an advanced stage, which formed a part of the complex society that constituted the milieu of the *Mahabharata* and the Buddhist literature. Vogel (1926) has meticulously analysed the *nagas* in the *Mahabharata* and the Buddhist literature, and it is out of the scope of this paper to address them. Suffice it to add that the *nagas* as supernatural beings now acquire a realm of their own -the *nagaloka*- and their own genealogical stories; they become powerful deities who impart fertility, bestow wealth, and perform kingly duties of causing rain and punishing evils. The *Mahabharata* and the Buddhist literature mention various powerful *Nagaraja*s such as Ananta, Vasuki, Takshaka, and Elapatra, Shankhapala and Bhuridatta, respectively.

It was in this backdrop of the evolved beliefs on the *nagas* that they came to be translated into stone as serpent deities in the post-Mauryan period (c. 200 BCE -300 CE). This period was a formative period of Indian art and architecture and religious interaction. The beliefs were manifested so enthusiastically that images of serpent deities

in various iconographies are to be found almost all over the country. In fact, images of *Nagaraja*s and *Nagi*s are among the earliest sculptural representations of deities in India, making ophiolatry one of the earliest faiths to have manifested in visual culture. These images provided many elements for a common artist's vocabulary to use in its contemporaneous religious traditions to express themselves visually (discussed in the next section). Coomaraswamy has noted that the worship of *yaksha*s and *yakshi*s, *naga*s and *nagi*s was "the natural source of the *bhakti* elements common to the whole sectarian development that became pervasive in the succeeding centuries" (Coomaraswamy 1931, I: 26). The religious interaction was so powerful that the earliest explicit visual evidence of ophiolatry comes from a relief carved on a railing medallion of the Stupa-2 at the "Buddhist" Sanchi Monastic Complex, Madhya Pradesh (Fig. 2) during this period.

Since the entire Sanchi hill has been classified and approached as a "Buddhist site," the sculptures of the Stupa-2 have been mostly overlooked by scholars. Alfred Foucher surveyed the general themes of the Stupa-2 reliefs but remained constricted to everything Buddhist. The sacred significance of the serpent divinities, more so of their presence on a sacred hill, was watered down by classifying them among the ornamental "fabulous creatures" and "the supernatural monsters of oriental fantasy" (Marshall et al. 1940, I: 97, 174.). Failure to see other than anything Buddhist has rendered these sculptures anomalous and lessened the possibility of viewing them as a manifestation of a dynamic and shared sacred visual culture.

The Stupa-2 is the earliest of all the Sanchi monuments to have been ornamented with relief sculptures, dating to the second century BCE. The relief medallion in question is carved on the outer face of the pillar numbered 81. The sculpture is slightly eroded, but this has not affected much of its overall visibility. Amidst the water represented by lotuses, arranged symmetrically on the lower part of the medallion, rises a giant serpent with five hoods, carved in the centre of the medallion. The two human figures flanking the serpent on either side appear to be women, making offerings and worshipping the serpent. The serpents' power to bestow fertility is attested by the *Champaka Jataka* (No. 506).

This *Jataka* informs us that when the *Nagaraja* Bodhisattva, after relinquishing the *nagaloka*, went to the realm of men to practice his moral virtues, he lay down upon an anthill near the highway, and the people, recognising him to be "a great serpent king of great power'', set up a pavilion over him, spread sand before it, and did worship with perfumes and scented things. Now people began to crave sons by his aid, having faith in the Great Being and doing him worship (Cowell 1901*:* 282). The association of the serpent with human fertility makes it a very important deity for women. Even though the *Champaka Jataka* doesn't say that women are the only ones who worship the serpent, the fact that women who want children still build *nagakals* in southern India shows that serpent worship must have been especially important to women, since the serpent deity could help them become mothers.

IV) A Shared Iconography

One of the most striking and sacrosanct serpent iconographies shared among the ancient Indian religions is the *Nagaraja* iconography, which has been used to portray the image of divine kingship (Ete 2017). This iconography is characterised by a human being,

Fig. 2: Serpent worshipping, Pillar-81, Sanchi Stupa-2, c. second century BCE (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

Fig. 3: Nagaraja Sculpture from Mathura, c. 300- 200 BCE, Mathura Museum (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

usually dressed in a royal manner, having a single or multiple serpent hoods forming an umbrella over the figure. The images of the Buddha sheltered by *Nagaraja* Muchalinda, Jina Parshvanatha protected by *Nagaraja* Dharanendra, and Vishnu sitting or reclining on *Nagaraja* Ananta are some of the famous examples of this iconographical type. Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism shared this iconography but it was not their invention. This iconography predates them.

A reminiscent of the Harappan Civilisation "personified *nagas*," this iconography resurfaced in the post-Mauryan period in an independent context at Mathura to depict a life-sized free-standing serpent deity (Fig. 3). Stylistically dated to c. 300-200 BCE, this sculpture is an image of a *Nagaraja*, who is royally attired and adorned with big earrings and a V-shaped necklace. The monumental size of the sculpture suggests that this icon was meant for worship. This sculpture inaugurates the artistic tradition of life-sized free-standing sculptures of *Nagaraja*s and *Nagi*s that were pervasive in the Mathura cultural zone during the early centuries CE.

The *Nagaraja* iconography, in which the serpent deities were first fashioned, was soon adopted by the Buddhists as early as the second century BCE. Images of the Buddha protected by the *Nagaraja* Muchalinda, adhering to the *Nagaraja* iconography, were first carved on the railings of the stupas at Bharhut (Lüders 1963: 104, no. B 31a), Pauni (Lal 1971: 14-16; Deo and Joshi 1972) and Dhaulikatta (Krishna Sastry 1983: 144-145, pl. 61). These three reliefs are contemporaneous with each other, dated to c. the second century

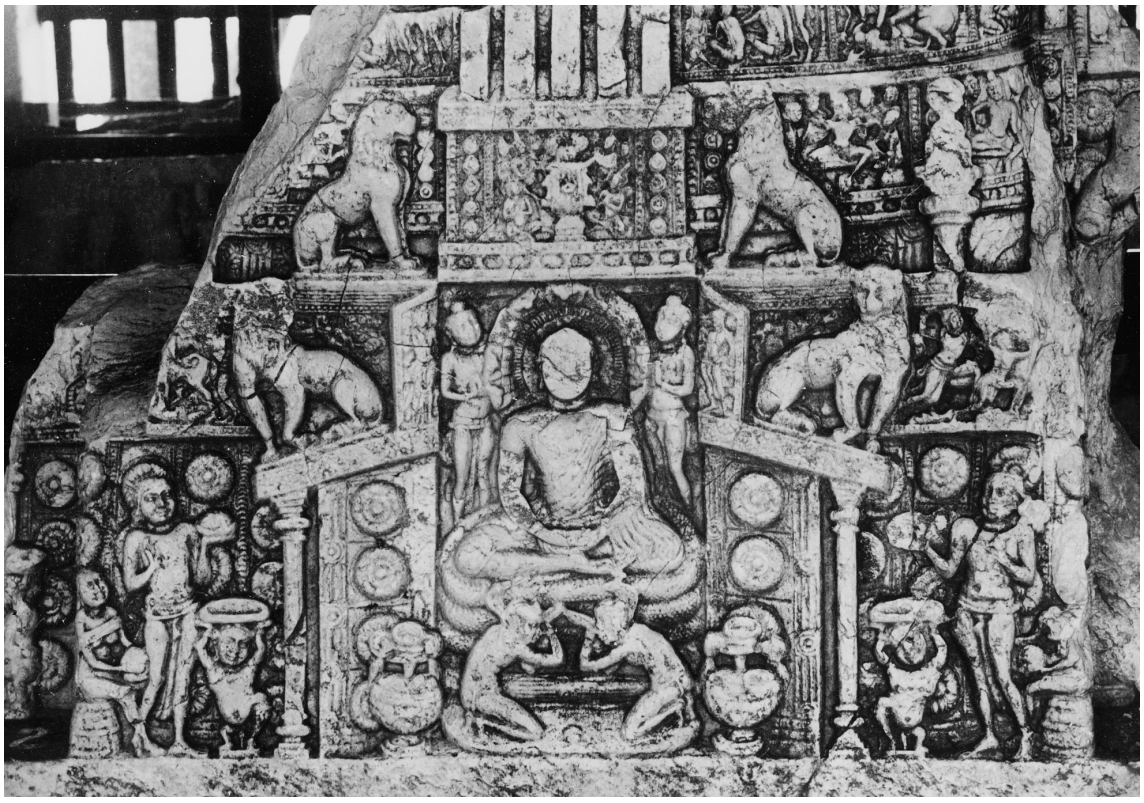

Fig. 4: *Nagaraja* Muchalinda shelters the Buddha, Amaravati Stupa, Andhra Pradesh, c. second century CE, Amaravati Site Museum (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

BCE, and are marked by an aniconic Buddha protected by the five-headed *Nagaraja* Muchalinda. However, from the second century CE onwards, when the motif was depicted at Amaravati Stupa (Fig. 4) and in the Gandhara school and Nagarajunakonda, the Buddha came to be shown in anthropomorphic form, thereby making him a *Nagaraja*, iconographically.

In the first century BCE, Hindus adopted the *Nagaraja* iconography to depict Samkarshana Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna Vasudeva. The sculptures of Samkarshana Balarama in the *Nagaraja* iconography have been found at Jansuti in Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 5), Tumain in Madhya Pradesh, and the Sanchi area (Shaw 2004: figs. 5-8, 13, 14). The earliest of these is from Jansuti, dated to c. first century BCE, which, in fact, represents the earliest visual evidence of Vaishnavism in the Mathura region (Quintanilla 2007: 92). It has been pointed out that Samkarshana Balarama, reckoned as a *Nagaraja*, was an agricultural deity and was incorporated into Vaishnavism as the elder brother of Krishna because of the popularity of *naga* worship (Vogel 1908-09: 162; Shrimali 1983: 119-120).

The Jains too adopted the *Nagaraja* iconography from the first century CE onwards to represent the 23rd Tirthankara Parshvanatha. The earliest image of the Jina Parshvanatha in *Nagaraja* iconography, dated to c. the first century CE, is carved on a Parshvanatha *ayagapatta* recovered from Kankali Tila in Mathura (Fig. 6).

Although Buddhists, Jains and Hindus adopted the *Nagaraja* iconography and depicted the *Nagaraja*s and *Nagi*s in this iconographical type on their monuments, the images of *Nagaraja*s and *Nagi*s continued to be made and worshipped as independent

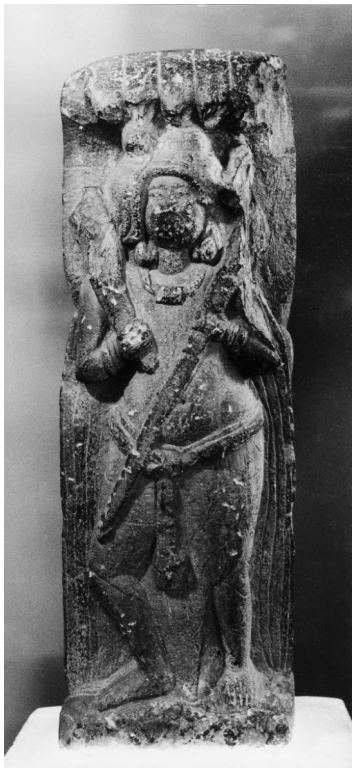

Fig. 5: Samkarshana Balarama sculpture from Jansuti, Uttar Pradesh, c. first century BCE, State Museum, Lucknow (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

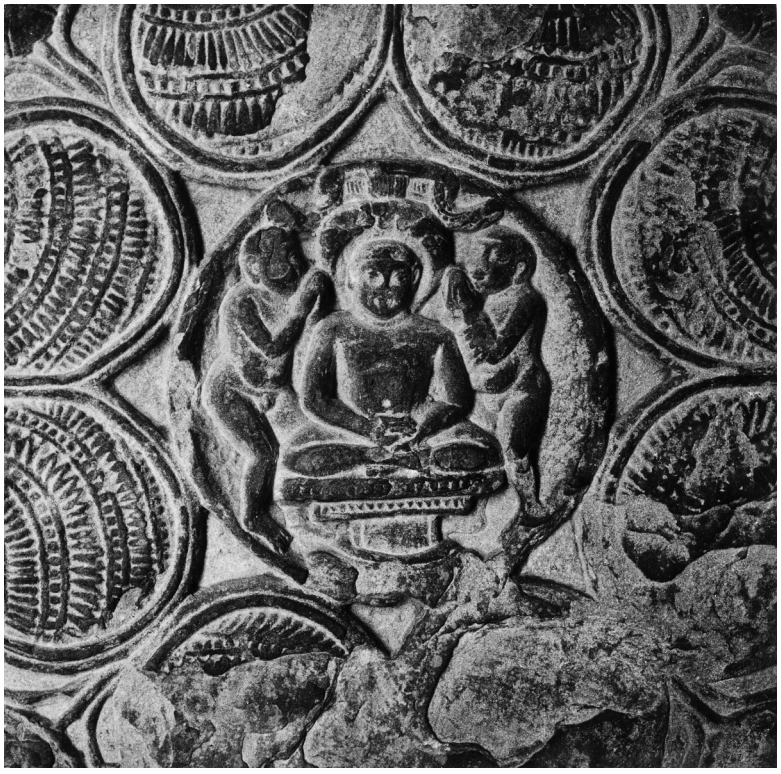

Fig. 6: Parshvanatha *ayagapatta* from Kankali Tila, Mathura, c. first century CE, State Museum, Lucknow (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

deities of rain, fertility and material prosperity. As independent deities, the *naga*s had their own shrine in the Mathura region. Archaeological excavation at Sonkh in Mathura District has unearthed a multi-temple complex, of which the Apsidal Temple No. 2 was dedicated to the serpent deities. The temple is dated to the second century CE, but the structural phases of the temple are traceable to the first century BCE (Härtel 1976: 663-683). The temple remains have yielded a rich corpus of sculptural representations of serpent deities in various iconographical types.

Dedicating shrines to serpent deities was not confined to Mathura. Excavations at Maniyar Math, Rajgir (Bihar) have unearthed the remains of a *naga* shrine, the structural phase of which is dated between c. second to first century BCE and the fifth century CE (Bloch 1909: 103-106; Chandra 1938: 52-54). The excavations have also yielded ritual paraphernalia of serpent worship, including spouted jars appended with numerous cobra hoods on their surfaces and an inscribed sandstone sculpture paying homage to Mani-*naga* (Fig. 7), dated to the second century CE (Nazim 1940: 45-46). The sculpture is mutilated and is carved on both sides with standing serpent deities in the *Nagaraja* iconography. Mani-*naga* must have been the tutelary deity of the place, honouring whom the place was named Maniyar-Math in modern times.

Fig. 7: Mani-*naga* sculpture from Maniyar Math, Rajgir, c. second century CE, National Museum, New Delhi (Photo: Duli Ete)

Fig. 8: Vishnu in the *Nagaraja* iconography, lintel of the Dashavatara temple, Deogarh, c. fifth century CE (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

Thus, the *Nagaraja* iconography in which the serpent deities were initially represented was soon shared between its contemporaneous religious traditions when they manifested themselves in the visual culture. The compulsive need to use this visual vocabulary by the Buddhists, Hindus and Jains for representing the Buddha, Samkarshana Balarama and the Jina Parshvanatha respectively show that the *Nagaraja* iconography was one of the most sacrosanct iconographies. When Vishnu emerged as a supreme deity and Vaishnavism asserted itself with new force in the fourth-fifth century CE, he too was represented with this iconography. The finest example of Vishnu in this iconography is carved on the lintel of the Dashavatara temple at Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 8). Even with his signature attributes such as conch and discuss, Vishnu can be easily mistaken for a *Nagaraja* by those who are already accustomed to the *Nagaraja* iconography of the serpent deity.

V) A Shared Sacred Landscape

Available archaeological and epigraphical sources amply show that the Buddhists often chose to live and worship in the sacred sites of *naga* deities. The Jamalpur mound inscription, which records the installation of a stone slab, probably a *naga* sculpture by the Chandaka brothers from Mathura, informs that the site was the sacred abode of the divine lord of snakes, Dadhikarna (Vogel 1908-09: 159). In the year 125 CE, a Buddhist

monastery was founded by the emperor Huvishka on this site. The particular site was selected for the emperor's monastery because of its prior sacredness associated with *nagendra* Dadhikarna.

The *naga* shire at Maniyar-Math, Rajgir referred to earlier, was excavated from "the surrounding of the base of a *stupa* like structure" (Bloch 1909: 103-106; Chandra 1938: 52-54; Kuraishi 1939: 19-25). It shows that the site was a sacred abode of a *naga* deity, Mani-*Naga*, before the establishment of Buddhism there.

The Varahadeva's inscription of cave-16 at the Ajanta monastic complex, dated to the fifth century CE, informs us that before the excavation of the hill into a Buddhist complex, the hill was the sacred abode of a *naga* king (Mirashi 1941). Richard Cohen observes that the *naga* king was rendered homeless when the Vakaṭakas began to institute a Buddhist community at the site. As compensation, Varahadeva, a Vakataka minister, hewn out a new shrine for the *naga* king at the entrance of the cave (Fig. 9) to serve as the guardian deity of the monastery and Waghora River (Cohen 1993: 374).

Within the monastic complex of the "Buddhist" Sanchi, three life-sized, free-standing sculptures of serpent deities were installed in the fifth century CE, and at least one of these sculptures was enshrined in a temple near the Great Stupa, which has been noticed by early nineteenth-century explorers such as Captain E. Fell (1834), James Cunningham (1847), and F.C. Maisey (1892). The sculptures consist of two *Nagaraja*s, now housed in the Sanchi Archaeological Museum, and a *Nagi*, now embedded within the platform of the Temple-31 (Fig. 10). These sculptures are not Buddhist *naga*s. They belong to that parallel artistic tradition that had been dominating the sacred landscape of Mathura since the second century BCE. The installation of serpent deities at the Sanchi Hill shows that the sacred landscape of Sanchi was shared between Buddhism and ophiolatry.

These inscriptions and material remains clearly show the continuity in the occupation of sacred space, first by a serpent deity and then by Buddhists (Ray 2004). Even when Buddhism monumentalized itself in the sacred abode of *naga* deities, rather than eliminating *nagas*, the presence of the *nagas* was made an integral part of it, although they are now shown subservient to the *chakravartin* Buddha. This gives an impression that the *nagas* were assimilated or subjugated and their imagery was "mere ornamentation" and never an "object of worship."

However, from the perspective of the devotees who viewed and experienced the serpent imagery at any Buddhist, Jain or Hindu monument, the power equation recedes into the background, and what emerges more prominently is the *presence* of these ophidian deities in human forms. Their presence at any religious site had much significance. Firstly, the *nagas*, being personifications of nature, made a profound visual impact on the viewers. Their presence visually announced to the viewer that the site was an auspicious one, where their devotion would be fruitful. Secondly, their presence on a *stupa* where the Buddha was not represented anthropomorphically, made the unseen presence of the Buddha manifest and tangible, apparently because they manifested themselves in a human form only on special occasions or in the presence of another remarkable or powerful person (Quintanilla 2007: 18). Whether they are represented as a devotee, guardian deity, subsidiary deity or as mere ornamentation to Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monuments, their sheer presence completes their sacred architecture. And the fact that the Buddha, Parshvanatha, Samkarshana Balarama and Vishnu were worshipped and represented in the fashion of a *Nagaraja*, shows the popularity of serpent deities in early India.

Fig. 9: Majestically seated *Naga* king in his shrine, Cave-16, Ajanta, c. fifth century (Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies)

Fig. 10: A life-sized sculpture of a *Nagi*, outside Temple-31, Sanchi, c. fifth century CE (Photo: Duli Ete)

The veneration of the serpent is also reflected in the people's names inscribed on sacred monuments. The donative inscriptions of Bharhut and Sanchi, for example, record numerous donors named after serpent deities, revealing religious affiliation and the favourite personal deity. The names such as Nagapiya, Nagarakshita, Naga, Nagadata, Nagila, Nagamitra and Ahimitra, etc. honouring serpent deities occur very prominently alongside names that honour the Buddha, the *dhamma*, the s*angha*, the Vedic and *Puranic* gods and popular deities such as *yaksha*s and *bhuta*s in an identical way. These donative inscriptions reveal that the individuals named after *naga* came from different backgrounds. In no way are the names restricted by gender, occupation, social status or rank. There are princes, bankers, wives, monks, and nuns whose names honour serpents. The monks and nuns came from the same society where the serpent was held sacred and venerated. Since Buddhism often chose to establish itself in the sacred abode of the popular deities, the monks and nuns had to be very respectful and wary of their non-human co-residents. As such, those sacred sites were shared among many contemporaneous religious traditions. Gregory Schopen has observed that "a significant number of individuals may have made donations to Buddhist establishments without, however, ever being Buddhist" (Schopen 2004: 384).

Conclusion

Serpent worship, as manifested in the material culture of early India, has a long history. It was not an outcome of the diffusion of serpent worshippers from a cultural epicentre

but of the fear of serpents, which is embedded in human beings as an evolutionary trait. For the same reason, serpent veneration has been a global phenomenon. Yet, it is culturally specific. Different societies across the globe and at different periods in time have translated ophidiophobia differently. Although ophidiophobia does not necessarily translate into ophiolatry, it does generate meanings, symbolism, metaphors, similes and motifs in such a diverse way that the serpent appears to surpass all other animals in this respect.

Serpent imagery formed part of the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu art and architecture, because serpents symbolised those universal aspects without which life cannot be sustained– life-giving water, fertility, protection, and material prosperity to mention a few. These are the necessities which cannot be construed as the needs of one specific religion, race, community, caste or tribe, just as much as ophidiophobia. The presence of serpent imagery in sacred sites or monuments transforms them into a quintessential landscape of their lives, where both spiritual merit and material prosperity can be acquired. Their presence provides a justification for the believers to visit the sacred site, have *darshan* and make donations. The Buddha and the Mahavira teach transcendental values such as *ahimsa* and personal salvation, and the serpent deities were believed to bestow material prosperity. Both are essential to lead a good life as delineated in the *purushartha*. Seen in this light, the purpose of gift-giving was, as put by Romila Thapar, "in part concerned with personal salvation and not altogether uninfluenced by material benefits" (Thapar 1992: 23). It shows that Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and serpent veneration were not mutually exclusive categories, but interdependent and often overlapped.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Parul Pandya Dhar, Professor of Art History, Department of History, University of Delhi, under whose guidance the principal research of this paper was carried out. This paper has gained immensely from Prof. Upinder Singh and Prof. Nayanjot Lahiri, who introduced me to ancient Indian epigraphy and archaeology of religion, respectively, during my Post-Graduation at the University of Delhi. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Robert DeCaroli, Associate Professor, George Mason University, Fairfax, USA, for sending me a copy of his 2011 publication, which was not available to me. I am also indebted to Mrs. Tsering Yangjom, Assistant Professor and Head, Department of History, Dera Natung Government College, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, for her comments on this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Vandana Sinha, Director, and Mr. Sushil Sharma, Assistant Director, Centre for Art and Archaeology (CAA), American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), Gurgaon, for promptly providing me the photographs I requested for this paper. The libraries of CAA, AIIS, Gurgaon; Kalanidhi of Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi; and the Tibet House Library, New Delhi, have been my haunts. I am entirely responsible for any errors.

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