

SERPENT WORSHIP IN INDIA

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The general name for the various snake-gods and snake-people in Hindu mythology is Naga. In the old days in India worship of the Naga was widespread. At the entrance of many old and deserted temples one can still see the traditional lifesize statues of cobras, the keepers of sacred ground that was once trod by many devotees. One famous temple is Nagercoil in South India. Here a great five-headed healing god, Nagaraja, is worshiped. He is the king of snakes. Many live cobras were seen there, both inside and outside of the temple, but no person was ever bitten. Stories about healing magical powers go back five hundred years, when the ruling king Vira Udaya Marthandavarma was cured of leprosy. Since that time this temple of serpent worship has been open to the public, among which have been followers from different religious faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and even Christianity.

In the biblical story of Creation the snake has a cunning character when she persuades Eve, the first woman, and Adam, to eat fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. By the direction of the snake, Adam and Eve wanted to open their eyes and be like God, but in fact only became conscious of their own physical nudity. Then when God wants to speak to Adam again, he finds him hiding out of fear to be seen this way. 'Who gave you the knowledge that you are naked?' Have you been eating from that tree, which I have told you not to eat?', God asks Adam and Eve, and they both point at the snake who deceived them, whereupon God curses the snake above all the cattle and animals in the field, 'On your belly shall you go and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life'.

In Hinduism, the snake has quite a different position, and is associated with the divine in the form

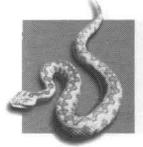
of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Shiva is wearing the snake primarily as an ornament, around the knot in his hair, around his shoulder as sacred thread, as a belt around his waist and as bracelets and anklets. In one of the prayers to Shiva, one of his



Photo: National Geographic, Vol. 138 nr. 3, (Sept. 1970), page 393; no indication about photographer and object.



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names is Bhujagendraharam, He is wearing the king of snakes as his garland. He is the Guru or master of many Yogis, and the Lord of the Divine Mother, called Shakti. Another name for Shakti is Kundalini. In Tantric traditions she is described as a curled up snake at the base of the spine, which slumbers and can be roused by either spiritual practice or spontaneously, to be united with Shiva in the crown of the head. By this the devotee attains cosmic consciousness.

In Hindu mythology it is said that the earth is resting on the head of the snake Sesha, who may be confused with other great Nagas like Ananta and Vasuki. Ananta is sometimes regarded as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu. His tail is lying around the earth in a circle and therefore is symbolic to eternity. Vasuki, the seven-headed Naga-king, served as the rope by which the gods and demons wanted to churn the milk-ocean to obtain Amrita, the nectar of immortality.

There are many fascinating stories around the snake in different cultures and religions around the world. In India the Nagas, the snake gods, are the keepers of the riches of land and sea, and they are connected to hundreds of lakes, sources and wells. According to Narada, the son of Lord Brahma, the heavenly abode Nagaloka or Patala, which is beneath the earth, is the most beautiful of all higher and lower worlds. Some of its snake-residents have five, seven, ten or a thousand heads jewelled with gems that shine like the Sun and therefore drive away all darkness.

Naga Panchami is a special religious celebration in the worship of the snake in India. In a ritual manner, cobras and other snakes are worshiped as the divine and symbolically given milk. Each year this takes place in the month of August.

English Corrections by Lawrence Smith