

The Serpent as a Folk-Deity in Bengal

By

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Of all the animals held in worship in different parts of India, the serpent is the most important. Its cult is widely distributed throughout the whole of India from Kashmir in the north to Cape Comorine in the south, though it is more popular at the latter place. The cult as prevalent in Bengal is somewhat different in character from what it is in the other parts of North India. Among the common run of people both in Bengal and in the south the cult has retained its primitive character to a very great extent. Roughly speaking, in North India the image of a serpent considered male in character and known as Nagaraja or the king of the snakes is held in worship, and in the south it is the living snakes to whom worship is often offered. Instead of the "king of the serpents" and the living snakes, an anthropomorphic serpent goddess known as Manasa is worshiped in Bengal. An exclusive cult known as the Manasa-cult has developed in this part of the country and is highly popular among all sections of the Hindus, especially among the lower classes in some areas. The rites as observed in connection with the worship of the serpent-goddess Manasa differ widely in the different districts of Bengal, but a careful analysis of these rites shows that they have originated from a common source. The elements of difference which have developed in the meantime are nothing but local factors and as such have no intrinsic relationship with the fundamental factors.

Throughout Bengal the area covered by the district of

Birbhum in West Bengal has undoubtedly the largest number of votaries of the serpent-deity Manasa. Any casual visitor to the rural areas of this district will certainly agree with me on this point. Even to this day the serpent-worship in Birbhum is a very well-developed and living cult. Almost in every village in this district a visitor will come across one or more serpent shrines. These are but low mud-walled straw huts situated within the house-quadrangles of some of the lower class Hindus. Daily worship is offered in most of these shrines, where invariably a Hinduized aboriginal serves as priest and conducts the worship. People of the various sections of the Hindu community ungrudgingly join the worship, though the educated higher class Hindus generally disassociate themselves from it. Such shrines are maintained by a class of priests known as *Deyasi* or *Dyasi*, Sanskritized sometimes to *Devamsi*, meaning a part and parcel of the gods, though the word is believed to have been derived from *Deva-vasi* 'associate of a god'. But I think the word has originated from some non-Aryan source. For in southern India the word *Deyasi* is still very widely used in rural areas to denote a headman, who may be said in a manner to correspond to a Justice of the Peace. Due to the growing influence of Hinduism, Brahmin priests are also requisitioned on special occasions. Sometimes the maintenance of the serpent-shrines is the only source of income of the *Deyasis* who also act as exorcists in cases of snake-bite. It is rather strange that the serpent-worship in the neighbouring districts of Birbhum is neither as widespread nor as developed as it is in Birbhum proper. The area of Murshidabad district which is contiguous to Birbhum and falls west of the river Bhagirathi is however an exception.

The serpent-shrines have no provision for the entry of air and light from outside when the only door is closed after the daily worship. Within in the darkness are installed on raised altars the images of the serpent-deity known by various local names at various places, e.g., Chintamani (literally meaning a fabulous gem able to grant the possessor whatever he wishes), Jalduburi (diver), Visahari (destroyer of poison), Padma, Padma-kumari (lotus maiden), Budima (the old mother), Dulaler Ma (Dulal's mother, and various others. A Bagdi, Kaot or Mal, all Hinduized aboriginals, is entrusted with the duty of performing the worship, a duty which is adopted as an hereditary profession. On the raised altar within the shrine are to

be seen three, five or seven earthen pitchers, with carvings of hoods of snakes around them. The pitchers are covered with a thick layer of vermilion which is being deposited on them since the day of their installation some decades back. Very rarely, however, one pitcher representing the deity is also seen, but in all cases it must be an odd number. On the top of each image are placed green leaves of the milky hedge plant (*Euphorbia lingularum*), which are daily replaced at the time of worship. Some times brass nails, offered by the devotees in fulfilment of their mental vows, are stuck to the outer side of the images. These nails are known as *chik* (one which glitters), because they glitter in the dim light of the lamp which burns within. The images are considered to be mutually related to each other as sisters, and I have already stated that they are also individually named. Numerous legends are in vogue in connection with these earthen pitchers, which are worshiped as the serpent deity.

I have now to give here an account of serpent worship as it is practised in North Bengal, where the serpent cult is also very widely prevalent. From the archaeological discoveries of Paharpur in Dinajpur district, which adjoins Maldah on the east and northeast, it is evident that serpent worship was a highly popular cult in this area from as early as the eleventh century A.D. Both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic serpent-images have been discovered from there. In this area there is no permanent serpent shrine anywhere. The worship is held once in the whole year with great pomp. The orthodox Hindu serpent festival known as Naga-Panchami is unknown here even among the higher class Hindus. The last day of the Bengali month of Sravana (July-August), instead of the Naga-Panchami day, is the day for ritual worship. The rites are conducted either at the public places of such worship or in the houses of the individual worshippers. Usually no image of the deity is generally made, but on this occasion the earthen images of the eight principal serpents of the Mahabharata legend (or sometimes of one serpent, probably of Astika of the same legend) are worshiped. In most cases instead of any image the milky hedge plant is worshiped as the seat of the serpent-deity. Special offerings, consisting of milk and fried rice and sometimes of milk with banana kept in big-sized arum leaves, are offered to the deity. In East Maldah the floors of rooms, verandah and the courtyards are beautifully decorated with special designs of rice-paste draw-

ings resembling the winding gait of the serpent. In some places the womenfolk abstain from taking food on that occasion. In most of the Hindu families no food is cooked on that day. This ceremonial or ritual abstinence of cooking is known as *arandhan*, and is observed on other occasions also.

The Rajvamsi constitute the main population of Rangpur, Cooch Bihar and Jalpaiguri districts. Serpent worship is also practised among them with due pomp and grandeur. In the Raj family of Jalpaiguri, which also belongs to the Rajvamsi clan, idols illustrating the principal serpent legend are displayed on this occasion when a large fair is also held. Sometimes the festival continues when a large fair is also held. Sometimes the festival continues for the whole month during which various folk-entertainments are offered.

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Barring a few minor exceptions, on the whole there is unity in the rituals of serpent-worship in the districts along the Ganges. Among them the western part of the district of Murshidabad is naturally influenced by the district of Birbhum. Elsewhere such as in East Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, Nadia and 24 Parganas there is very little or no difference in ritualistic observations of serpent-worship. In this part of Bengal there are public places of worship of the serpent-deity in almost every village where worship is held on the prescribed date, invariably before a milky hedge plant which grows in size as years roll by. People assemble there irrespective of caste and creed and offer their worship without, however, making any animal sacrifices. Sometimes the higher class Hindu women, instead of going over to such places of public worship, perform the ceremonies at their own houses with the assistance of the Brahmin priests. In that case also a branch of the milky hedge plant will be invariably kept upon a conventional type of earthen pitcher which will form the chief object of worship. No image is built nor any animal is sacrificed in this connection. Dasahara (the day on which the river Ganges is ceremonially worshiped), Naga-

Panchami (the day on which the serpent is worshiped all over the India by the orthodox Hindus), the last day of the Bengali month of Ashadha (June-July), of Sravana (July-August), and of Bhadra (August-September), roughly speaking the four months of rains, are the occasions when the serpent-deity is worshiped.

In some villages small brick-built shrines are also raised permanently at such places of public worship by some munificent devotee. Permanent images built of metals or stones are also sometimes installed inside the shrines. At Khidderpore near Calcutta, within a shrine there is a big image of the serpent deity made of brass which must have attracted the notice of many passers-by. Daily worship of the goddess is held at this place throughout the year. Only in a very few places in East Bengal are there permanent shrines of the serpent-goddess. I know of only two such places; one is known as Manasa-Bari (house of Manasa) of Vikrampur in Dacca and the other is known as Jalkumari's Bari (house of Jalkumari) of Suchakradandi in Chittagong. I have also heard that there are a few such places in the district of Sylhet, but I have no personal knowledge of them. Animal sacrifice is an indispensable adjunct to the rituals in East Bengal.

Owing to wide prevalence of the cult among all classes of people in East Bengal, a very elaborate and complicated ritual has developed in this area with regard to its observance. Though the modes of worship are fundamentally the same, yet they differ in detail to a considerable extent. There is little difference in ritualistic observances of this cult in the area covered by East Mymensing, West Sylhet and North Tippera. This area can be accepted as a social and cultural unit. The annual celebration of serpent-worship is held here on the last day of the Bengali month of Sravana when the whole of the above area is practically covered by a vast sheet of water overflowing from the Assam and Surma Valleys. People irrespective of caste and creed build clay images of the snake-deity and worship her at their own houses individually with sacrifices either of goat or of pigeon. The Vaisnavas (the worshipers of Visnu) who do not take meat, offer the goddess sacrifices of sugar-cane, pumpkin and other vegetables. The image has two or sometimes four arms; two clay snakes spread their hoods on either side of her shoulder. On the following day, before the image is immersed in the river, the earthen snakes are taken

out of the image and placed in the house. People believe that the dried earth of these clay snakes is an infallible remedy of many incurable diseases, especially children's diseases. There is one very interesting item among the objects of worship here, which is nowhere met with now-a-days. This is known as *Karandi*, which is worshiped along with the image and sometimes in lieu of it. It is made of Indian cork (*shola*) in the shape of a small house, generally not more than two feet in height. Coloured drawings of serpents, the serpent-goddess and some characters with some incidents of the serpent-legend are made on the conical outer roof and the flat outer walls. These drawings are undoubtedly among the remarkable specimens of folk-art in Bengal. After the animal is sacrificed its blood is sprinkled on the *Karandi* which is sometimes preserved in the house with the stains of blood on it, though more frequently floated down the river on the immersion day. Besides the *Karandi* there is another essential ingredient necessary for the worship of the serpent deity. These are the tiny pictures (*ghat*) made of clay and shaped in a peculiar fashion, like a thin pipe with two snakes spreading their hoods on either side of it. Sometimes a human face, obviously that of the serpent-deity, is carved out of the upper part of the pipe. These pictures are known as *Kaitari Ghat*. Though the word *Kaitar* in East Bengal means pigeon, I failed to understand how this particular bird could be associated with an object of serpent worship. These pitchers are filled with corn and kept beside the image during the ceremonies. Milk and bananas in vessels made of plantain bark are placed in the *Karandi* as the special offerings to the serpents. Eight kinds of fried foods such as pea, oil-seed and other pulses form the special offerings for the eight principal serpents of the Mahabharata legend.

The special feature of the serpent festival in this part of the province is the rice-paste drawings (*alipana*). The entire venue of worship is decorated, with these drawings representing serpents in various designs. Around these drawings other paintings illustrating the chief incidents of the principal Bengali snake-story are also drawn. Coloured powders are used in such drawings. The entire floor of the room appears to be a picture-gallery. From the first day of the Bengali month of Sravana until the day of the worship, which falls on the last day of the month, the principal snake story is recited in part every day after nightfall before the assembly of villagers. The immersion

ceremony of the deity takes place on the day following her worship. This occasion is marked by a national festival, namely the boat-race. It is very difficult to say how the boat-race has come to be associated with the immersion ceremony of the serpent-deity. I have already stated that this area is covered by a vast sheet of water during the rainy season. These marshy lands are known as *haor*—the word seems to have been derived from the Sanskrit word '*Sagara*' meaning the sea. There are certain regular places where the racing boats of the neighbouring villages assemble and compete; the winning boat ties a new piece of cloth on its prow as a symbol of victory.

The districts of Dacca, Faridpur and Bakherganj form another distinct socio-cultural unit. The area known as Vikrampur, included within it, is the section most effectively influenced by Hinduism in the whole of East Bengal, and has developed certain rituals in the line more of Hinduism proper than of the popular faiths. Serpent-worship is also a very well-developed cult here, its rituals being more complicated than in any other part of Bengal.

The Naga-Panchami, mentioned above, is very widely prevalent here among all classes of Hindus. On this occasion, worship is conducted of the eight principal serpents of the Mahabharata legend, or nine or forty-two serpents according to the family tradition of each worshiper. Earthen images of serpents with raised hoods, the number of which is determined according to the tradition prevailing in each family, are made and worshiped on this occasion. Worship in all cases is ministered by the Brahmin priests without any scruple whatsoever. The serpent-deity is also worshiped on the last day of the Bengali month of Sravana as in other places of East Bengal; the worship of the serpent-deity on this particular day is known as the worship of *Pat Visahari*. In most houses, a pitcher representing the serpent-deity is installed on the first day of the Bengali month of Sravana and worshiped up to the last day of the same month, when it is ceremonially immersed. The house-wives, young or old, are not allowed to go to their fathers' houses on any account after the pitcher has been ceremonially installed within the house. Though there is no dearth of watery stretches in the above area, yet the boat-festival is seldom celebrated here on such or any other occasions now-a-days.

Neither Nag-Panchami nor the worship of Pat-Visahari is a matter of importance so far as serpent-worship is concerned

among the people of the above area. The most important serpent-festival is known here as *Rayani*, a word of doubtful origin. *Rayani* can be celebrated at any time of the year. It is indeed a very important social festival among the Hindus of the above area though it is unknown elsewhere in Bengal. When a child is born in a family a mental vow is taken by its head to the effect that the snake-festival known as *Rayani* would be performed on the occasion of its marriage or sacred-thread ceremony, if the child is a male and Brahmin or Vaisya by caste. It is indeed a very costly affair. Therefore due to economic reasons a greater part of its rituals is now being sacrificed though only a couple of decades back the festival used to be celebrated with all its complicated details. The worship is arranged to be held two or three days before the actual sacred thread or the marriage ceremony as the case may be. The celebration of *Rayani* extends over a period either of five or two and a half days according to the custom prevailing in each family, or, in the absence of such a custom, according to the mental vow taken for either of the above periods at the time of the child's birth. In this connection, clay images of the serpent-goddess as big as the image of the goddess Durga (three to four feet in height) are sometimes built. On either side of the image are placed three or four images of her associates. In front of these images a row of idols representing the chief character of the principal Bengali serpent-story are placed side by side, each on his or her distinct seat. The snake-story is recited musically through the night. Nobody dares to hold the marriage of his son or daughter without performing this ceremony, because of the strong belief that on failure to do so snakes will create trouble for the married couple.

The rituals of the serpent-worship in some parts of Bengal have merged into the popular Saivism of those areas. As the serpent is the ornament of Siva according to the Puranic tradition, it has been found convenient to absorb the serpent-cult within Saivism from an early period of time. In many popular Saiva shrines live snakes are found to be preserved. I have myself seen some living snakes in a village shrine of Siva in the district of Burdwan. They live inside holes made on the walls and floor of the shrine and generally feed on milk and other offerings given before the deity at the time of worship. Gradually they increase in number, but nobody coming to the temple is afraid of them nor do these 'domesticated' serpents cause any harm

to anybody. At the time of worship these snakes come out of their holes where they hide themselves during the day and night. After the worship is over they take food and drink offered by the priest and then quietly retire to their holes. In some places serpents live in the hollow of big *peepul* trees which shade the shrines below. At the time of the annual worship of Siva offerings are also made to them by the devotees. None ever think of causing any harm to them. Snake charmers are also not allowed to catch these snakes which are considered absolutely harmless due to their supposed divine association. In places where the serpent-worship has practically merged into the local Siva-cult no rituals exclusively of the serpent-goddess are found to exist. They have been inseparably connected with the rituals of Siva.

In some places of West Bengal even today a special serpent-festival, secular in character, is observed. This is known as *Jhampan* which really means a stage erected to exhibit tricks with snakes. It is held on the last day of the Bengali month of Sravana (August-September) when the annual serpent-worship is held throughout the whole of Bengal. Though due to the influence of present urban culture it is fast becoming obsolete, yet it was a very common affair during the last century. *Jhampan* is really the annual conference of the snake-charmers or exorcists of a particular area. The exorcists of a particular area, or disciples of a particular preceptor in snake-charming assemble at an appointed spot on this occasion and show various tricks and feats with live snakes, claimed to be venomous, as they proceed with music along the public road. Sometimes the disciples of a particular preceptor carry him on their shoulders along the road on a mobile platform on which the preceptor rides, showing various tricks with live snakes. Sometimes a bullock-cart is also used as the mobile platform for this purpose. The eager crowd on either side of the road, with a mixed feeling of horror and delight, witness the performance. The chief among the dexterities of the exorcists is to show how they remove the poisonous fangs of the serpents. Sometimes the exorcists coil the snakes around their necks and arms. Fatal cases of snake-bite among over-exuberant participants sometimes occur in the course of their display of feats made with snakes with their poisonous fangs unextracted. I have been told that due to fatal consequences the practice has long been abandoned in many places, with little prospect of

future revival. The practice is confined among the *Kayat* or *Kaivarta* (fisherman class) in particular, though as a rule every exorcist, to whatever caste he belongs, is allowed to participate in it.

A very rich folk-literature flourished in Bengal about the local legends of the serpent-goddess Manasa, probably as early as the thirteenth century A.D. One of these legends, written in the form of narrative poetry, gained the widest popularity of all the classes of folk-literature in Bengal, throughout not only this state but also the neighbouring states of Assam and Bihar. Hundreds of poets composed verses with the same theme which is being carried down the generations for centuries even to this day. This is known as the legend of the merchant Chand and Behula. It is not however the only story extant in Bengal that sings the glory of the serpent-deity Manasa. There is yet another which is recited in the course of the ceremonial worship of the deity held by the Bengali women during the months of rain. Besides the above there are innumerable snake-stories of a secular character in the folk-literature of Bengal.

The principal Bengali snake-story or the narrative of Chand Sadagar in its various forms has been contributing to Bengali secular folk amusement from very ancient times. These are the four principal forms in which the narrative has been adopted for folk-amusement: viz, *Bhasan Yatra*, a popular drama; *Rayani*, a kind of musical entertainment; *Jagaran*, a musical recitation of the narrative; and *Putul Natch*, a puppet dance. In addition to these principal forms there are a few others of minor importance. All the above forms are still prevalent in different parts of Bengal though they are already decaying due to the impact of urban culture.