

5. THE NĀGAS AND SERPENT-WORSHIPPERS IN INDIA.

15, Willow Road, Hampstead Heath,
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DEAR SIR,—I have heard with interest Dr. Oldham's novel and ingenious theory regarding the ethnological affinities of the Nagas. But I greatly doubt whether the Naga to-tem—or totemic—worship of any kind had much to do with the origin or diffusion of serpent-worship in India—at any rate in the North-West Provinces—the part of India with which I am best acquainted. And this for two reasons: 1st, We have the same general features and the same superstitions which characterize serpent-worship in other countries; 2nd, The distinctive marks of totem-worship are, so far as I know, entirely wanting.

To give some examples of my first proposition. Snakes are regarded as the guardians of secret treasure. Many years ago in the Furukhabad District I asked some villagers regarding a ruinous mound in their vicinity. I was told that a palace lay beneath—in which there was a great hoard of gold; but it was guarded by the cobra-king: and when a villager once ventured to dig for it, the cobra-king came with his army of cobras at midnight, surrounded the house in which the man lay, and bit the audacious wretch to death. Then they are supposed to haunt strange and weird-looking trees. A mango tree of this kind once stood in my garden. On its topmost boughs it was said there lived a huge and aged cobra—it might be 100 years old—who descended to the earth only at the darkest hour of night, and was rarely if ever visible by mortal eye. Snakes are also the guardians of divinely inspired, or protected, children. A story was current two or three years ago of a cobra, which had glided out of the forest and coiled itself round a little girl of ten or twelve. It canopied her head for a while with its hood, and then returned to the forest. This it did three days running. So far, all the stories I have heard mentioned only cobras; but there are many superstitions common to all snakes. It is counted uncanny to kill any snake: it is sure to take vengeance (*badla lega*). A lady,

who was travelling in the Himalayas, compelled her porters to kill a snake which had glided on the path. They remonstrated and warned her of the consequences; and, next day, thanks to the snaky ghost, or the assistance it derived from the porters, her "dandy" broke down, and she was thrown on the ground. Another popular superstition is that a person bitten by a snake will not die as long as the snake is kept alive. I have known men carry *karaiths* about in earthen pots, when they brought their friends to be cured. Some snakes, too, are supposed to be endowed with preternatural cleverness. *Dhamans*, for instance, are said to be able to stand up and milk the cows at pasture without hurting them. These illustrations will suffice, I think, to show that the popular superstitions in India regarding snakes are very similar to those which prevail in other countries. They appear to differ in only one important point. I have never heard of any oracular power attributed to snakes, but this may simply be because I never inquired regarding it.¹

I am not aware that actual worship is ever paid to snakes, although they are kindly treated, and individuals frequently place basins of milk at night for snakes to drink. A similar practice still prevails, I believe, in Germany. As to serpent-totem worship, I have never seen any traces of it in the North-West Provinces. In totem-worship we expect to find that all the members of a family or tribe reverence the totem—while it is persecuted by their enemies. I could never find that any tribe or caste as such revered the serpent. It has always seemed to me a matter of individual belief, and we find instances of it in every class of society, from the most orthodox Hindus to the lowest aborigines. It is strongest, I think, as might be expected, among the Vishnuites, and the hill-tribes of Kumaon, or at the foot of the Himalayas, a region which abounds with superstitions, as with jungle; and the snake has no enemies, for the Naths (gipsies), who are professional snake-killers, kill them

¹ There is no connection between serpent and river worship in India any more than there was in Egypt or (until a later period) in Babylonia.

for reward, but have no special hostility. Moreover, many persons who will not kill snakes themselves have no objection to bring them to you to be killed. Not long ago a man brought me a number of earthen pots full of live cobras to be killed. I demanded to see some before I paid him the reward. He darted his bare arm into a pot, seized two large cobras, one after the other, by the middle, and flung them on the ground within a few feet of me. I made no further question.

The cobra, by his terrific aspect and his deadly venom, naturally takes the highest rank among snakes; indeed, the cobras are, I think, the only snakes that have a king. But the cobra by no means monopolizes the popular imagination or Hindu mythology. For instance, there are two representations at least in the Amaravati sculptures where three men carry in triumph a gigantic snake—which they have captured or killed. It is apparently a python. In almost all mythologies the serpent plays a double part—it is an obvious symbol of the awful and mysterious power which resides in a divinity or king. On the other hand, it is an embodiment of the evil principle of the earth. And as in early ages the physical and moral are inextricably intertwined, the serpent becomes more than an emblem: it becomes an incarnation of the mysterious double nature which it symbolizes. Serpent-worship in Egypt appears to me the nearest analogy to serpent-worship in India—except that in Egypt the opposition between the divine uraeus and the evil snake is more strongly marked perhaps. However that may be, the uraeus which raises its hooded head on the crown of every Egyptian divinity and king, and the solar hawk which hovers over the statue of Cephren at Ghizeh, are an exact counterpart of the cobra which overcanopies Buddha or Siva and the eagle of Garuda. The Naga worship described by Dr. Oldham is no doubt a case of totem worship; but I think it is more probable to believe that it arose out of or contemporaneously with the prevailing serpent-worship, than that it should have spread serpent-worship throughout the length of the land.—Yours truly,

J. KENNEDY.

The Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society.