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THE TRADITION OF SERPENT WORSHIP IN GOA: A CRITICAL STUDY

SANDIP A. MAJIK

Research Student, Department of History, Goa University, Goa 403206 E-mail: sandipmajik29@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: As in many other States of India, the State of Goa has a strong tradition of serpent cult from the ancient period. Influence of Naga people brought rich tradition of serpent worship in Goa. In the course of time, there was gradual change in iconography of serpent deities and pattern of their worship. There exist a few writings on serpent worship in Goa. However there is much scope to research further using recent evidences and field work. This is an attempt to analyse the tradition of serpent worship from a historical and analytical perspective.

Keywords: Nagas, Tradition, Sculpture, Inscription

The Ancient World

Animal worship is very common in the religious history of the ancient world. One of the earliest stages of the growth of religious ideas and cult was when human beings conceived of the animal world as superior to them. This was due to obvious deficiency of human beings in the earliest stages of civilisation. Man not equipped with scientific knowledge was weaker than the animal world and attributed the spirit of the divine to it, giving rise to various forms of animal worship. Of all the forms of animal worship, the worship of serpents became most popular throughout the length and breadth of the ancient world.¹

The serpent has always been an object of fear and wonder. Its capacity to move fast without legs and to live on land and in water, its deadly poison, and the ability to periodically shed its skin and grow a new one, keen sense of audition and reputed ability to live on the air it breathes, have excited the human imagination and given rise to a vast serpent lore.² The serpent cult is very ancient and prevailed in several parts of the world like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Crete, Judah, Phoenicia, Scandinavia, and Great Britain and still continues in some countries.³ The Naga worship in India became more popular due to its association with Shiva, Vishnu, Buddha and deities of the Jain pantheon. The Naga acts as a garland of Shiva, a bed of and canopy for Vishnu, a belt for Ganesh and weapon for (ayudha) several other deities.⁴

The Naga Tribe and Serpent Worship in Goa

The earliest of the race that inhabited Goa and made it habitable through agricultural pursuits was of Austric origin and the Negritos who had preceded them. The Gaudo in Goa is probably the direct descendant of this race. The people who succeeded this race and overpowered it by a higher civilisation were the Dravidians. Other tribes that rose to eminence were the Kols and Nagas.⁵

The Sanskrit word *naga* is actually derived from the word *naga*, meaning mountain. Since all the Dravidian tribes trace their origin from mountains, it may probably be presumed that those who lived in such places came to be called Nagas.⁶ The worship of serpent deities in India appears to have come from the Austric world.⁷

During the historical migration of the forebears of the modern Dravidians to India, the separation of the ancestors of Gonds (Nagas) took place in about 2000 B. C. These Nagas who migrated from the Indus valley were the totemistic people with the serpent as their totem. Thus the Nagas can be considered to be a tribe associated with the serpent, at times tracing their descent from it, bearing it on their crest and banner.⁸ This type of sculptural depiction of Naga people is noticed in the Sanchi stupa. They possess a common religious faith of Saiva-Sakta nature and serpent cult.

After their migration in India, the Nagas became a powerful and widespread people of more than usual importance, who appear to have been in the occupation of different parts of India from about 2000 B. C.⁹ They were worshippers of the snake, and left their imprint all over the country, from place name to local tradition.¹⁰ These Nagas must not be identified with the Nagas of Nagaland in the north-east India, who were not snake worshippers.¹¹

The widespread prevalence of serpent worship in Goa, may be due to the earliest rulers in Goa and other Konkan region who were some Naga tribal chiefs. It is known that the Kuntala country, which included parts of Karnataka and Western Deccan (perhaps Goa too) was ruled by the Nagas.¹² In this connection we have some inscriptional evidences from Goa. For example, the Shiroda copper plates of Bhojas mention that one of the ministers had the name *Prabhu Naga Bogikamatya*.¹³ After the Bhoja rule, the second major dynasty that ruled

in Goa was Goa Kadambas. The Marcella copper plate of Kadambas mentions the name of Kadamba king Naagavarma.¹⁴ Similarly the Devagiri plates of the Kadamba King Krishnavarma I connect his family with that of the Nagas.¹⁵ The copper plate inscription from Priol Ponda belonging to the 11th century A. D.,¹⁶ copper plate inscription of Kadamba king Nagdeva from Mapusa (Kasarpal) 1352 A. D.¹⁷ and the stone inscription from Nageshi Ponda 15th century A.D.¹⁸ refer to the Naga. The stone inscription from Adcona belonging to 1688 A. D. and displayed in the Goa State Museum, also mentions a minister by name Dharmaji Nagnath.¹⁹

The existing historical writings on Goa allude to the influence of the Nagas on Goan culture. Based on the existing Sanskrit literature, B. D. Satoskar argued that “the Naga people were the original inhabitants of Aparant or Konkan. As Goa is situated in the middle of the Konkan region, it may be assumed that Naga people inhabited Goa”.²⁰ Similar kind of argument is also made by J. F. Fleet who pointed out that the Western Deccan and part of Karnataka were ruled by the Nagas in the ancient period. Given the nature of Naga worship prevalent in Goa, this land too must have been governed by the Naga tribal chiefs.²¹ According to Iravati Karve, tribes like Baiga, Gond, and Koli from Madhya Pradesh had relation with Nagakula. Further she says that the Mundas belong to the Nagvanshi. Naagav, Nagapada, Panvel (Pannavel), Nagpur, Nagothane are some place names in Maharashtra where the traditions of Naga worship existed. Initially, such hilly tribe like the Naga fought against the Aryan and at the end they ran towards the forests of east and south.²² Probably they came and settled in the region of Konkan and Goa since today there exist village names in Goa like Nagoa in Bardez, Nagoa in Salcete, Nagaali in Tiswadi, Nageshi in Ponda and Nagve in Sattari. According to B. D. Satoskar, “the dating of the arrival of Naga people in India and Konkan has not been fixed. However these people might have intermingled with other people without maintaining their separate existence”.²³ Further he quoted V. K. Rajwade and stated that these people were known as Kshatriyas and as proof to this he cited some surname of Marathas of the Konkan.²⁴ A. R. Dhume disagreed with the views of Satoskar and Rajwade and wrote: “the Marathas with hegemony in the country tried to link their genealogical origin with the mythical Nagas”.²⁵ K. D. Naik says that in the foundation of Goan culture, the Naga race also played a role and these people might be snake worshippers. That might be the reason for the presence of plenty of snake worshipping symbol in Goa.²⁶ Though the Naga worship is a strong tradition among the Hindus in Goa, a special reference needs to be made to the Marathas of Goa who strongly believe in Naga worship. V. K. Rajwade wrote that the Marathas migrated to the Deccan from Magadhadesh long before the Christian era. They had cohesion with the Nagas in Maharashtra and by which three ‘*vanshas*’ namely Sun (*Suryavansha*), Moon (*Chandravansha*) and Serpent (*Nagavansha*) came into existence.²⁷

Empirical Evidences

V. R. Mitragotri studied Goan sculpture and revealed that the Bhoja and Chalukayan sculptures are only few in Goa. Analyzing the 4th century A.D. Naga god from Peddem in Canacona, he viewed that it has characteristic of post-Gupta period with thick lips, flat ear-rings and five serpent hood.²⁸ Another image of Naga god belongs to 10th century A. D., and is popularly known as *modkodev* (broken god) and found at Talauli Ponda.²⁹ The sculpture here depicts half human body and half serpent tail with serpent hood. Another slightly defaced Naga sculpture belongs to 13th century A. D. It is popularly known as *semrodev* and found at Shantinagar, Ponda. This image of Naga god is found in seating position, and holding serpent in the hand with five serpent hood.³⁰

Besides these serpent gods, there are several serpent goddess sculptures found in Goa. They include the Nagin sculpture from Chandor, Salcete belonging to pre-Kadamba period; Snake Goddess Khamini from Keri, Ponda belonging to 17th C. A. D.; and Snake goddess from Kapileshwari, Ponda 18th C. A. D.³¹ In some parts of Goa, these serpent deities are merged with the *Sateri* goddess. For example the *chaturbhuj*a sculpture of *Sateri* goddess of Narve village of Bicholim taluka is seen holding the serpent in both the hands.³² Similarly the standing image of *Sateri* goddess from Shigaon is also seen holding the serpent in both the hands.³³

Besides these, in the northern part of Goa particularly Sattari, Bicholim, Dharbandoda and Pernem talukas, the serpent goddess is worshipped in the name of *Brahmanimaya*. There are many sculptures of this deity found in these four talukas. Individually, in Sattari taluka more than hundred sculptures of serpent goddess are found. Normally, the iconography of this goddess is so simple that she is shown with *dvibhuj*a holding serpent in both the hands. Some old sculptures of *Brahmanimaya* are found in standing posture, but most of the sculptures are seen in *padmasana* in seating posture. In some of the sculptures, the deity used serpent as her vehicle.

The shrines of *nagakal* are found at Tamdi Surla and Talde villages in Dharbandoda taluka. At the Mahadeva temple of Tamdi Surla, three sculptures of serpent deities are displayed outside the *garbhagriha* of the temple.³⁴ In the Talde village, which is five kilometres away from Tamdi Surla, the *Gramdevata* temple is devoted to the serpent goddess *Brahmanimaya*. This temple, is very small in size, but has a plinth very rich in carvings of different deities. The significance of this carved art at the basement of the temple is the serpent motif which is shown at the footsteps of the entrance. The images of serpent-god *Bramhan* and serpent goddess - *Brahmanimaya* who holds serpents in both the hands are also carved here.³⁵

In Goa, there existed several shrines of Nagnath in the pre-portuguese era. Such examples include the shrines in

Verla and Sirula in Bardez taluka, Casaulim, Cavorim Sarzora and Naikinim in Sanguem taluka, Mummgoa in Salcete taluka and Tollem ward at Usgaon in Ponda taluka.³⁶

The Colonial Impact

The Portuguese colonial rule in Goa saw religious suppression of the Hindus. There was large scale destruction of Hindu temples and shrines in Tiswadi, Bardez and Salcete talukas. These were known as Old Conquests. Several Hindu deities were destroyed and defaced in Goa. The sculptures of *modkudev* and *semrodev* from Ponda taluka could be the result of the colonial suppression of religion in Goa. Though the old shrines were destroyed, the people of the Old Conquests had not given up the faith of traditional deities and they continued to venerate them with or without the shrine.³⁷

The Tradition of Nagache Vounshe

The tradition of offering *vounshe* is followed by the Old Marathas of Goa on the occasion of *Nagapanchami* (festival of serpent). This is noticed among the Parab community from Palyem and Naik community from Harmal - both in Pernem taluka and Shetye community from Menkurem and Naik community from Amthane village - both in Bicholim taluka. These communities worship the clay idol of snake and perform *vounshe* ceremony which is popularly known as *Nagachevounshe*³⁸ (with the blessing of serpent god, the

newly married woman is ritually included in their clan). This ritual has lot of significance as it bestows religious and clan sanctity for the woman and also blesses her for procuring child.

The Parabs of Palyem village in Pernem taluka worship *Vaaterampurush* as their family deity. They observe the ritual of *vounshe* on *Nagapanchami*. The ritual of *Vounshe* is unique and important to the Maratha community. The offering of *vounshe* on the occasion of *Nagapanchami* highlights the importance of the *nagas* to the Parab community.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is evident that the Naga tribe introduced the Naga or Serpent worship in Goa during the second millennium B. C. The prevalence of Serpent worship in various parts of Goa, through the centuries, from the ancient period to the present, is proved by historical evidences like names of Bhoja and Kadamba kings, place names, sculptures depicting the Naga, Naga shrines, different forms of Naga worship, customs, traditions and belief in Naga worship. It is connected with prosperity of the believers and their procreation. The tradition was so deep rooted that it could survive the ordeal of suppression during the Portuguese rule. The Naga cult or tradition of Naga worship is strong in Goa as in the other parts of India in general, and in the neighbouring regions of Maharashtra and Karnataka in particular.

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¹⁹ Stone inscription of Chatrapati Sambhaji found at Adcon, Ponda displayed in the Goa State Museum, Panaji, Goa.

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²⁹ This sculpture of Naga is in the collection of the Goa State Museum, Panaji.

³⁰ Shrine of the snake god *Semrodev* found at Shantinagar, Ponda.

³¹ These three female deities are in the collection of the Goa State Museum, Panaji.

³² This sculpture of the Sateri goddess is found near the village temple of Narve in Bicholim taluka.

³³ This sculpture is in the collection of the Goa State Museum.

³⁴ Three sculptures of the Serpent deities are displayed outside the *garbhagriha* of the Mahadeva temple at Tamdi Surla in Dharbandoda taluk, Goa.

³⁵ This is found in the Talde village in Dharbandoda taluka, Goa.

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