

ISSN No. 2277-744X

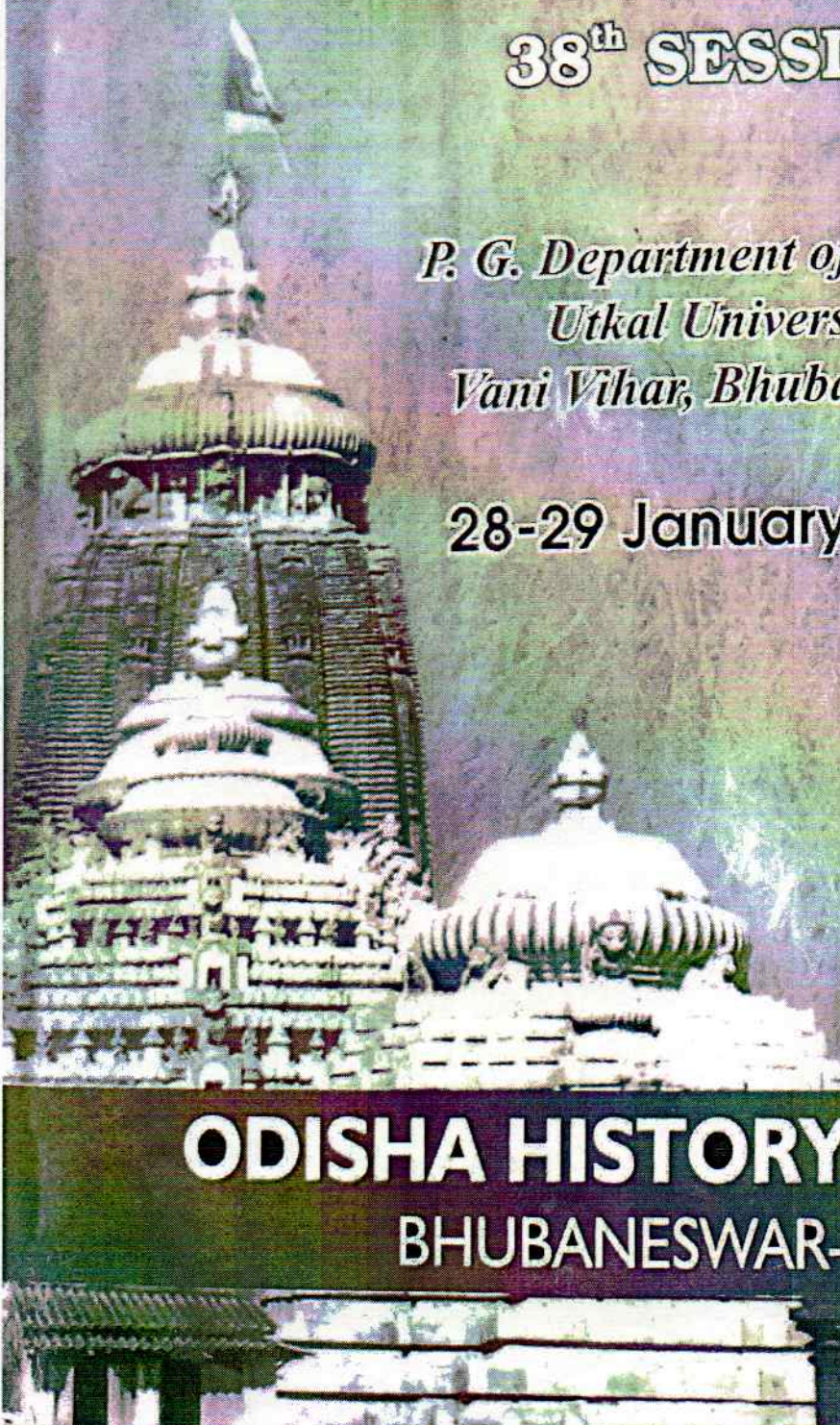


**PROCEEDINGS OF THE
ODISHA HISTORY CONGRESS
38th SESSION**

*P. G. Department of History
Utkal University
Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar*

28-29 January 2017

**ODISHA HISTORY CONGRESS
BHUBANESWAR- INDIA**



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ANTIQUITIES OF NAGA WORSHIP IN ODISHA

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The tradition of Serpent worship seems to have been one of the oldest and most widespread forms of religious cult in India. The origin of the cult is intimately connected with the effect which all animals more or less had upon the mind of early man, a feeling that they were stronger, wiser subtler than all. And this phenomenon was especially true of the serpent because of its swift yet graceful and mysterious gliding motion without feet or wing unlike that of any animal, its power of disappearing suddenly, brilliance and power of fascination of its eyes, its beauty and strength, the sudden fatal consequences of its bite, the practice of casting its skin which suggest its longevity or even immortality. All these queer attributes contributed to arouse feelings of wonder, respect and fear to produce worship and connect it in innumerable myths.¹

The origin of Snake worship was associated with so called Takshaka tribe of Central Asia.² And it was introduced in India by the scythians and other invaders from Central Asia.³ On the other hand, innumerable references are found about the prevalence of Naga worship in the ancient scriptures of India, such as Vedas, Epics, *Sutras* and in many other religious and secular literature. Though the worship of the serpent was in embryonic stage during the period of the Rigvedic People, it became a regular object of worship during the post-Vedic period. The serpent had found such good place among the Vedic and post-Vedic deities that the *Grihya-sutras* contain the account of *Sarpabali* which is an annual rite for two specific purposes namely honoring of the serpents and warding off of any evil from them. Likewise, the great Epics (the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) are full of references to the worship of serpents in various ways. And the place of serpent in the later orthodox cult like Brahmanical Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and also regional cults is conspicuous by its presence in architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, tradition and folklore.⁴ On the whole the wide distribution of snakes, the presence of antiquities displaying Naga art throughout India and the propitiation and worship of the Nagas by the followers of different religions in India suggest that, the Naga cult in one of the most popular forms of worship in India.

Antiquity of Naga Worship in Odisha

The prevalence and continuity of Naga worship in Odisha may be dated back to early Christian centuries which are attested by the discovery of a number of Naga antiquities, throughout the state.

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The twin hills of Khandagiri and Udayagiri which are famous for the Kharavela's Hatigumpha inscription and innumerable caves contain a few sculptures of the Nagas. The earliest sculptural representation serpent in Odishan art are the two life-size anthropomorphic images of Nagas in broken condition are kept in the Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar. The iconographic features suggest that these images might have preceded Kharavela's time.⁵ There are three more anthropomorphic images of Naga and Nagi at Sundarpada (Near Bhubaneswar) suggest the prevalence of Naga worship of the Place. These Naga images are mighty, impressive and fully life-size with terrifying hoods of snakes over their heads. These images can be regarded as independent cult images for Naga worship.⁶

There is a reference of dynastic worship of Naga from the *Asanpat inscription* of Nagaking Satrubhanja in the Keonjhar region belonging to the period of 4th century A.D.⁷ In this connection we may mention the presence of a carved serpent of Ravanachaya, Sitabinji in the district of Keonjhar belonging to Maharaja Disibhanja (5th Century A.D.)⁸. The Kanasa copper plate grant⁹ of the king Lokavigraha, the king of Toshali dated in Gupta era 280 (A.D. 600) throws light on the worship of 'Maninaga'. it is recorded that a village in the bank of river Sali (present Salia) was donated to a Maitrayaniya Brahmin Urdhasrunga for the maintenance of the deity Maninageswar. It is also noted that the king had officials named Bhavanaga and Nagadutta, who were probably of Naga lineage.

The bust portion of a Naga figure belonging to the post Gupta period is found in front of the Svarnajaleswar Temple at Bhubaneswar with seven-hooded snake over his head.¹⁰ It appears to be an independent cult image of that period. The cult of Naga worship had gained popularity in and around Mayurbhanj region with the ascendancy of the Naga dynasty before the Bhanjas establish their rule. The Naga dynasty of Mayurbhanj known as the Vairata Bhujanga dynasty, worshipped Naga as their tutelary deity. The image of Nagamata the tutelary deity of the Vairata Bhujanga dynasty is still preserved in the house of the Sarbarakhar dynasty of Koptipada.¹¹ The image of Kinchakesvari or Khichingesvari now at Khiching appears to be identical with *Pata Thakurani* (presiding deity) of this dynasty. This type of figure wears a head-dress of serpent hoods and clasping a bowl with both hands commonly known as Manasa, the chief deity of the serpent worshippers of modern times. The kings of Vairata family performed the worship of Nagamata and of eight Nagas in their respective hearths.¹² This form of worship of Nagamata or Manasa in the kitchens has been continued and practised by the Hindus of Bengal and some parts of Odisha every year in the month of the August and September. This form of worship is perhaps a relic of the great influence once wielded by the Naga dynasty of ancient Odisha. However, from the discovery of a large number of Naga images both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic forms in the district of Mayurbhanj, Balasore, Bhadrak, Keonjhar, Puri and some other parts of Odisha, it can be said that Naga worship was most prominent and popular religious cult of Odisha.

Antiquity of Naga Worship in Bhadrak District

Naga worship was very popular religious faith in Bhadrak district. The antiquity of Naga worship is traced back as early as the post-Gupta period. A large number sculpture of Naga Cult viz. Nagaraj, Nagamata, Manasa and Astika-Jaratkaru are found in the district. A detailed description of Naga antiquities has been given here based on the archaeological exploration of the district.

During the survey of the village Banitia (near Bhadrak Rly Station) we came across of an image of Na g a r a j (Fig.1) which has been worshipped in name of Budhi Jagulei by the local people. He is seated in *lalitasana* on a double petalled lotus pedestal and flanked by two attendants. The image is canopied by seven hooded snake. His head is decorated with a *jatamukuta* and some strands of her curling hair locks fallen down on this shoulders. His is well ornamented viz. *kundalas*, necklace, *yajnopavita*, armlet and waist band with decorated beads. He holds a cobra in his left hand and right one shows *varadamudra*. The right corner at the bottom of the slab is depicted a devotee in kneeling posture holding the right foot of the deity while there is a vase closed with lid (*mudakumbha*) is depicted in the left corner. It is carved on a sand stone and measuring about 2 feet in height and 1 feet 4 inches in breadth. Ichnographically it may be dated to 8th century A.D. The image is in good condition, but it requires an early care for its protection, as it is placed in open sky near a drain on the road side of the village.



An image of serpent goddess Manasa (Fig. 2) is worshipped as a presiding deity in a small shrine in the flourishing village Kaupur. She is seated in *sukhasana* on a throne under a canopy of seven-hooded snake. She holds a snake in her left hand which is placed on her left thigh while her right hand shows *varadamudra*. Below the throne pedestal there are five devotees with *anjalihasta* facing towards the deity. Her head is decorated with a *mukuta* and some strands of hair are fallen on her shoulder. She is adorned with a necklace, ear-rings and bangles. The image is carved on a chlorite slab measuring about 2 feet in height and 1 feet 3 inches in breadth. It may be ascribed to 9th century A.D. It is well preserved.



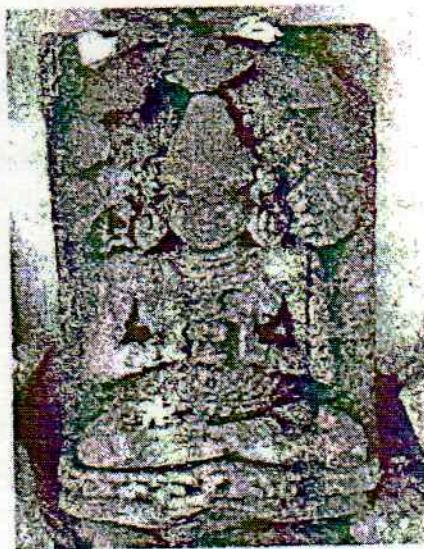
Another image of Manasa is worshipped in the village shrine of Chadheia, a vicinity of Kaupur. She is seated in *sukhasana* on a pedestal. Seven-hooded snake is served as canopy over her head. In her two hands, the right hand holds a *kumbha* with closed lid placed on the left thigh. She is ornamented with elongated ear-rings, necklace with central pendent and bangles.

A colossal image of Manasa¹³ (Fig. 3) is worshipped as Ratna Jagulei in the village Chakrapadhi, the famous Jaina site. She is seated in *lalitasana* on a throne. A seven-hooded snake is finely carved over her head serving the purpose of canopy. She holds a foliated vase clasping it with her two hands at her chest. She is flanked by two male attendants standing one in each side. She has prominent breasts and is adorned with necklace, ear-rings, bangles and anklets. Two devotees are carved in the pedestal. It is carved on a black chlorite stone and measured about 3 feet in height and 2 feet in breadth. It is dateble to 9th century A.D. and preserved in good condition.



There is an image of Manasa found at the Saivite Village Guamal. It is seated in *sukhasana* on a pedestal. A seven-hooded snake is seen over her head serving for the purpose of canopy. Her right hand shows *varadamudra* while her left hand is broken from her elbow. She has prominent breasts and adorned with necklace elongated ear-rings, bracelets, bangles and anklets. A figure of cobra is carved below her throne pedestal. The image is carved on a sand stone slab measuring about 1 foot 6 inches in height and 1 foot in breadth. The seven hoods of the snake at the top are got much damage and it may be ascribe to 8th century A.D.

An image of Manasa (Fig-4) is worshipped in the village shrine of Rahania near Dhamnagar along with the sculptures of Brahmanical and Jaina Pantheon. She is seated in *padmasana* on a lotus pedestal. A canopy of seven-hooded snake is carved over her head. She holds foliated vase clasping it with her both hands at her chest. She wears elongated *kundalas*, necklace, bracelets and bangles. Her cognizance mark cobra is finely carved below the pedestal. It is well state of preservation.



There is another image of Manasa is worshipped in the village shrine of Khadipada. She is carved on a chlorite slab in her usual attributes like the image of Rahania. It is also good state of preservation. Another image of Manasa is worshipped in the village shrine of Purusandha near Agarpara. The image is seated in *padmasana* on a pedestal. Her usual cognizance mark the seven hooded snake is carved over her head for serving the purpose of Canopy. It is badly damaged by broken into two pieces below her chest. A fine image of Manasa¹⁴ (Fig-5) is placed in the village shrine of Ghantagadhia along with a sculpture of Astika-Jaratkaru and other Buddhist sculptures. Here the Nagamata Manasa is seated in *padmasana* on a

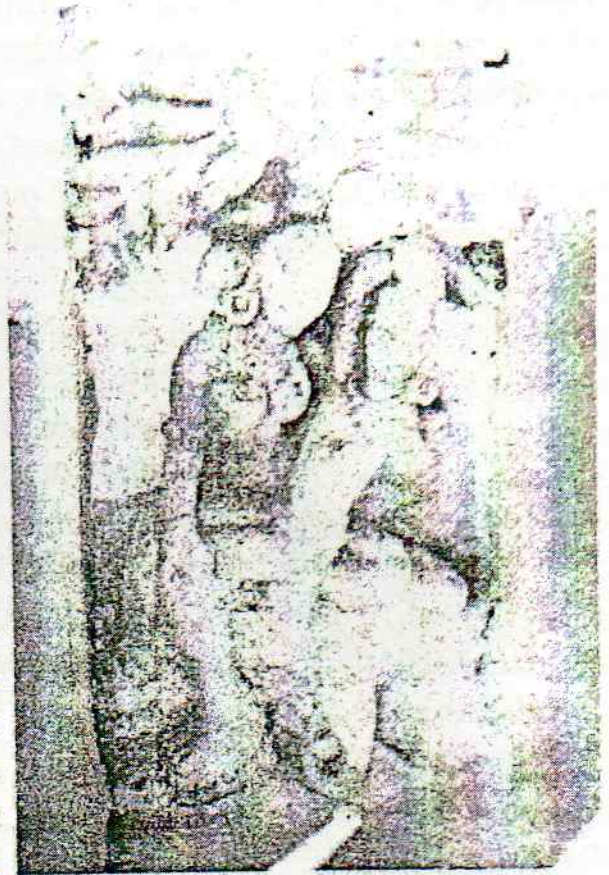


pedestal. She holds a *kumbha* in closed lid in her two hands at her chest. A canopy of seven hooded snake is carved on her head. She is well ornamented with ear-rings necklace, armlet and bangles. The image is measured about 2 feet in height and 1 feet 4 inches in breadth. A horizontal crack is observed just below her chest. It may be dated to 8th century A.D.

The sculpture of Astika-Jaratkaru¹⁵ (Fig. 6) is placed to the left side of Manasa. In the sculpture a woman is seated in *lalitasana* on a double petalled lotus pedestal in front of a tree. A man is seated in her lap, whom she holds as a mother does for her child, by her left hand going round his neck and by her right hand drawing his thigh nearer to her. She has prominent bosom, *kundala*, necklace and bangles. She is identified with Jaratkaru the mother of Astika. The man on the lap of the mother is adorned with a number of jewels such as *nupura* in the only leg (the left) exposed, waist girdle with *kundalas*. His hair is arranged in an elegant *kesabandha*. His left hand is stretched down while his right hand is not exposed. Below the pedestal the usual springing snake is seen with raised head. The sculpture is measure about 2 feet 6 inches in height and 1 feet 4 inches in breadth. It may be dateable to 8th century A.D.



Another such type of Astika-Jaratkaru image (Fig. 7) is fixed in the outer wall of the khilatesvara Mahadev temple at Khangara. Like the Astika-jaratkaru sculpture of Ghantagadhia, mother Jaratkaru is seated in *lalitasana* on a pedestal with holding the man Astika on her lap. The both are their usual iconographic feature. Such iconographic feature of Astika-Jaratkaru is related to the popular story of Astika-Jaratkaru episodes of *Mahabharata*.¹⁶ The story is that Jaratkaru the hermit, had adopted the ascetic life. One day he beheld some ancestral spirits who advised him to marry and beget a male offspring for their deliverance and future bliss. Jaratkaru consented to their wish and agreed to take a wife, but he made the conditions that the maiden whom he will marry should bear the same name as he and should be bestowed on him as alms. Besides he did not wish to support her. After long wanderings by him, Vasuki, the king of snakes came to know about the wishes



of the hermit Jaratkaru and offered his sister to him as alms. On learning that she too bore the name of Jaratkaru and receiving the assurance that after their marriage they were to be supported by her brother, the sage consented to marry. After they had been duly wedded, Jaratkaru warned his wife that incase she will to give him any cause of displeasure, he would leave her immediately. The young Naga-bride, indeed did all she could to please her irritable old husband. But one evening while he was sleeping with his head in her lap and the solemn time for the twilight devotion had come. She knew not what to do. At last she decided to awaken him. So greatly incensed was the old hermit for this disturbance in his sleep that he at once resolved to abandon his newly wedded wife and to re-assume the ascetic life.

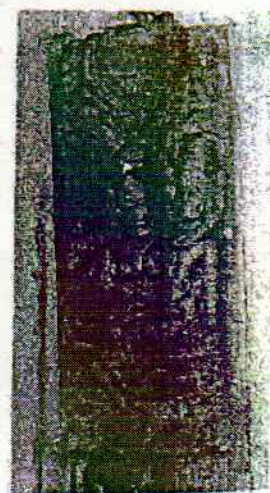
But, before he left her for good he declared to relieve her from fear. "There is asti (O fair one), in thy womb a son, resembling the fire God, who will be a great sage in righteousness and will master all Vedic lore." When the time had come, she gave birth to a son and on account of the parting words of his father "There is asti", he became known by the name of Astika and it was he who saved the Naga race from total annihilation during the serpent sacrifice conducted by king Janmejaya to avenge the death of his father Parikshita caused

by the serpent king Takshaka. Since then Astika obtained as a boon from the Nagas that the recital of his name shall free men from the danger of snake. The representation of this story finds expression in the plastic art of India in the form of a lady holding a boy in her lap. They appear profusely on the walls of the Hindu temples and religious monuments for the devotees for seeking protection from snake bite.

But, the images of Astika-Jaratkaru (Fig-8) found in the village Mangoli near Agarpara has some difference from that of Ghantagadhia. Here the woman (mother goddess) is seated in *lalitasana* in front of a tree with a dead warrior on her lap. The man has stretched down his left hand indicating death attitude or *varadamudra* while his right hand usually depicted as lifting over his head as it being reproved from the dead.¹⁷ Two warriors with swords in their raised right hands carved one in each side. There is a serpent with raised hood in pedestal and a couchant lion in the left corner and a kneeling devotee in the right corner of the pedestal. It is measured about 2ft in height and 2ft in breadth and is good state of preservation. It may datable to 9th century A.D.



Another such type of Astika-Jaratkaru image¹⁸ (Fig-9) is found in the inner wall of the Mahadev temple at Palia. Here Astika-Jaratkaru is fashioned as that of Mangoli, but the two shoulder attendants are absent. Only the usual springing snake is depicted on the lower portion of the pedestal. Some scholars identify these types of sculptures as depicting the story of Chand-Lakshmidhar-Behula folklore of Bengal associated with the cult of Manasa spread in 10th-11th century A.D.¹⁹



Thus, it may be concluded that from the discovery of various Naga sculptures viz. Naga, Nagi, Manasa and Astika-Jaratkaru indicate the wide prevalence of Naga cult in the region of Bhadrak.

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