Chapter - VII

The Concept of Nāgas in Early Buddhism
CHAPTER VII –
THE CONCEPT OF NĀGAS IN EARLY BUDDHISM

1. Definition, Meaning of Nāga

Nāga play a prominent role in Buddhist folklore. Gifted with miraculous powers and great strength, their bodies are described as being those of snakes, but they can assume human form at will. Thus possessing the power of transformation, they are "shape shifters." Broadly they are to be divided into two classes, land-based (thalaja) and water-based (jalaja). The Thalaja-nāgās are regarded as subterranean (and therefore confused with "demons"), whereas the Jalaja-nāgās live in rivers and in the ocean.

Several dragon-dwellings (Nāga-bhāvanā) are mentioned in Buddhist texts, for example:

- Mañjerika-bhāvana under Sineru
- Daddara-bhāvana at the foot of Mount Daddara in the Himālayas
- Dhatarattha the dragon under the river Yamunā
- Nābhāsā the dragon in Lake Nābhāsā
- The Reptilians of Vesāli, Tacchaka, and Payāga (D.ii.258). ¹

In the Buddhist art, three forms of Nāgas are illustrated, first mere animal form, second human form with serpent hood shown depicted over the head and third both the human and the animal combined in such a way that the human bust is shown attached with lower animal part as coils. Generally, Nāgas in human form with their female counterparts are represented worshipping the Buddha.²

2. Sharma R.C. Interaction Between Brahmanical and Buddhist Art p. 31
Nāgas are linked with gods. They are sometimes represented as half human serpent. They are of two classes, mythological and historical. Buddhist mythology also is parallel, with the Devas and Devatas, claiming the Nāgas as belonging to a class of Superior being. The Nāgas are possessed of great courage and are quick and violent. They are handsome and wear jewels, crown and large earrings. Important Nāgas which are known as residing in lakes also have the power of producing rain.  

The Buddhist nāga generally has the form of a large cobra-like snake, usually with a single head but sometimes with many. At least some of the nāgas are capable of using magic powers to transform themselves into a human semblance. In Buddhist painting, the nāga is sometimes portrayed as a human being with a snake or dragon extending over his head.

The Buddha is also associated with snake. In Buddhism Nāgas who play important role in several events in the life of the Buddha are Elapatra, Nanda and Upananda, Kalika and Mucalinda. While, Elapatra waited for the appearance of the Buddha in this world, Nanda and Upananda gave a miraculous bath when he was born. The Nāgaraja Kalika offered prayers and nāgis presented flowers in the honour of the Buddha. Mucalinda protected him during a storm.

The Nāga figures are an important aspect of idiosyncrasy of Buddhist art and are found abundantly at Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad caves. They have also been given ample importance in Buddhist literature and Hindu literature. In Buddhism a number of Jātaka tales like Campeya Jātaka, Sankhapala Jātaka are carved where stories about Nāga kings are narrated.

The word "Nāga" is often used as an epithet of the Buddha and the Arhats. In this connection the etymology given is āgum na karoti ti Nāgo The Bodhisattva ("Buddha-to-be") was born several times as the King of the Nāgas: Atula, Campeyya, Bhūridatta, Mahādaddara, and Sankhapāla.

3. Dulari Qureshi – Art and Vision of Aurangabad Caves p.54
4. Sharma R.C. op.cit. p. 30
In Buddhism, the nāgas are the enemies of the Garudas, minor deities resembling gigantic eagles, who eat them. They learned how to keep from being devoured by the Garudas by eating large stones, which made them too heavy to be carried off by the Garudas. The nāgas are ruled by Virūpāksha (Pāli, Virūpākkha), one of the Four Heavenly Kings who guards the western direction. They act as guardians on Mount Sumeru, protecting the devas of Trāyastrimśa (Pali, Tāvatimsa) from attack by the asuras.

According to Fergusson the Nāgas have affinities with the Nāga tribes of Sylhet and Assam as they belong to the same race and locality. He further writes that the Nāga stone sculptures are found practically in all the sites like Bharhut, Sanchi, Amravati, in all Western Indian caves and in Ceylon, and Cambodia. Probably they were the most important of all races that adopted the religion.

The Nāgas have also been considered along with dragons as ambivalent symbols in all cultures. In India the Nāgas are symbols of initiation of wisdom. They are also connected with fertility cult and are regarded as auspicious emblem of vegetative fertility derived from popular beliefs. They are also considered as genii of lakes and springs and worshipped as powers of waters, alike in their beneficent and their destructive aspects. According to Coomaraswamy Nāga cult is of Dravidian origin.

**Nāgas in Buddhism**

Among the notable nāgas of Buddhist tradition is Mücalinda, who protected the Buddha from a fierce storm by his ability to transform into a large hooded cobra whose hood covered the meditating Buddha.

_Nāga and Nāgī_ (male and female) is the Sanskrit and Pāli word for a minor deva taking the form of a very large serpent in Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

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7. *Ibid*
8. Dulari Qureshi – *Art and Vision of Aurangabad Caves* p. 54
Nāgas are generally ferocious beings. But this quality is sublimated and surpassed in Buddhist art and a soft gentleness is obvious under the influence of Buddha. They are generally depicted as door guardians in western Indian cave temples and as such they frequently appear at the portal of Hindu and Buddhist shrines. And here they are the devotees of Buddha whom they worship with great reverence and ardency. ¹⁰

The Book of Discipline (Vinaya ii.109) contains a list of four Royal Families of Nāgas (Ahirājakulāmi) to be radiated with loving-kindness to avert snake bite and/or to overcome a fatality due to a venomous bite after the fact. These four Royal Reptilian Families are: Virūpakkhā, Erāpathā, Chabyāputtā, and Kanhagotamakā. Two other Nāga tribes are generally mentioned together, the Kambalas and the Assataras. It is said that all Nāgas have their home in the Himālayas. Nāgaland, a place in India to the extreme east, is a state with a reputedly ferocious human tribes called Nāgas.¹¹

3. Nāgas in Buddhist Literature

There are various Nāgas described in the Buddhist literature. According to Buddhist legend, while the Buddha was in a trance for the third time for seven days a serpent king Muchalinda on piercing a storm gathering above, came out of his abode and with coils of his body enveloped the Buddha seven times and with his giant snake hood sheltered the great man from sun, wind, rain and cold for seven continuous days. And on the seventh day he uncoiled himself and stood before Buddha with joined hands bowing to the Saviour of the world. ¹²

¹⁰ Dulari Qureshi – op.cit. p. 54.
¹¹ Wisdom Quarterly op.cit p. 2
¹² Dulari Qureshi – op.cit. p. 53
Another story reads as follows: "That Buddha after attaining Nirvana began reaching his doctrine, which proved to be beyond the grasp of human understanding as mankind shrank from its extremity of a void (Sunyata). Finally Buddha committed his teachings to Nāgas who should hold it in trust for him till mankind was ready to comprehend its implications. Till then Buddha taught the simple Hinayana doctrines. After seven centuries Nāgarjuna initiated by the serpent king taught all is void Śūnyatā. So the teachings of Mahayana was brought before the public by a Nāga king.\textsuperscript{13}

1, The Kāla Nāga King Story"

Extract from the Chronicle of Gotama Buddha - by Mingun Sayadaw “After he had partaken of the alms food of Ghana milk -rice offered by Sujata, the Bodhisatta made the resolution while holding the gold cup, "If I would attain Buddhahood today, may this gold cup float away upstream; if I would not attain Buddhahood today, let it float downstream with the current'. He then let the gold cup float in the channel of the Neranjara. The gold cup cut across the current and went straight to the mid-river and then floated upstream from there with the speed of a fast running horse for about eighty cubits and sank in a whirlpool. On reaching the mansion of Nāga king, Kala, it hit all the three gold cups used by the three previous Buddhas, namely, Kakusanda, KoNāgamana and Kassapa on the day they were to attain Buddhahood, producing the (metallic) sound of 'kili, kili' and came to rest under the said three gold cups. On hearing the sound, Nāga King Kala said:

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\textsuperscript{13} Dulari Qureshi \textit{op.cit. p 54.}
It was only yesterday that a Buddha appeared; today, another Buddha appears." and then he rose uttering words of praise in many verses. (The period of time intervening the appearance of Kassapa Buddha and our Buddha was so long that in the meantime the Great Earth had risen by one yojana and three gavutas, But as for Kāla Nāga. it was so very short that he could say of these appearances as happening yesterday and today.\textsuperscript{14}

2. The Story of the Nāga King – extract from the 'The Mahāvamsa'

"Now the most compassionate Teacher, the Conqueror, rejoicing in the salvation of the whole world, when dwelling at Jetavana in the fifth year of his Buddha-hood, saw that a war, caused by a gem-set throne, was like to come to pass between the niigas Mahodara and Cūlodara, uncle and nephew, and their followers; and he, the Sambuddha, on the uposatha day of the dark half of the month Citta, in the early morning, took his sacred alms -bowl and his robes, and, from compassion for the Nāgas, sought the Nāgadīpa. That same Nāga Mahodara was then a king, gifted with miraculous power, in a Nāga-kingdom in the ocean that covered half a thousand yojanas. His younger sister had been given (in marriage) to the Nāga-king on the Kannavaddhamana mountain; her son was Cūlodara. His mother's father had given to his mother a splendid throne of jewels, then the Nāga had died and therefore this war of nephew with uncle was threatening; and also the Nāgas of the mountains were armed with miraculous power.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Maung Paw, California – A Gift of Dhamma, Extract from the Chronicle of Gotama Buddha by Mingun Sayadow p. 4

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p 5
The deva named Samiddhisumana took a rajayatana-tree standing in Jetavana, his own fair habitation, and, holding it like a parasol over the Conqueror, he, with the Teacher's leave, attended him to that spot where he had formerly dwelt. That very deva had been, in his latest birth, a man in Nāgadipa. On the spot where thereafter the rajayatana-tree stood, he saw paceeka buddhas taking their meal. And at the sight his heart was glad and he offered branches to cleanse the alms bowl. Therefore he was reborn in that tree in the pleasant Jetavana-garden, and it (the tree) stood afterwards outside at the side of the gate-rampart. The God of all gods saw (in this) an advantage for that deva, and, for the sake of the good which should spring (there from) for our land, he brought him hither (to Lafika) together with his tree.

Hovering there in mid-air above the battlefield the Master, who drives away (spiritual) darkness, called forth dread darkness over the Nāgas. Then comforting those who were distressed by terror he once again spread light abroad. When they saw the Blessed One they joyfully did reverence to the Master's feet. Then readied the Vanquisher to them the doctrine that begets concord, and both [Nāgas] gladly gave up the throne to the Sage.' When the Master, having alighted on the earth, had taken his place on a seat there, and had been refreshed with celestial food and drink by the Nāga-kings, he, the Lord, established in the (three) refuges and in the moral precepts eighty kotis of snake-spirits, dwellers in the ocean and on the mainland. The Nāga-king Maniakkhika of Kalyani, mother's brother to the Nāga Mahodara, who had come thither to take part in the battle, and who, aforetime, at the Buddha's first coming, having heard the true doctrine preached, had become established in the refuges and in the moral duties, prayed now to the Tathāgata: 'Great is the compassion that thou hast shown us here, O Master! Hadst thou not appeared we had all been consumed to ashes.

May thy compassion yet light also especially on me, O thou who art rich in loving-kindness, in that thou shalt come yet again hither to my dwelling-country, O thou peerless one.' When the Lord had consented by his silence to come thither, he planted the rājayatana-tree on that very spot as a sacred memorial, and the Lord of the Worlds gave over the rājayatana-tree and the precious throne-seat to the Nāga-kings to do homage thereto. 'In remembrance that I have used these do homage to them, ye Nāga-kings! This, well beloved, will bring to pass blessing and happiness for you.' When the Blessed One had uttered this and other exhortation to the Nāgas, he, the compassionate savior of the entire world, returned to Jetavana

Role of the Nāga in Buddhism

Nāgas are said to have raised their hoods to protect the Buddha, and other jinas [spiritual victors] like the Jain saint Parshva. However, at least 2500 years before Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment when Muchilinda with his many heads sheltered him, the mythic image of Nāgas doing homage to a great yogi was well-known.

Nāgārjuna

The Indian mahāsiddha, Nāgārjuna received his illuminating insights and tantric empowerment with the help of the Nāgas in the lake beside which he meditated. Nāgārjuna is one of the main champions of Buddhist philosophy, and is traditionally portrayed with a sunshade or halo formed by a multi-headed serpent. He is called the Second Buddha, partly in tribute to his having established the Madhyamaka [Middle-Way, i.e. neither materialist nor nihilist nor idealist] school of philosophy. Nāgārjuna was a monk in the celebrated monastery of Nalanda in Bihar – the Monte Cassino of India, - and proclaimed himself the restorer of the old faith.

17. Maung Paw, California, op.cit.p. 5.
According to this prophet, the words uttered by Sakya Muni during his life-time had been heart and noted down by the Nāgas, who had kept them to themselves in their own abode, till such time as mankind should become worthy to receive them. Nāgarjuna gave out that he had received these documents from the Nāgas and was commissioned to proclaim them to the world.

This gave rise to an entirely new school of Buddhism known as Mahayana, or as M. Julien translates it, the ‘Grand Vehicule,’ as opposed to Hinayana or the ‘Petit Vehicule’.¹⁸

**Buddha’s Nāgas**

According to the Vinaya or Buddhist Monastic Rule, an animal cannot become a monk. At one time, a Nāga was so desirous of entering the Order that he assumed human form in order to be ordained.

The Serpent who wanted to be a priest (Translated from the Mahavagga i. 63)

Now at that time a certain serpent was distressed, at, ashamed of, and loathed his state as a serpent. Then it occurred to the serpent as follows:

"By what means can I gain release from my state as a serpent, and quickly become a human being?" Then it occurred to the serpent as follows: "Here, these Sākyaputta monks are virtuous, tranquil, religious, truthful, moral and noble. If I were to retire from the world under these Sākyaputta monks, thus might I gain release form my state as a serpent, and quickly become human being."

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¹⁸. Fergusson James, *Tree and Serpent Worship* p. 65.
Then the serpent, in the guise of a youth, drew near to the priests, and asked leave to retire from the world into the Order. And the priests received him into the Order, and ordained him. Now at that time the serpent dwelt with a certain priest in a cell on the outskirts of the monastery. And the priest arose at the waning of the night, and paced up and down under the open sky. Then the serpent, when the priest had gone out, felt safe and went to sleep; and the whole cell became filled with the snake, and his coils hung out at the windows. And the priest, wishing to enter the dwelling, pushed open the door, and saw the whole house filled with the snake, and his coils hanging out at the windows.

And when he had seen this, he was frightened and shrieked aloud. And the other priests came running up and spoke to the priest as follows:

"Brother, wherefore did you shriek?"

"Brethren, this whole house is filled with a snake, and his coils hang out at the windows."

Thereupon the serpent awoke at the noise, and sat in his seat. And the priests spoke to him as follows:

"Who are you, brother?"

"Reverend Sirs, I am a serpent."

"But wherefore, brother, have you behaved in this manner?"

Then the serpent announced the matter to the priests, and the priests announced the matter to the Blessed One.

Then the blessed one, on this occasion and in this connection, having called together the congregation of the priests, spoke to the serpent as follows:

"You, verily, are a serpent and not capable of growth in this Doctrine and Discipline; go you, remain in your state as a serpent, and keep fast-day on the fourteenth,
fifteenth and eighth day of the half-month; thus shall you gain release from your state as a serpent, and quickly become a human being." 19

The snake was given the Five Precepts as the means to attaining a human existence in his next life when he can then be a monk. Then out of compassion for the sad snake, the Lord Buddha said that from then on all candidates for the monkhood be called 'Nāga' as a consolation. They are still called 'Nāga' to this day." 20

There are stories -- for example, in the Bhūridatta Jātaka -- of Nāgas, both male and female, mating with humans. Although the offspring of such unions are said to be watery and delicate, it settles the question of how to translate the term "Nāga": it clearly refers in modern parlance to Reptilians.

The enmity between the Reptilians and the Avians (Garulas) is proverbial. At first the, it is said, Avians did not know how to seize Reptilians because the latter swallowed large stones so as to be of great weight. But they learned how in the Pandara Jātaka. The Reptilians dance when music is played. However, it is said that they never dance if any Garula is near (through fear) or in the presence of human dancers (through shame). 21

The best known of all Reptilians is Mahākāla, king of Mañjerika-bhāvanā (the dragon dwelling under Sineru). He lives for an entire age (Sanskrit kalpa, Pali kappa can refer either to an aeon or a full "life term," which for Nāgas is either 90,000 (or 90 million human years), and is a very pious follower of the Buddha. 22

The Reptilians of his world had the custodianship of a part of the Buddha's relics until they were needed for the "Great Pagoda" (Mahā Stūpa, Mhv.xxxi.27f.). And when the Bodhi tree was being taken to Sri Lanka, they did it great honor during

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22. Ibid p. 4
the voyage (Mbv. p.. 163f.). Other Reptilian kings are also mentioned as ruling with
great power and majesty and being converted to the Buddha's teaching -- for example,
Aravāla, Apalālā, Erapatta, Nandopananda, and Pannaka. (See also Ahicchatta and
Ahināga). In the Atānātiya Sūtra (D.iii.198f.), speaking of dwellers of the Realm of
the Four Great Sky Kings (Cātummahārajika), Nāgas are mentioned as occupying the
Western Quarter, with Virūpākkha as their king.23

The Nāgas had two chief settlements in Sri Lanka, in Nāgadīpa and at the
mouth of the Kalyānī river. It was to settle a dispute between two Nāga chiefs of
Nāgadīpa, Mahodara and Cūlodara, that the Buddha reputedly paid his second visit to
Sri Lanka. During that visit he made a promise to another Nāga-king, Manjakkhika of
Kalyānī, to pay him a visit. And the Buddha's third visit was in fulfillment of that
undertaking (Mhv.i.48f.).

The reptilians form one of the guards set up by Sakka ("king of kings," the
reigning monarch over the Four Great Kings as well as the devas in his home world,
Tāvatimsa) at the base of Sineru against the Asuras.24

TREE AND SERPENT WORSHIP

Ajatasatru, the sixth king of the Nāga dynasty of Magadha, who was then the
lord paramount of Northern India.

The name of Sisu-Nāga is applied by the Brahmans to the first king of this
dynasty; the Buddhists give it to the tenth, and add the following legend :- On a
certain occasion one of the chief of the courtesans bore a child to one of the
Lichchhavi Rajas, but the child proving an abortion was put into a basket, and at night
thrown on a dung heap. A certain Nāgaraja, the tutelary of the city, observing it,
encircled it with its folds, and sheltered it with its hood. The people who congregated

23 Ibid p. 4
24 Wisdom Quarterly: American Buddhist Journal p.. 5
there made a noise, "Su, Su," to frighten the snake, and on examining the basket
found the abortion matured into a male child with every mark of greatness on it. In
consequence of this incident he received the name Sisu-Nāga, and in time ascended
the throne of Magadha. The second convocation was held 100 years after the death of
Buddha, during the reign of his son Kālāśoka, and we gather, though somewhat
indistinctly, that his successors, including the nine Nandas, till the accession of the
celebrated Chandragupta (B.C.325), were Nāgas or serpent worshippers pure and
simple. They certainly were considered as of very low caste and hated by the
Brahmins, and were not loved by the Buddhists.

Nāgas in Jātaka stories
1    Sankhapala Jātaka

When the king of Magadha was ruling Rājagrha, the Bodhisattva was born in
the name of Duyyodhana as his son. After acquiring knowledge of all sciences, the
king installed his son as his successor and took to religious life and started to live in
the royal garden. Every day the Bodhisattva used to visit the abode of his father,
thereby receiving great profit and honour. Owing to his hindrance, the king failed to
perform the preparatory rites that led to mystic meditation. The king decided to leave
the royal park. He set up his hutment beyond the boarders of the Magadha, near
Mount Canda, in a bend of the river Kannapenna, where it issues out of the lake
Sankhapala. There he developed the faculty of mystic meditation and subsisted on
whatever he could pick up.

Once, a king of the Nāgas by name Sankhapala, from the river Kannapenna
along with the company of snakes, visited the abode of the ascetic and listened to the
instructions of Dhamma. Since then, he habituated to visit the ascetic’s hutment
regularly. The Bodhisattva, who was searching for his father’s abode in the territory,
succeeded to locate the hermitage. There he saw the Nāga king Sankhapala listening

25. Fergusson James, Tree and Serpent worship p. 63
26. Dr. Subrahmanyam B. – Jātakas in Buddhist thought and Art, p.. 125
to the law. The Bodhisattva greeted his father and said “Reverend Sir, what king is this that has been to see you?”. Then the ascetic introduced the Nāga king Sankhapala to his son Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva seeing the magnificence of the Nāga, conceived a longing for the Nāga world. After a few days he returned to his own city and constructed an alms-hall at the center of the city and by alms-giving he made a stir throughout the sub-continent and in aspiring to the Nāga world he ever kept the moral law and observed the duty of holy days. At the end of his life he was reborn in the Nāga world as a serpent king Sankhapala.

Though he was born as a Nāga king, he grew sick of this magnificence and relinquished his mundane wealth and decided to sacrifice himself by way of charity. From the day he left the Nāga world and settled near the river Kannapenna on an ant-hill between a high road and a narrow path, there he resolved to keep the holy day and took upon himself the moral law, saying “Let those want my skin or want my flesh, let them, I say take it all”. Every first day of each fortnight he returns to the Nāga world.

One day when the Nāga king was at the ant-hill a party of sixteen men of the nearby village, who failed in hunting an animal, saw the snake at the ant-hill and thought to themselves. “Today we have not caught a young lizard, we will kill this snake king”. But they feared about the size of the snake. They planned and decided to capture the snake only with stakes but not with hands. By listening to the sound of the foot-steps of the sixteen men, the Bodhisattva lifted his head from the coiled body and thought “Today my desire will be fulfilled s I lie here, I will be firm in my resolution and yield myself upto them as a sacrifice as when they strike me with their javelins I will not open my eyes and regard them with anger”. The men beat the Nāga king and carried the body fastened to a bomboo stick and laid on the road. 27

27. Dr. Subrahmanyam, B., op.cit. p. 127
At this moment a landowner named Alara, who was traveling with five hundred wagons, containing gold coins and ornaments, saw the sixteen men holding the Bodhisattva. Alara offered his entire wealth to the lewd fellows and they released the Bodhisattva from their clutches. The Bodhisattva immediately returned to the Nāga place and later with his retinue approached Alara and invited him to the Nāga place. At the palace, Alara enjoyed heavenly delights. Before leaving the Nāga palace, Alara said, “My friend, I wish to become an ascetic”. Alara took ascetic life and left the Nāga palace and went to the Himalayas. One day on pilgrimage, Alara visited Banaras and met the king who was leading an ascetic life in the royal garden. The king gave him warm welcome and offered a seat. He appraised what he witnessed in the Nāga palace about the honour extended by Samkhapala. After a year, Alara left for Himalayas. 28

2 Bhūridatta Jātaka

The king Brahmadatta was ruling Banaras, he made his son Viceroy. Seeing the growing supremacy of his son on the throne who was discharging his duties righteously and honestly, the king suspected the character of his son and asked to quit the kingdom and dwell wherever he pleases and advised his son to come only after his death and occupy the throne. The price complied and left the kingdom and built a hut near the confluence of the river Yamuna. One day a young female Nāga who had lost her husband left the Nāga world in search of a man. Passing through the sea shore, she saw a hut made of leaves. She put some fragrant flowers on a couch and kept fruits nearby it to eat for the ascetic who dwelt in the hut, with a view to test the candidature and also his tastes. She thought to herself “If he is at heart a lover of pleasure and not an ascetic from faith he will lie down on my bed; then I will take him and make him my husband and dwell here” When the price returned and entered the hut, he saw the arrangements. He felt very happy and enjoyed the facilities and fell fast asleep. 29

28. Ibid p. 127
29. Dr. Subrahmanyam B., op. cit. p. 440
Seeing the extraordinary beauty of the lady, the price fell in love with her. He entered into the hut when the lady was adorning the bed and asked her “Who are you”? She replied, “My Lord, I am a Nāga woman I am a widow without a husband”. Similarly the prince introduced himself to the lady as the son of the King Nāga women who had husbands I became discontented on account of carnal passion and I come away and go wandering about, seeking a husband”. The prince also conveyed to her that he was not an ascetic from faith and was dwelling here because of the orders of his father. However both have agreed to marry and dwell in concord. With her spiritual powers she built a beautiful palace with all amenities.

After a while she conceived and brought forth a son, named Sāgara-Brahmadatta. The second time she gave birth to a daughter and named her Samuddaja.

Some days later, after the death of the king, the minister knowing the information through a forester approached the prince and invited him to occupy the throne. Then the prince consulted his wife, the Naga woman and informed the situation to her. But she replied “My Lord, I cannot go, because we Nāga women, possess deadly poison and we are easily displeased for a trifling matter; and the anger of a co-wife is a serious thing; if I see or hear anything and cast angry Some days later, after the death of the king, the minister knowing the information through a forester approached the prince and invited him to occupy the throne.

Then the prince consulted his wife, the Nāga woman and informed the situation to her. But she replied “My Lord, I cannot glance thereon, it will be instantly scattered like an handful of chaff, therefore I cannot go”. However, she advised the King that the children are of the human race and they are very delicate and are of watery nature and hence they may be carried in a boat filled with water to the city. With these words they departed from each other very happily and meaningfully and went to their abodes. Accordingly the price brought the children in the watery boat.
One day, when the water was let into the lake, a tortoise entered the boat. The children saw the tortoise and reported to their father "O father, a Yaksa has frightened us in the lake". The prince ordered the attendants to throw it in the waters of Yamuna. The tortoise afterwards reached the Nāga world and there he narrated a false story to the Nāga king about the escape from the death. He said "as a messenger, I brought the marriage alliance to Dhattaratta, the son of the Nāga King, with Samuddaja the daughter of the King of Banaras. However, the false action turned into a true one and both the Kings agreed to marry their children to each other and the King of Banaras sent his daughter to the kingdom of Dhattarata. There she lived affectionately and harmoniously with him under the idea that it was a world of men.\(^{30}\)

Later, she gave birth to four children namely Suddassana, Datta, Subhaga and Aritha. Through her child Aritha, she was identified as the Nāga women. The second son who is the Bodhisattva named Datta-a-favourite son of the parents, accompanied the King to the great King Virupākṣa. In the assembly of Nāga world, where Sakka sat on a respectable place, put a question, but nobody has answered, except the Great Being, Datta. The God King Sakka named him as ‘Bhūridatta’. Bhūridatta asked the God King Sakka "What have I to do with this frog eating nature? I will return to the snake world and keep the fast and follow the observances by which one may be born among the Gods". So he took the permission from his parents and went to the forest and with his folded body sat on the top of the anthill saying. Let who will take my skin or muscles bones or blood. I will observe the fast".\(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Dr. Subrahmanyam B.\textit{op. cit.}, p. 441

\(^{31}\) \textit{Ibid} p. 441
Campeyya Jātaka

The Master while he was dwelling in Jetavana, told the congregation about the virtues of fasting and observing other vows, "It is well done that you have taken upon yourself the fast-day vows. In olden times wise men renounced even the glory of being a Serpent King and lived under these vows" and at their request he narrated this Jātaka. 32

A Serpent king named Campeyya built a pavilion on the banks of river Campa situated between the kingdoms of Anga and Magadha. The king of Magadha who suffered a defeat at the hands of king of Anga, decided to plunge into the steam of Campa along with his army saying, "Better death drowned in this river than death at the hands of my enemies." The serpent king after knowing the facts assured the king to make him master of both the kingdoms. For seven days the king of Magadha was the Serpent king’s guest. By the spiritual power of the Serpent King, the King of Magadha got possession of the kingdom of Anga and later ruled over the two realms.

From that time onwards there was firm friendship between the King of Magadha and the Serpent King. Seven days after the death of the Serpent King Campeyya, the Bodhisattva, who was born in a poor family having given alms and lived virtuous life, came into being in his place on his royal couch saying, "So, here am I born in this reptile shape; what care I have for life". He wanted to put an end to himself. But a young female serpent Sumana by name, started saying, "This must be Sakka, mighty in power born here to us". On hearing this, all the Nāgas came and made offerings to him. The serpent’s palace became, as it were Sakka’s palace. He was shown great honour and all manner of musical instruments were used to entertain him. The thought of death left him and he put off his serpent shape and sat on the throne.

32. Dr.Subrahmanyan B. op.cit.p., 113
Another time he repented saying “What care have I for this reptile shape. I will go among men, live under the fasting vow, shake myself from this place, learn the truths and put an end to pain”. Wherever he went, the female serpents followed him, making him violate the rule of virtue. He thought, “I must leave this palace”. On the fasting days he went to the world of men and lay on the top of an ant-hill by the roadside not far from a frontier village.

He said “Let them take it, who desire my skin or any would have me a dancing snake, let them make me so”. Thus saying, he yielded his body and contracted it and lay on the ant-hill observing the fast days vows. Those who passed by the road where he lay, worshipped him with scents and incense. The villagers set up a pavilion over him. The great being kept there the fast vow on the fourteenth day and fifteenth day of the half-moon lying on the ant-heaps and on the first day of the lunar hall, he would return to his palace. As he was thus fulfilling his vow, time went by. His consort Sumana warned him that the world of men being dangerous, some danger might befall him even as he was observing his fast day vow. She asked him. “Suppose some danger should come upon you, how shall I learn of it”. The Great Being led her to a pond and said. “If anyone strike me or hurt me, the water here will become turbid; if a bird carries me away, the water will disappear and if a snake-charmer catches me, the water will turn to the colour of blood”. So saying, he went to keep the fast of the fourteenth day and lay down on the ant-heaps. A young Brahmin of Banaras, who learnt snake charms, caught hold of the snake and put him into a hosier basket after bearing him and breaking his teeth. The Bodhisattva in great pain, thought “My poison is powerful, and if I am angry and send forth the breath of my nostrils, his body will be shattered and scattered like a fistful of chaff then my virtue will be broke, so I will not look upon him”. After that the snake charmer took him to the village making him dance to the delight of the king and his courtiers and amassed great profits.33

33. Dr.Subrahmanyam B. op.cit.p.114
After lapse of a month Sumana found that the water of the pool nearby has become red as blood. She came to the ant-heap, saw the place where he was caught and tormented and making enquiries, reached Banaras. The Great Being, as he danced, looked up in the air and saw Sumana and being ashamed, crept into his basket and there he laid. The king Ugrasena cried out, “what is the matter now”, and looking by his side, he saw Sumana and enquired, “who is it like the lightning shines Goddess or Titaness”. She answered “No, goddess I nor human, mighty king! a female of the serpent king”. The king said, “What wrong or what desire brings you lady, I desire to know”. She answered, “On holy days the royal snake at the four ways he used to take holy vows; a juggler caught him, free my husband for my sake”. After this, the juggler took the Great Being out of the basket. The serpent came forth and crept into a flower where he put off his shape and reappeared in the form of a young man magnificently arrayed.

Down from the sky came Sumana and stook beside him. The serpent king stood reverently joining his hands in respect to the king. The King Ugrasena was curious to see the palace of the serpent king and commanded that his army should go along with him. The mortal King was surprised to know about the Serpent King who left all this magnificence and laid on an ant-heap in the world of men to keep the fast-day vows. The Serpent King replied, “It is my craving if I can be reborn again as man”. The King asked, “How our world surpasses thine?”. The Serpent King answered as: “Comes control and cleansing when one is in the world of men only there; once man, I will never have birth nor death again”. On hearing this, the mortal King replied, “Surely it is good to venerate the wise in whom deep wisdom and high thoughts arise”. Ugrasena while taking leave from the Serpent King said, “Let all the subjects of the King who have come here, take with them what they will of my wealth, gold and all” and he sent the treasures to the King. The King agreed to Nāgaraja’s suggestion. The Master ended the story and identified the Births. At that time Devadatta was the snake charmer, Yashodhara was Sumana, Sariputta was Ugrasena and I was myself Campeyya the king of the snakes.34

34. Dr.Subrahmanyam B. op.cit.p. 114
4. **Worship of Nāgas**

Nāgas were also originally worshipped by the Dravidians. The worship of snakes was looked down upon by the Aryans. The Dravidians probably worshipped objects of nature which they dreaded. In order to appease dreaded objects of nature they worshipped them. The same was the case with snakes. According to P. Thomas, in Hindu scriptures, snakes are in some places mentioned as enemies of mankind and in other as deities. But just as a number of Dravidians beliefs and idols were assimilated in the Aryan religious beliefs, so also snake gradually came to be worshipped and absorbed in the Aryan beliefs.\(^{35}\)

**Nāga worship in India**

Ophiolatry or Serpent worship (most popularly referred to in India as Nāga Cult seems to have been one of the oldest and most widespread forms of religion the world has ever known.

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 he, in a word, uncanny. And this phenomenon was specially true of the Serpent because of its swift yet graceful and mysterious gliding motion without feet or wings unlike that of any animal; its power of disappearing suddenly, the brilliance and the power of fascination of its eyes; its beauty and strength, the sudden fatal consequences of its bite; the practice of casting its skin which suggested its longevity or even immortality. All these queer attributes contributed to arouse feelings of wonder, respect; fear to produce worship and also to make the serpent a fit subject of innumerable myths. In the various forms of the Cult there is often found a sense of the animal’s beneficence expressing wisdom, secret knowledge, magical powers, healing properties and inspiration.\(^{36}\)

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35. Dulari Qureshi *op. cit.* p. 53

36. Pandey Sadhu Charan - *Nāga Cult in Orissa* p. 4
The scope and the extent of Serpent worship is so universal and antique in mature that practically there is no country in the ancient world where it did not prevail. Abundant testimony of Serpent worship is available in Persia, Arabia, Syria, Asia minor, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Italy, Northern and Western Europe, Mexico, Peru, America, China, Japan and Ceylon. But the cult of the Serpent has assumed special significance and importance in India, for in no other part of the world it is more widely distributed or developed in more varied and interesting forms. Indian is also the only country in the world inhabited by all known families of living snakes. The wide distribution of these dreaded reptiles and the serious loss of life caused by them sufficiently explain the fear with which they were regarded and the respect and worship paid to them.\(^{37}\)

The place of serpent in the later orthodox cults like Brahanical Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and also regional cults, is conspicuous by its presence in Architecture, Sculpture, Paintings, Literature, tradition and folklore. On the whole, the wide distribution of snakes, the presence of antiquities displaying Nāga art throughout India and the propitiation and worship of the Nāgas by the followers of different religions in India suggest that the Nāga Cult is one of the most popular forms of worship in India.

Nāga worship, we have certain epigraphic records to show the cult of the Nāgas in various iconographical types:

a) First, the form of the serpent, usually many headed;

b) second, the human form universally characterized by means of the Polycephalous serpent-hood;

c) Third, a combination of the two, the upper part of the human body being combined with the lower half a Snake’s coil.\(^ {38}\)

\(^{37}\) Ibid p. 7  
\(^{38}\) Pandey Sadhu Charan op. cit. p 8
A few finds that have been unearthed at Harappa are of much interest in as much as they throw light on the place of serpent in religious life of the people. Among them there is a faience tablet where a seated deity is worshipped by a kneeling man on either side of it and behind each of the worshippers is seen a Cobra with head raised and hood expanded. The snakes evidently appear here as protective deities, protecting the kneeling suppliants. Besides that, serpents have been found painted on potteries and the carved figure of a snake on a clay amulet is seen before a low stool on which appears to be an offering. Probably milk.\textsuperscript{39}

**Independent Nāga Worship**

**Worship of Cult Images**

From the availability of literary references and antiquities dating back to Christ and the prevalence and continuity of worship and festivities connected with Nāga throughout Orissa, it appears that this land like that of Kashmir in the North. Mathura in the heart of India, and Kerala in the South, was also a very famous place for Nāga worship. This land, like most of the parts of India, witnessed the first work of artistic merit during the tenure of Emperor Asoka. But architecture in the pre-Asokan as well as Asokan periods was mainly built in perishable materials like mud, bricks and timber almost everywhere except in some area where stone was in abundance.

Because, following the decline of Kusanas and the rise of Brahminical faith under the Guptas, it appears that the Nāga worship like other forms of animal worship could not flourish and become popular. Moreover, with the political eclipse of Nāga rulers at the hands of Samudra Gupta, their religious creed also seems to have suffered. Here it is interesting to note that Nāga became a subsidiary being with Hindu Pantheon Gods and Goddesses during the Guptas.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} *Ibid* p. 18

\textsuperscript{40} Pandey Sadhu Charan *op. cit.* p 18
Nāga worship in various other forms

Apart from these traditional forms of Nāga worship, people of Orissa worship Nāga in various forms such as

a) Water Spirit
b) Ancestor Spirit
c) Guardian of the Hidden Treasure
d) God of Fertility
e) Tutelary Deity

a) Water Spirit: The cause of the origin of Nāga as Water Spirit is not far to seek. Among the commonest haunts of Snakes are lakes, ponds, springs, pools and rivers. Possibly out of this feature a belief in the control of water by snakes came into being among the early inhabitants of India. A similar belief is common to many races of the world. It is because of this reason the view of the scholars who believe that the Nāga spirits were originally worshipped as water spirits does not appear valid, This belief definitely came later.41

A number of scholars like V.A. Smith, H. Kern, B. Roland, Swami Sankarananada, including J. Ph. Vogel and others opine that Nāgas were worshipped as water spirits in the ancient period. J. Ph. Vogel who has accepted the view expressed by H. Kern mentions that “Nāgas are to be regarded as personified forces of nature; in the first instance the snake-like coiling rain-clouds emitting flashes of lightning – the Serpents of the sky-which are transported to the lakes and pools on earth and finally are ‘confounded’ with real poisonous snakes.” There are a number of legends recounted in our literature in which Nāgas haunt lakes, ponds and rivers.

41. Ibid p 25
They are beneficial givers of rain but if roused to anger, they cause destructive hair storms and ravage the produce of the fields. The Serpent Ahi who was defeated by Indra for obstructing the flow of water from the sky to the earth is the symbol of cloud. In Northern India, Nāgas and Nāgis are worshipped as Water Spirits of Lakes and springs and in Kashmir almost all the wells are associated with Nāga worship.\footnote{Pandey Sadhu Charan. \textit{op.cit.p.}, 26}

b) Ancestor Spirits: Nāgas are regarded as reincarnations of the dead. Particularly the tribals, such as Oraons, Santals, Kols and Konds regard the Boda snake as their ancestor and worship it. High caste Hindus in Orissa also believe that the snake embodies the spirit of the ancestor.

c) Guardian of the Hidden Treasure: In all Indian mythology, the Nāgas play a great part as the lords of the earth and of its hidden treasure, which they guard in their subterranean realm Pātāla. In India ant-hills are, therefore, worshipped as the abode of Nāgas. Many traditions have been recorded in India to show the worship of Nāga as the Guardian of Hidden Treasure.

Many store houses in Orissa are seen with carvings of Nāga images and in some of them the gates are adorned with anthropomorphic Nāga-devatas or their consorts.

d) God of Fertility: From time immemorial the earth has been worshipped as Goddess of Fertility and the Serpent who is supposed to be her son, was considered to be endowed with the qualities of the mother. The primitive men worshipped Nāga as a divine being who could bestow fertility on their crops by controlling rain.
Nāga and Fertility

Above is a Nāga stone erected in anticipation or in gratitude for blessings received

Because of its shape and its association with renewal, the serpent is a phallic symbol. This powerful emblem of fertility is thought to bring plentiful harvests and many children -- images of Nāgas adorn houses and shrines and temples. It is said that when a king once banned snake worship, his kingdom suffered a drought, but the rains returned once the king himself placated Vasuki.

The tribals, such as Santals, Bhumijas, Kols and Khonds, worship Nāgas at the beginning of the monsoon as well as during the period of cultivation to ensure the blessings of Nāgas for better agricultural products. There is also a common belief that if a Nāga appears in a dream, the person is said to be soon blessed with children. 43

It is believed that Gautama Buddha is of Serpent lineage. J. Fergusson also suggests that the ruling dynasty of Magadha at the time of Buddha was of Nāga race, who not only helped the propagation of Buddhism by accepting it as their religion but also made Buddhism the state religion.

Such a view is accepted by scholars like C.S. Wake who believed that the religious ideas of the Nāgas had probably much in common with those of the Buddha himself. Though there is reservation among the scholars to accept the equation of Buddha belonging to Nāga race, there is a consensus among them as regards the intimate association of Nāga with Buddha is concerned. 44

43. Pandey Sadhu Charan op.cit.p., 18
44 Ibid. p.28
J. Fergussion's idea of the complete rejection of the Nāga Cult by Buddha can hardly be accepted in view of the existence of innumerable artistic representation of Nāga in association with Buddha dating back to early Christian centuries. It is known from Buddhist writings that the two Nāgas, Nanda and Upananda, were of great help at the time of Buddha's birth who also gave him his first bath. According to tradition the Nāga king Muchalinda sheltered Buddha from rain and wind for a week when the Lord was engaged in meditation. Sculptural representations of this scene are found in Sanchi and Amarāvati panels. A beautiful image of Muchalinda Buddha is still to be found at Ganjapali in the district of Sambalpur.

Though early Buddhist monuments and architecture in Orissa have been brought to the limelight of historical studies by N.N. Vasu, in his Archaeological Survey of Mayurbhanja and N.K. Sahu in his famous book Buddhism in Orissa, we hardly come across sculptural representations of Nāga with Buddha save a sculpture showing a theriomorphic Serpent in the image showing Gautami with Sakyasimha (identified by N. N. Vasu) from Ayodhya in Mayurbhanja. It is mainly because of the ruinous condition of early Buddhist structures which were generally plain and devoid of decorative motifs and panels. Therefore, except the presiding images of different monuments found at Banesvara nasi in Narasinghapur, Bankada, the capital of the old Kangoda Mandala, Udayagiri, Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri, Solanapur, Khadiapara and Baud, we hardly find any other sculptures depicting the life and story of the Buddha.45

However, the images of Serpent Goddess of Mahayana Buddhists Janguli are found at Kenduli, the birth place of the celebrated poet Jayadeva in Cuttack district at Dahigaria in Balasore district and at Laida in the Sambalpur district. Now they are being worshipped as Gramadevi by the local people.46

45 Ibid p 36
46 Pandey Sadhu Charan op. cit. p. 37
Nāga images and sculptures

There are a number of Nāga images and sculptures of different periods in various forms such as

i) Nāga in his animal shape (theoriomorphic)

ii) the anthropomorphic Serpent God canopied by one or several hoods; and

Nāga, the upper part of whose body is human, while the lower part from the hips downwards is purely animal (therioanthropomorphic). This third type is referred to by J. Ph. Vogel as the Mermaid type.

Iconographically though there are Nāga images and sculptures with distinct forms land features in Orissa, there seems to have been no systematic gradual and chronnological development in artistic evolution of Nāga figures in Orissa. Of course, Nāga figures whose upper part of the body is human while the lower part from the hips downwards is purely animal appears for the first time in Orissa in the Mukteswara Temple (c. A.D. 800 to A.D.1060). Earlier to it, Nāga either appeared in thropomorphic form or in anthropomorphic form both as Cult images and decorative elements in various monuments belonging to different religions. In later periods we find the representation of Nāga in all the three forms mentioned above.\footnote{Ibid p.37}

While Nāga in animal form is found right from the time of Indus Valley Civilisation. Nāga in anthropomorphic form appears to have come into vogue during the early centuries of the Christian era. During the period, the hood of Serpent heads assumes the appearance of a circular nimbus around the head of the human being. This development is no doubt due to the halo having been introduced by the Graeco-Buddhist School as a necessary adjunct of Buddha and Bodhisattva figures.
In these images, it is quite clear that the hood is not conceived as an exccrescence springing from the back of the human frame as we find in Bharhut sculptures. This mode of rendering the Nāga remained in vogue during the later phases of Indo-Buddhist art. The third type, i.e. the Mermaid type (Nāga Kanyā) which is extremely rare in Indo-Buddhist art is very common in Brahmanical sculpture. "This type of the snake-tailed Nāga", observes J.Ph.Vogel, "remains a favourite subject in mediaeval art, and it is conspicuous on the temples of Orissa."

Literary works, including technical works on iconography, portray the Nāgas sometimes as a mere animal, sometimes as human being, but generally both the human and the animal properties stangely blended. 48

Thropomorphic cult images

Six images of Nāga in theriomorphic representation as independent objects of worship have come to our notice. All of them are either carved on or chiseled out of sand stone. Except the three hooded Cobra found in Kundesvara (cuttack district) which is carved on the top of a decorated pillar and the bust of five-hooded Cobra found in Barpali chiseled out of a single stone, all other are carved figures on stone blocks of various sizes. 49

Anthropomorphic Cult Images

In between the period following the close of A.D. second century to the beginning of A.D. seventh century, we do not find independent anthropomorphic Nāga Cult images in Orissa. The reason may be ascribed to the strong Brahmanic revival during the Gupta period in which the Vedic Gods and God -lings were conceived and carved in their various manifestations. 50

48. Ibid p.. 51
49. Ibid p.. 53
50. Pandey Sadhu Charan op.cit.p.. 59
In the frescoes that cover the walls of the Caves at Ajanta is found a third picture, three centuries later than the sculptures at Amravati, this time representing the state of Buddhist belief just before its decline. Owing to the unfortunate fire at the Crystal Palace these are not now available for purposes of illustration, but they may become so hereafter. Even, however, if we possessed drawings or photographs of them, they could never be so important for the history of the faith as the sculptures of the two Topes of Sanchi and Amravati, which represent it before the existence, in their present form, of any of the books we now possess. Our regret, however, at the loss of these copies, is very much lessened, in so far as our present purposes are concerned, by the knowledge that there were no traces of Serpent Worship in the paintings. The only representations of the Nāga found at Ajanta are among the sculptured decorations of the doorways or in detached bas-reliefs outside the caves, where they may be considered as accessory or subordinate to the principal form of worship. For a history of Buddhism, the paintings are of great interest; as illustrating either Tree or Serpent Worship, they are comparatively unimportant.  

4. Nāgas on monuments and on Sculptures

Nāgas on Monuments

The Nāga in the semblance of a polysepalous serpent is of frequent occurrence on the earliest Buddhist monuments. Among the reliefs of the Bharhat Stupa which are earlier than those of Sanchi by about a century and belong to the second century B.C., there is a five-headed serpent conversing with an ascetic who is seated in front of his hut. The depiction of an iconographic type of human Nāga with his serpent crest which was derived from the more

51 Fergusson James, Tree and Serpent Worship p 67
primitive conception of the Nāga as a polycephalous snake, is common in the topes of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amarāvati and the frescoes of Ajanta. Mathura (Muttra) which is now closely associated with the cult of God Krisna was a great centre of Nāga worship. A Sanskrit inscription preserved in Lucknow Museum refers to a local serpent deity names Dudhikarna who appears to have had his own shrine not far from Buddhist convent founded by king Huviska in the year 47 of Kaniska’s era. Among the numerous Nāga images recovered in Mathura district, the most valuable specimen is the inscribed statue from Chhargaon.  

It is now preserved in the local Museum. From the inscription incised on the back of the image it is learnt that it was set up at a water tank in the fortieth year of the Kusana era during the reign of king Huviska. Such icons still receive the worship of the rural population, but under a different name: they are invariably designated as Dauji (meaning the elder brother) or Baldeo (Balarama). The decline of Kusana rule saw the establishment of kingdoms by rulers associated with Nāga cult in and around Northern and Central India.

This is amply attested by epigraphic and numismatic evidences (besides literary reference) found at Vidisa, Kantipura, Mathura, Padmavati, Taksasila, Ayodhya. An important and powerful ruler who ruled Mathura as his capital after the Kusanas, was one Virasena who appears to have been a Nāga. In one of the few available coins of this ruler a serpent is seen rising over the throne on which is seated a female figure (probably Ganga), holding a jar in her upraised right hand. In the coins of three kings Visakhadeva, Dhanadeva and Kumudasena who appear to have ruled over Ayodhya between 150 B.C. and A.D. 100 are found among other figures, the snake as a symbol.

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52. Pandey Sadhu Charan op.cit.p. 8

53. Ibid p. 9
The Buddhist Art of Nāgarjuna-konda

The scene of the snake charmer catching the Nāga King Champaka is one which was handled with great charm at Amarāvati, showing the companions of the snake charmer harmoniously urging on the capture of the Nāga King. In the Nāgarjuna-konda example, the flat figures give only the essential narrative details of the message. If we compare the second scene, King Ugreserra visited by the wife of the Nāga Kind to a similar scene of repose in Queen Maya’s Dream of ayaka panel 2, the difference is clearly defined. Surprisingly, both panels are the same height and proportions, but the artist the ayaka panel 3 felt no need to embellish the story to its limits, even though the text speaks of the chief queen visiting King Ugrasena with a company of ‘sixteen thousand female Nāgas’. ⁵⁴

In the Champeyya Jātaka, the Bodhisattva was a Nāga king of great glory and was named Champeyya. As the story goes, a snake-charmer took him to the court of king Ugrasena of Varanasi to perform a snake dance. The snake had felt ashamed on seeing his wife, Sumana, who sought her husband’s release. Finally, the serpent king shares the throne with the king of Varanasi. The story of the Champeyya Jātaka has been depicted five times; thrice at Amarāvati and twice at Nāgarjuna-konda.

The story of the Champeyya Jātaka is depicted in a detailed manner on a panel of a pillar dateable to the 2nd Century AD at Amarāvati. This panel reveals the main part of the episode. After learning why the snake stopped performing the dance, the king ordered the snake charmer to set it free. On this panel, the snake is shown coming out from flute in the hand of snake charmer. To the right of the snake charmer is probably seen Sumana. We also see the Nāga returning to his abode. On the extreme right of the panel is the Nāga performing a dance and on the centre of the panel is seen a conversation between the Nāga and the king.

⁵⁴ Stone Elizabeth Rosen, *The Buddhist Art of Nāgarjuna-konda*, p 45
In the second example from Amarāvati is a slab dateable to the 2nd Century AD that has three panels above a circular lotus medallion. It illustrates the snake charmer’s mode of earning his livelihood. The Sculptor has shown the snake charmer with ‘Negroid’ looks and curly hair who holds a tray or the lid of a circular wicker box on which a snake lifts itself up to dance before a man of noble bearing seated, on a pallanka with his wife to his right.

A king, evidently Brahmadatta of Banaras, is shown seated on his royal couch in the company of his queens and attendants, enjoying the tricks of the snake charmer and his monkey. That the scene is laid in a pleasure garden is evident from the tree carved at one end. A similar scene dateable to the 3rd century AD gets depicted at Nāgarjunakoṇḍa. This similarity indicates the fact that there was a relation with regard to art motifs between Amarāvati and Nāgarjunakoṇḍa. In another example there is a fragment of a panel from Amarāvati belonging to the 2nd century AD, now in the Archaeological Museum of Amarāvati. On that fragment we can see the initial stage of the Champeyya Jāta’s story. Here we see a snake charmer and the audience squatting in front of the ant hill that is, the abode of the snake. A snake is seen coming up to the flute held by the snake charmer.

In contrast with this scene, the relief at Nāgarjunakoṇḍa belongs to the 3rd Century AD and shows a king seated on a throne in the midst of the usual type of palace attendants. A snake charmer is seen squatting before the king and holding a coiled serpent in his hands. The king is shown in the attitude of having a conversation with the snake charmer. The female standing next to the king’s throne on the left side can be identified as Sumana from the serpent hood that is much damaged in this specimen but can still be recognized, behind her head.

Her gaze is fixed on the serpent in the hands of the snake charmer. While the Nāga Sumana is shown in anthropomorphic form, according to the practice of the artists of Nāgarjunakoṇḍa, Champeyya is shown in the animal form as the trend of the story makes it essential. The moment selected by the artist for depiction in the sculpture is that in which the king after his conversation with Sumana, ordered the
snake charmer to release the Nāga. Thus the first two examples show the initial stage of the Champeyya Jātaka while the ones on the left of the Master are closed. The trunks of both the animals are coiled inside and while the tusks of the left one are seen protruding out those of the right one are invisible. The elephant to the right of the Master is decorated with a breast-band while the left one is devoid of ornamentation.

On his way to achieving Truth and Enlightenment, the Buddha was on the one hand, given trouble in several ways by Mara but on the other hand, Nāga Mucilinda protected him from a terrible storm for over a week. In the Deccan region, we see the following five sorts of Nāga Mucilindas; a five-hooded Nāga with expanded hood resting on a wide ring of coils, a seven-hooded Nāga resting on two wavy coils, a five-hooded snake protecting the Master, a seven-hooded Nāga clouding the Buddha, and a six-hooded snake overshadowing the Buddha. Vogel has remarked that the Nāga in the semblance of a polychromatic serpent is a frequent occurrence on the earliest Buddhist monuments. I agree with him because in this study we can find innumerable sculptures of polychromatic serpents. Nevertheless, we can divide out discussion of the Nāga, which are found in this case study into two those representing the Hinayana phase showing the earliest tyes and the other of the Mahayana phase showing the later forms.

In this study, eight sculptures of the earliest Buddhist form of the Nāga are available. One comes from Dhulikatta belonging to the 2nd century BC one from pauni dated to the 2nd Century BC now in the National Museum, New Delhi, one from Amarāvati datable to the 2nd Century AD, one from Sannati belonging to the 2nd Century AD, one from Banavasi dated to the 2nd Century AD two from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, one datable to 2nd Century AD and the other belonging to 3rd Century AD respectively. The snake with five hoods at Dhuikatta and at Pauni are seen protecting the pad or feet of the Buddha. There is a minor difference in the number of coils at each of these places. The sculptor shows the snake at Dhulikatta resting on two coils, while the snake at Pauni is seen resting on six coils. The body of the former is depicted as smooth like that of a pickled fish while the latter's is found
with spots as is mostly commonly noticed in nature. The latter is made to appear very realistic. It is interesting to observe the similarities in the number of hoods, coils and form of the edge of the tail among the snakes depicted at Amarāvati and at sites in Karnataka. These snakes are all seen rested on four coils, hooded with five heads and the edges of the tail lie to the left. There is a minor change in the way the body of one of the snake is made. The sculpture makes the body of the snake at Banavasi in a manner similar to that of the one found at Dhulikatta while the bodies of the remaining reptiles are more naturalistic and resemble the one found at Pauni. Out of the two snakes depicted at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, one is seven-hooded and the other one is with five hoods. The former is seen overshadowing the Pada and wheel of the Buddha while the latter looks like the snakes at both Amarāvati and sites in Karnataka where the form of the tail is reversed. The edge of the tail of the five-hooded snake at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa is placed to the right.

The snakes depicted during the later phase of Buddhism come from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. Of those three snakes, one is seen with five hoods, another with six hoods and the remaining one is seen with seven hoods. All of them are shown overshadowing the Buddha with their respective hoods. Among them the seven-hooded one is seen clouding over the Buddha. It rests on its body coiled. The five-hooded one seems to have the throne integrated with its body. On the coiled snake throne is seen the Buddha seated while the snake with six hoods is shown protecting the Buddha sitting on the throne made of serpent bodies that came out from snakes, each one on either side of the Buddha.

There is a change in the way the animals are depicted in the art. The artists show the animals as Bodhisattva in a rather natural form while some animals associated with his early life are portrayed with rich ornamentation. We also see the creative skill of the artists. For instance, the Nāga is chiseled with several hoods, which is not seen in nature and was therefore, part of the artist’s imagination to show how the Nāga ably protected the Buddha.
In Buddhist caves of Ajanta in the later phase Nāga guardians, guard the entrance of the main hall and all the shrine entrances. At Ajanta initially Nāgas were carved on the doorway of Caves 1 and 2 (Lower) 6, a Nāga figure with two attendants. This is one of the earliest evidences of Nāgas carved on the doorjambs at Ajanta.\textsuperscript{55} Nāgas in Buddhist art also appear in the early monuments of Mathura, Sanchi, Amravati and various other sites. But they appear initially on the shrine doorways. They have a pre-historic origin. Nāga attendants are carved at Ajanta porch doorway, Ghatotkacha porch doorway, Ajanta I shrine doorway. All these Nāga figures are unattended. The central doorway of Cave 26 has Nāgas with female yakshis and dwarf attendants, shrine doorway of Cave 2 has Nāga guardians and their consorts carved at their sides. Cave 27 has Nāga kings again with their consorts.\textsuperscript{56}

The decorative traditions of Ajanta continued at Aurangabad more prominently in Caves 1 and 3, with tremendous vigour and strength in every detail. At base on either side of the door, Nāga kings are carved. They show grace and elegance. At the earlier sites of Ajanta Nāga kings were unaccompanied. At Ghatotkacha shrine doorway, Ajanta shrine and porch doorway, Cave 23 shrine doorway the Nāga king appears unaccompanied. But in Cave 2 shrine doorway the Nāga king appears unaccompanied. But in Cave 2 entrance doorway he is accompanied by a Nāga princess.

\textsuperscript{55} Dulari Qureshi op cit. p 54.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. p. 54
The Nāga kings in the later caves like 26 porch doorway stands on a slightly elevated position, holding a staff (club), while the other hand is in abhaya-mudrā.

At Aurangabad Cave 1 the hoods of the Nāga king is broken. The female Yakshis are carved as their consorts. The Nāga couple carved on the left is attended by a dwarfish figure, while the Nāga couple on the right is unattended.57

But during the later period the second miracle came to be carved repetitively, where Buddha is shown seated on a lotus supported by Nanda and Upananda. In this second episode Nanda and Upananda the Nāga kings created a miraculous lotus on the pericarp on which the blessed one seated himself. Then through magic, above this lotus where created multiple lotuses each of which formed a seat for the Buddha.58

At Ajanta Cave 6, on the second storey, on the right of the entrance door, leading to the hall, two Nāga kings with serpent hoods above their heads are shown holding the stalk of lotus on which the Buddha who is seated with legs in Western style, has placed his feet. Both the Nāga kings are seated on a lotus, the stalk of which is held by two Nāga kings. Here on the walls of the antechamber, miracle number one is also depicted in sculpture in various attitudes, seated standing in the abhaya, varada or meditative poses. Both the episodes of the Sravasti miracle are carved in Cave. At Ajanta Cave 6, on the second storey, on the right of the entrance door, leading to the hall, two Nāga kings with serpent hoods above their heads are shown holding the stalk of lotus on which the Buddha who is seated with legs in Western style, has placed his feet. Both the Nāga kings are seated on a lotus, the stalk of which is held by two Nāga kings.

58. Ibid p. 38
Here on the walls of the antechamber, miracle number one is also depicted in sculpture in various attitudes, seated standing in the abhaya, varada or meditative poses. Both the episodes of the Sravasti miracle are carved in Cave 7. In 22 on the right wall of the shirne there is a figure of Buddha seated in western style, his feet resting on a lotus flower, the stalks of which are held by Nāga kings. This panel was once painted.\textsuperscript{59}

In cave 26 on the left side of the hall the Mahaparinirvana and the temptation of Mara are carved and the rest of the circumambulation path is carved with 21 figures of Buddha seated in Pralambapada asana and Dharmachakra mudra, representing the miracle of Sravasti. Second episode with the two Nāga kings Nanda and Upananda, supporting the lotus flowers, on which rest the legs of the Buddha.\textsuperscript{60}

At Ajanta 26 the Buddha is seated in Pralambapada-asana, with his hands in Dharmachakra mudra, with flying dwarfs above, attendants on either side and the two Nāga kings supporting the lotus stalk with devotees at the base on either side. In some case the flying dwarfs fold fruits, flowers and also a crown. A crown is not generally depicted at any other site. The crown is also a surprising object to be held above the head of the Buddha. Buddha never wears a crown, since he has renounced worldly life. Of course it is merely a suggestion, but that too is quite amazing. The central figure carved on the chaitya of Cave 26 is that of Buddha seated in Pralambapada-asana, teaching attitude (one hand broken) and at the base his legs rest on a lotus supported by the two Nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{59} Dulari Qureshi \textit{op.cit }i.p.. 39.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid p. 39
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid
Water Spink writes that the presence of Nanda and Upananda, supporting the stem of the lotus, the cosmic axis, on which the Buddha is seated, is appropriate, for they figure prominently in the Buddhist textual description of the miraculous event.

The pillar is also square at the base and rosettes are carved. They appear rather flat and dry unlike the rosettes carved on the other pillars. On all four corners, Nāga rajas are carved.

One Nāga raja is attended by two servitors. One of them is a dwarf holding a flower vase while the other attendant also holds a lota type on his shoulders. The Nāga raja holds flowers in one hand and the ends of the garment in the other hand. The Nāga raja standing on the second angle stands with a flexion of his body holding a vina with both hands attended by only one servant. The other two Nāga kings are completely destroyed.  

### Sanchi Sculptures

When Maya reached Lumbini vana, she experienced pains. With her right hand she caught hold of a tree. The Bodhisattva came out of the right side of her womb after full ten months. Immediately after his birth, a great lotus emerge from the earth and two Nāgarajas, Nanda and Upananda, flanked the Bodhisatta. Standing on either side and gave him bath with two streams of water, one cool and the other warm. When the Bodhisattva was born, he was bathed by Sakra with gandhodaka. In the Sanchi reliefs, Indra's elephant Airavata gives bath to the Bodhisattva. Sakra, Brahma, Lokapālas and Devaputras shower flowers on him.

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62. Dulari Qureshi op.cit.p. 68.
63. Dr.Rao Manjushree, *Sanchi Sculptures An Aesthetic and Cultural Study* p.. 84
Nāgarāja Muchalinda and Goat-herd’s fig tree

The Buddha went to the Muchalinda tree where the Muchalinda Nāga covered him seven-folds for a week in order to protect him from heavy rains and colds. From there he went to the Rājayatana tree and spent a week there. All this time he did not take any bath or food and remained always in bliss. After seven weeks, on the forty-ninth day, he cleansed himself and sat under the Rājayatana tree.

The Buddha passed one week with the serpent king Muchalinda and spent another week under a goat-herd’s fig tree. These two incidents are depicted in the top-panel on the other face of the pillar. Muchalinda with his five-headed hood is seated amidst his women. A better depiction of Muchalinda Nāga is seen in P.38. At the time when the Bodhisattva was going towards the tree of enlightenment he was praised by Nāgarāja Kalika. In the Buddhacharita he is known as Kala. 64

Black snake at Rājagaha

Fig.--., which is now in the Lahore Museum, is a rectangular panel, picturing the miracle of the black snake at Rajagaha. The story was that a wealthy miser of Rajagaha buried his treasure in his garden. After death he turned into a black snake in order to guard it, and in that form terrorized the neighbourhood. At the request of King Bimbisara the Buddha subdued the snake, which forthwith crept into his begging-bowl. In the center of this relief stands the thick-set, stocky figure of the Buddha, holding his begging-bowl in his hand with the snake coiled inside it. Below, is a clump of lotuses growing from a small patch of water, and near by stands Bimbisara, gazing reverently at the snake. 65

64. Ibid p. 89
Nāga-rāja – Apalala

Fig which is in the Bombay Museum, depicts the submission of the Nāga Apalala. Though the workmanship is rough, the story is told simply and effectively – more effectively, I think, than in some of the later and more sophisticated versions. To the left, in the foreground, are the Nāga-rāja and his wife, emerging from the waters of a tank. Above them, among the rocks, is a dwarf-like yakṣa, smiting the mountain with a vajra and making the earth tremble. On the right is the figure of the Buddha in a protective pose, and behind him the Vajrapāṇi, here clad in a monk’s robe like the Master himself, while above him, in the background, appear the head and shoulders of another monk.⁶⁶

Nāga King – Kalika

In fig the Buddha is listening to the prophecy of the Nāga king Kalika and his queen. The composition is formal and unimaginative but the workmanship is conscientious and refined, and the figures of the two Nāgas and of the devas above, who appear actually to be moving in flight through the air, are not lacking in grace and charm.

Observe the conventional sala trees in the background and the youthful brahma-carin-type of Vajrapani- a type destine to become familiar in later sculpture.⁶⁷

⁶⁶. Ibid.p.52
Nāga King Mucilinda

The story about Mucalinda has some interesting parallels with a snake protecting Kṛṣṇa from the rain. It is said that after achieving the Enlightenment, once Buddha sat cross-legged under the Mucalinda tree for seven days enjoying the bliss of Enlightenment.

At that time a huge cloud appeared and for seven days rain and cold wind continued. Mucalinda, the Serpent king, enveloping the body of the Blessed One seven times with his coils, kept his long hood spread over the Master’s head protecting for all the seven days. The story of Mucalinda is also given in later texts like Nīdāna-kathā, Lalitavistara and Mahāvastu with a slightly changed version.68

The panel below (Fig.10b) depicts the visit of the Nāga king Mucilinda to the Buddha soon after his Illumination. The Nāga king is seated in the foreground, with two of his queens on his right and a ballet troupe of dancers and musicians making up the rest of the Nāga group.

In the background, behind Mucilinda, is the throne of the Buddha in the shade of a nyagrodha tree, which is attended by two kinnaras and two female celestials riding, respectively, on a winged lion and a griffin. Legend tells us that it was in the shade of a nyagrodha (ficus indica) tree that the Buddha rested in the fourth or fifth week after his illumination, and it is interesting to observe the meticulous care with which the artist has depicted that particular species of fig-tree, in contradistinction to the asvattha or ficus religious ordinarily associated with the Illumination.69

68. Sharma R.C. op.cit.p.31
Victory over the Serpent

Once he Buddha reached Uruvela, on his journey to Rajagaha from Mrigadava. At that time there were three Jatilas living at Uruvela: Uruvela Kasyapa, Nadi Kasyapa and Gaya Kasyapa, Uruvela Kasyapa was leader and chief of five hundred Jatilas; Nadi Kasyapa was leader and chief of three hundred Jatilas and Gaya Kasyapa was leader and chief of two hundred Jatilas. Thus, the total number of the Jatila followers was 1000. The Buddha approached Uruvela Kasyapa and requested him thus:-

“O Kasyapa, I desire to stay in the fire-house (agyagare) for a night”. Uruvela Kasyapa replied ‘No Mahasramana’. There in the fire-house is a ferocious serpent-king who is most poisonous and turbulent. So I would not allow you to enter the fire-house.” Uruvela Kasyapa repeated this reply three times. When the Buddha insisted on entering the fire-house, Uruvela Kasyapa agree to his request. Then the Buddha entered the fire-house and took his seat on a grass-cushion seated cross-legged. Then the serpent saw the Buddha and became angry.

The Buddha thought that he should create more heat in the body of the serpent and he did it. So, the serpent started burning out of anger. Thereafter, the Buddha also developed heat. Then the fire-house was full of intense light and heat. All the Jatilas surrounded the fire-house and uttered the words: “The Mahasramana has defeated the serpent. Thereafter, the serpent crept into the Buddha’s begging bowl. The Buddha that night stayed there and spoke to Uruvela Kasyapa “O Kasyapa the Nāga has been subdued.” Then Uruvela Kasyapa was convinced that the Mahasramana is really great. He is a powerful serpent among the men or an elephant among the men. (Manussa nago)70

70. Dr.Rao Manjushree, *Sanchi Sculptures An Aesthetic and Cultural Study* p. 91
In the middle of the panel is the fire-temple with a fire-altar in front and throne indicating the presence of the Buddha within while behind the throne there is the five-hooded Nāga. Flames are issuing from the windows in the roof. On either side of the temple are Brahmana ascetics standing in an attitude of respect and veneration, three on the right side and five on the left side of the temple. In the foreground to the right is a round leaf-hut (parṇasālā) and Uruvela Kasyapa is doing the penance. Before him is another Brahmana Jatila standing; apparently reporting to him the miracle that the Buddha has subdued the Nāga.71

Stūpa of Ramagrama

Asoka went to Ramagrama where he saw that the Nāgas (elephants as well as serpent kings) were worshipping stūpa. It was the eighth stūpa erected earlier containing the Buddha’s relics. They requested Asoka not to disturb the stūpa and leave it under their care.

After full consideration Asoka gave up the idea of opening the stūpa. The pl. 11, 2 shows the stūpa of Ramagrama as a central motif of the panel. The pl. 46,3 of the eastern gateway also depicts the same scene. The scene in the pl. 11,2 is taken from Asokavadana. It is said that the eight original deposits of relics into the stūpas were excavated by Asoka who distributed them into eighty four thousand relic-stūpas, but for one stūpa which was at Ramagrama. This stūpa was worshipped and protected by Nāga kings who did not allow Asoka to touch the stūpa. The sculpture has shown the two rival troops in the clearest manner on either side of the stūpa. The lintel on the eastern gateway gives the second form of the legend as narrated by Fa-Hien and Hiuen-thsang. According to their version the stūpa was abandoned in the jungle; but some Nāga king used to worship it. A herd of elephants carrying lotuses in their trunks offered flowers to the stūpa.

71. Ibid
A clear-cut distinction between the two scenes is made thus: -
In pl. 11,2 the serpent kings protect the stūpa, but in P.31 the elephant kings offer prayers and flowers to the stūpa. The different is probably due to the interpretation of the word “Nāga” which means a serpent as well as an elephant. 72

Sculptures of Mathura and Sarnath

Bath Scene: A single example, showing this event, is housed in Mathura Museum. This scene is depicted in a peculiar manner. A nude figure of a male child stands on a platform. On each side of him, two Nāga kings, Nand and Upnanda emerges half-way from a round masonry well as mentioned in the Buddhist text. The Nidānakathāand Divyāvadāna are silent about this scene, while Mahāvastu refers that to the East of the Stūpa, are two fountains of pure water are built by the side of two Stūpas.

This is the place, where Dragons appeared from the earth, when the Bodhisattva was born, the attendants hastened in every direction to find water for the use of the child. Two springs gurgled forth from the earth, one cold and other warm. Instead of pouring water on the infant Bodhisattva both the Nāga kings stand in the attitude of adoration. But at Sarnath, the pair of Nāgas pouring water on the Bodhisattva are canopied by nine-headed snakehood. An another important characteristics, to show the divinity of Buddh, the artist of Mathura carved Bodhisattva larger in size than a human figure. The six musical instruments is found at the top of the panel, which probably indicates that the Heavenly music was heard on this joyous occasion The sculpture is distinguished by both a unique format and iconography. 73

72. Dr. Rao Manjushree, Sanchi Sculptures An Aesthetic and Cultural Study p. 96
73. Dr.(Mrs) Tiwari Usha Rani Sculptures of Mathura and Sarnath : A comparative study. p. 124
“Erapata (Erathpa, Erakapatta, Elapatra or Ailapatra) – the Dragon – chief.”

This bas-relief, as Cunningham observes, is a square panel, on the left of which is kneeling a Dragon-chief in complete human form, with a five-hooded snake canopy over his head. Behind him to the right are the half figures of a male dragon and two female dragons, also in human form, and with snake hoods over their heads, but with their lower extremities concealed. In the midst of the piece is a five-hooded snake rising apparently from the ground, who can be taken to be the Dragon-king in his first appearance from below in his true snake-form amongst the trees and rocks. Above, there are two small trees, and two half Nāginis. One of the short labels refer to the scene as one of worship of the Blessed Saviour by the Dragon-king Erapata.74

The Dragon-king Erapata pays reverence to the Buddha as a means of escape from his snaky existence.

On the lower corner of the main strip in the left, the Dragon-king Erapata kneels on the ground and bows down, touching with his forehead the left hand side of a cubical jewel-seat of Buddha Śākyamuni from a corner, grasping the upper edge with his left hand and placing his right palm against the side itself. He appears indeed in the form of a roya 1 personage, with a five hooded crest over his turban.75

The longer label is incised just behind the Dragon-chief, describing his action and attitude. Just above it, in the midst of the upper pool, we notice a beautifully adorned maiden in human form, standing characteristically as though turning round and round, while she is dancing and singing, upon the five-headed hood of the Dragon-king, raised aloft from water. She holds a lotus-bud in her upraised left hand, while her right hand is pointed towards a man before her with whom she is conversing with her charming face.

74. Barua Benimadhab, Barhat Book 1, stone as a story – tells p., 65
75. Ibid
The man stands, his body above water and wrapped by an upper garment, donned on his left shoulder, holding a lotus-bud in his right hand stretched towards her, evidently making advances of love. His face is broken off. But it is certain that he has no head-dress, may, his head is shaven. In the midst of the lower pool we seen the same Dragon-king, now in a royal human form, walking on towards the jewel-seat, carrying a lotus in his folded hands, and followed by two female dragons, also in human form, with single serpent-crest over their heads, one behind him appearing to be his wife, and one behind her his daughter.

The two females are distinguished by the different head-dresses, here the head-dress of the daughter behind the queen being the same as that of the maiden on the hood of the Dragon-king. The shorter label giving the Dragon-king’s name is incised just below his figure lest the observer may mistake his identity, now that he has assumed the human form. The labels give his name as Erapata or Erapata, while in literature it is found to be Erakapatta, Erapatha, Elapatra and Ailapatra. These suggest different etymological explanations. See how Erakapatta, equating well with all the forms but Erapatha, is explained in the Dhammapada-Commentary: He came to be known as Erakapatta because he felt as though an Eraka-leaf had seized him by the neck. Erapatha, corresponding to Mendapatha in the Mahaniddesa, signifies a country abounding in elakas or rams, through which the north-western branches of the Indian caravan route (uttarapatha) passed.

This must have been situated within Takhasila, since it is expressly stated in the Mahāvastu that his abode with a tank or lake in Takhasila, None need be surprised if this place was or Ailaprashta, an ancient Iranian settlement. The Mahāvastu mentions Elapatra as one of the four richest persons in India. Why should he, despite his riches, be anxious to pay homage to the Buddha? The reply is given in the Erakapatta-Nāgaraja-vatthu of the Dhammapada-Commentary, of which a counterpart may be found in the Mahāvastu.
As hinted at by Cunningham our bas-relief faithfully illustrates a story similar in many points to that in the Dhammapada-Commentary, which will be manifest from the following narration.  

In the dispensation of Buddha Kasyapa, Erakapatta was a young monk, who while going in a boat along the Ganges, passed a jungle of Eraka-trees. He grasped an Eraka-leaf. Though the boat was moving rapidly, he did not let it go. The result was that the leaf was completely torn off. He thought it to be a mere trifle. But when he was about to die, he felt as though an Eraka-leaf hang about his neck like an alabaster of sin. His mistake was that he did not confess his fault. He died to be reborn to his shame as a Dragon-king, the measure of whose body was that of a dug-out canoe. "What a pity that after performing meditations for so long a time, I find myself in a feeding-place for frogs!" 

He had a daughter. Lying on the surface of the water in the middle of the Ganges, he raised his great hood, placed his daughter therein, and caused her to dance and sing, which he practiced as a device of attracting persons from whom he might gather information about the Buddha’s advent. He had it proclaimed that if any one could sing a reply to his song, he would give him his daughter, and the power and wealth of a dragon king as a gift. Every fortnight, on Fastday, he placed his daughter in his hood, and she, poised there, danced, and sang this song:

“What manner of ruler is a king?

What manner of king is under the dominion of passion?

How may he free himself from the bondage of passion?

Why is he called a simpleton?”

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76. Barua Benimadhab, op.cit p. 66

77. Barua, op.cit.p. 66
Many suitors came with replies which were all rejected. At last came a wooer, the Brahmin youth Uttara, coached by the merciful Buddha, who felt pity for the Dragon-king. As the daughter of the Dragon-king sang her song, Uttara sang a counter-song in reply. "What a grand song and reply this must be, which none but a Buddha can suggest!" His heart was filled with joy at the very thought. With his tail he lashed the surface of the water, whereupon great waves arose, washing away both banks. "Master, where is the Teacher?" he asked Uttara, approaching him. "He is sitting under one of the seven Sirisha-trees near Benaras." "Come, master, let us go." He, on their arrival at the place, bowed down to the Teacher and stood on one side weeping. "Great king, human estate is indeed difficult to attain, it is likewise difficult to gain the privilege of listening to the Law so also is the rise of a Buddha is difficult. For this latter is brought about with toil and trouble." As he listened to these words he gained the fruit of conversion, and recovered the power of going about in human form.  

The Barhut scene illustrates this story in three stages of its progress: (1) the Dragon-king looking out for information about the Buddha's appearance, (2) going to the place where the Buddha was, and (3) interviewing the Teacher. The surviving fragment of the panel presents six instead of seven Sirisha-trees. It is not in the Commentary-story that the Dragon queen and princes accompanied the king. In this point the scene has rather an agreement with the Mahāvastu-story.

Cakavāko Nāgaraja.

Cakavāka, the Dragon-chief. a human demi-god, who is seen standing, with joined hands and comely mien, on a high rock showing the faces of two tigers, peeping out from their dens, beside a lotus-lake, where a swan is swimming, a few cranes stand in a significant attitude, and a crocodile stands in water with a gasping mouth, apparently with the intention of attacking some of the birds.

78. Ibid pg 68
79. Barua Benimadhab op.cit. p. 68
His gracefully bound turban is canopyed by a five headed cobra-hood, which is characteristic of the figure of a Nāgarāja. His joined hands, held across his breast, are evidently directed towards the invisible presence of the Buddha. There must have been some Buddhist legend giving an account of Chakavāka’s interview with the compassionate Master, paying respects to whom the Dragon-chief, like Ailapatra, regained the human form and speech.  

According to settings suggested in the Ajanatiya-Sutta, Dhritaraśra is to guard the eastern quarter with the aid of Surya (his general), seven constellations and eight devakumaris;

Vikudhaka is to guard the southern quarter with the aid of Yama (his general), seven constellations and eight devakumaris. Virupakṣa is to guard the western quarter with the aid of Varuṇa (his general), seven constellations and eight devakumaris. Kubera is to guard the northern quarter with the aid of Maṇibhadra (his general), eight constellations and eight devakumaris. It is difficult to think and say that these directions have been strictly followed.

Some generals or lieutenants are here; some heavenly bodies, including sun and moon, are here; and some devakumaris are here. Keeping the literally tradition in the Ajanatiya-Sutta in view, one can understand why the four Lokapalas stand waiting upon the Buddha, showing reverence to him. There is a Uttarapathaka (North-western or Persian form of Surya, Mihira, Persian Mehr) with avyanga and high-heeled boots and armed like a soldier. The attitude is one of a sentinel of duty, standing easy by way of saluting a superior person whose presence is felt. A Nāgarāja, called Cakravāka, appears among the generals, with a five-hooded cobra-head rising from behind his head, and in a human form in the rest of the features. He stands gravely with clasped hands as a prototype of tutelary deities of rocky pools. He may be taken to be a Barhut type of Varuṇa mentioned in the Pali Sutta.  

80. Ibid

81. Ibid pg 540
A Nāgarāja called Erapata in the Barhut labels, appears first in his natural form as a snake with a five-hooded cobra-head, and next in a human form with the cobra-hood rising from behind his head. He is followed by his wife and daughter who are females are distinguished by a single-hooded cobra-head. Erapata is hurrying to the place where the Master was sojourning. Another Nāgaraja, called Manikantha, is also to be seen in his natural form in Scene 106, while in a medallion, a Nāgarāja is dancing in a human form with a similar five-hooded cobra-head, waited upon by two mermaids from two sides. Another Nāgaraja in his natural form is shown in a lake beneath the Trikuta rocks.82

Images of the Buddha with serpenthoods over the head are known from the sites like Bharhut, Sanci, Amarāvati, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, etc. At Bharhut the scene of Elapatra Nāgaraje’s visit to the Buddha is represented. At first Elapatra is shown in his serpent form and at another place in the anthropomorphic form with snakehoods attached behind his head. Elapatra (Erapata)

Nāgarāja is shown worshipping the bodhi tree with his family. On a pillar, now housed in Allahabad Museum in the central medallion is the five-hooded Mucalinda Nāgarāja below a Banyan Tree and footprints of the Buddha are also depicted. Mucalinda is said to have protected the Buddha during a storm. This story is carved at Sanci, Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa stūpas also. A typical Nāga figure named Nāgarāja Cakkavāka (cakkavāka Nāga rajo) on a railing pillar, which stood in the corner of the south gate at Bharhut, is represented in human form with a canopy of five snake-hoods attached behind his head.

82. Barua Benimadhab op.cit.p.58
At Sanchi Mucalinda, the king of the Nāgas has been shown on the western and small gateways. Another five-hooded Nāga king along with his four nagi queens and Nāga attendants has been depicted on a pillar of the southern gateway. On the middle architrave of the same gateway, the Nāgas and nagis children are coming out of a pond and seen worshipping a stūpa. In Gāndhāra art Nāgarāja Apalala, struck by Vajrapāni, appears with his consort before the Buddha with hands in adoration. 83

The gateways at Sanchi were erected, as nearly as can be ascertained, in the first half of the first century of our era, and, therefore, nearly contemporary with Nāgārjuna. They are not pure, but they are purer than anything else of their kind now known to exist. Buddha never appears in them as an object of worship. The Dagoba, the Chakra or wheel, the Tree, and other such emblems are reverenced. The Serpent does appear but rarely, and we have very little of the absurd supernatural fables which afterwards from the stock of the legends. At Amravati, three centuries afterwards, we find a state of affairs much more in accordance with modern notions. Buddha is worshipped, but the Nāga is his co-equal. The Dagoba, the Tree, the Chakra, are all reverenced; and almost all the legends of modern times may probably be traced in its sculptures, though in a purer form than in the books. The first may be taken as the nearest approach we possess to an illustrated Bible of the Hinayana period, five hundred years before the oldest Buddhist book we possess; and Amravati as a pictorial illustration of the Mahayana three centuries after its promulgation, and just before Fa-Hian visited the country and gave us the earliest description we have of the faith by any outsider, since at least the very meagre and unsatisfactory accounts of the Greeks. 84

83. Ibid
84. Fergussion James, Tree and Serpent Worship p. 67
The same remark applies to the frescoes in the Caves at Baugh, and generally to the western Caves. The tendency of the migration from Takshhasila seems to have been southward, and towards the East, and never to have descended the Ghauts or penetrated into the Concan. On the other hand, the most recent example I am acquainted with of any great Nāga Sculptures belonging to the classical age of Indian art, is the well-known bas-relief at Mahavellipore, on the eastern shore, about forty miles south of Madras, and executed apparently in the thirteenth century. This is carved on two great masses of granite rock, and extends about 90 feet north and south, by 30 or 35 feet in height. When Mr. Babington drew them, in 1827, only the lower part of the great Nāga was remaining, but his wife below him was quite perfect, and presents us with a form not found either at Sanchi, Amravati, or Ajanta. The Nāgas here, both male and female, are represented as Serpents at full length, but human from the waist upwards. They still, however, generally have the Snake hood of three or five heads canopying their own; in the same manner as in the Chinese woodcut, No.3, introduced on page 53, where this more modern form of the Nāga has been adopted.85

Influence of Nāga-Worship in Buddhist Art

The antiquity of Nāga-worship goes back to the remote past. Various references found in the literature of the Nāga festival (Nāgamaha), fairs and procession made in his honour (Nāgayātra) show the popularity of Nāga-worship in ancient India. 1 The Nāgas were serpent deities of folk-cult. The offering to a Nāga deity was called the Nāgabali or sarpabali, the purpose of which was to get rid of snakes.

85. Fergussion James, Tree and Serpent Worship p. 68
We have the long tradition of Nāga-worship in India. Vedic literature refers the famous battle between Indra and Vṛtra. Here Vṛtra signifies as the Dragon of the Deep (Ahir-budhnya) and also identified with Ananta, the cosmic serpent. Marshall refers to two seals found at Mohenjo-Daro, which bear figures of a god seated in yoga posture, on whose either side is represented a half human, half-animal form of a Nāga with hands uplifted in prayers. These seals suggest that Nāgas were also considered sacred and personified by the Harappans. Many other depictions of the Nāga in the art of Indus Vally Civilization are also the evidence of the popularity of Nāga cult during the period.

With the Mauryan kings Buddhism seems to have entered on a new phase; at least in Asoka’s inscriptions we have no trace of the worship of either Buddha himself, nor of Trees nor Serpents. Pure abstract morality seems to have been the form it then took or was intended to take. But in the Mahavanso, one of the great events of Asoka’s reign, is the dispatch of a branch of the Bo Tree of Buddh Gaya to Ceylon, showing that form of faith to be then prevalent; and in the Caves of Orissa, which probably are anterior to the Christian era, we find both Tree and Serpent Worship prevailing. There are, however, few periods of Indian history during which such scanty materials exist for settling any point, either historical or mythological, as during the two centuries and a half before the Christian era. We know nothing that happened during that period, and we hardly see where light is to come from to illumine those dark ages.86

Thus, the Nāgas have played a significant role in the history of religion and art. These being folk divinities were worshipped among the common people as the guardian deities of water and treasures. Their shrines have also been mentioned in literature.

86. Fergusson James, op. cit. p. 64
Many temples dedicated to the Nāgas were built. One such temple belonging to the Kuśāṇa period was excavated at Sonkh near Mathura. This region was once a great center of Nāga-worship, and this worship continue even today in the form of Nāgapañcami puja throughout India. Though their status was raised to the rank of devatas in Brahmanical cults, but in Buddhism and Jainism, these were regarded as tutelary gods and considered to be the subordinate and attend on the Buddha, Parsvanatha, Mahāvīra, Krṣṇa and Śiva.87

It is important to realize that the designation Nāga is given to certain aboriginal tribes of the area, such as the Nāga tribal peoples of Assam (Indian province) and Myanmar (the country formerly called Burma) in the eastern foothills of the Himālayas.

Since legend has it that Nāgas washed Gautama Buddha at his birth, protected him in life and guarded his relics after death, some believe that this refers to the term "Nāga" as meaning tribal or hill people, or possibly even the class of adepts or yogis that are sky-clad.

And there are many tales of the conversion of Nāgas to Buddhism, including the account of a Nāga of a lake in a forest near Rajagaha who was convinced of the benefit of Buddha-dharma.

Traditions about nāgas are also very common in all the Buddhist countries of Asia. In many countries, the nāga concept has been merged with local traditions of large and intelligent serpents or dragons. In Tibet, the nāga was equated with the klu (pronounced lu), spirits that dwell in lakes or underground streams and guard treasure. In China, the nāga was equated with the lóng or Chinese dragon.

87. Sharma RC, interaction between Brahmanical and Buddhist Art. p. 32
In the accounts given, there is undoubtedly great confusion between the Nāgas as supernatural beings (transforming reptilians), as snakes, and as the name of certain non-Aryan human tribes. But the confounding of one with the other is too entangled to unravel.\(^{88}\)

The use of the term nāga is often ambiguous, as the word may also refer, in similar contexts, to one of several human tribes known as or nicknamed Nāgas, to elephants, and to ordinary snakes, particularly the king cobra and the Indian cobra, which is still called nāga in Hindi and other Indian languages.\(^{89}\)

\(^{88}\) Sharma R.C, \textit{op.cit.}, p.32  
\(^{89}\) Wisdom Quarterly \textit{op.cit.} 5
Plate XV
Nāga Mucilinda, Protection of the Buddha. 2nd century AD. Sannati, Karnataka

Plate XVI
Naga Mucilinda, 2nd century AD. Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh
Plate XVII
Deer. First Sermon. 3rd century AD. Nagarjunakonda. Andhra Pradesh

Fig. 69. Submission of the Naga Apalala. From Sanghao. Bombay Museum. Ht. 7'12 in. A.G.-B.G. vol. I, p. 551
Fig. 75. The Buddha and the Nīpa-sūtra kuśa. From Sākhā. Lahore Museum. Ht. 13 in.
Pl. 38. Campeyya Jātaka, Nāgarjunakoṇḍa
219. The Nāga Apālāṇa Subdued by the Buddha, detail of a dome slab (Photo: Archaeological Survey of India).
Pl. 39, Campeyya Jataka, Nāgarjunakonda
Pl. 39a. Campeyya Jātaka, (Sumana’s Dream) Nāgarjunakonda

Pl. 39b. Campeyya Jātaka, (Performance of Snake Dance) Nāgarjunakonda

Pl. 39c. Campeyya Jātaka, (Suman’s request for release of Campeyya) Nāgarjunakonda