Before we proceed with the snake-worship in India, it is interesting and even essential to know about the origin of this cult. To quote Ferguson "love and admiration, more than fear or dread, seem to be the main features of the faith and there are so many unexpected features which are at the same time common all the world over, that it seems more reasonable to suspect a common origin."

Geographical or racial origin of snake-worship:
The origin of snake-worship has been attributed by Tod to the so-called Tak or Takshak tribe of Central Asia. Ferguson supposed that the cult to have originated among the Turanian people of the upper Euphrates and to have spread thence to every part of the old world, depending upon their migrations and settlements at different times. He, however, maintains that no Semitic or Aryan people adopted it as a form of faith. But the latest searches on the Scythians unfold that though the use of the snake as an ornament or symbol is found among the people, there is no indication of a general cult of the reptile. Still more recently Alliot Smith suggests a theory of migration by which serpent-worship, originated in Egypt about 800 B.C. was spread thence by the

---

J. Ferguson, *Tree and Serpent worship* (Oriental Publishers, Delhi, 1868), p. 1
Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 412
Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 3
Crooke, *op. cit.*, p. 412
Phoenicians to India, the Far East, and the Pacific islands and later to America. But Alexander Kinglake in his 
*Western Travel*, a popular book of Eastern Travel, mentions that the Egyptians were supposed to have come from Hindustan where they, following their ancient custom of raising sepulchral mounds, showed progress and perfection in Pyramidial constructions. This line of thinking does much against the theory of Smith and all these theories seem, as Vogel says, quite "strange and useless".

**Totemistic origin:**

Oldham opines that a group of people who claimed their descent from the sun and had the hooded serpent for a totem went on worshipping the being of their totem-symbol. In view of this theorist those people who had the *nāga* symbol for their totem were the *nāgas*. If these alone were supposed to have worshipped *nāgas* (the snakes) because they chose the *nāga* for their totem, this theory fails to offer an explanation for the prevalence of snake-worship among people other than the *nāgas*. Moreover this theory favours the fixation of the commencement of the snake cult in recent times. Either way this theory appears to be neither sound nor plausible. But still this is one view.

---

3. Vogel, op. cit., p. 2
The origin, geographical and racial, totemistic or tribal, of snake-worship is, thus, a disputable point as yet.

wherever the serpent-worship may have had its origin in the old world, it was and is still in vogue. In general, the existence of snake-worship in prehistoric times is uncertain, though serpents are found among the animals figured by Palaeolithic artists of the entire universe.

Biological Origin:

The snake-cult seems to be as old as man. In the quite distant past, people believed that the spermatozoa of the male fluid or semen to be animals. They have a flattened oval-head like the hood of a nāga and the tail following it. Each sperm resembles the hooded cobra in all respects as shown in the picture annexed.

---

As this has been considered the most vital to have progeny, the nāga-worship came into being as a means to attain children. The Indians hold this view differing from others who merely took it for an animal. The traditional belief in our country, especially in South India, is that sterility is a curse for those people by the nāga-god for wronging his race in their previous birth. Consequently, it is believed that without propitiating the snake-god and winning his favour, such cursed people cannot beget children, in spite of their craving for them.

Evolutionary Origin:

Almost all the learned men all over the world attribute the origin of the snake-cult mainly to fear aroused by the cold fixity of its gaze, the protrusion of its forked tongue, its stealthy habits and the deadliness of its attacks. Of course, there is some truth in it and it may be the basis of the serpent-cult, and one of the reasons for its survival since ages throughout the world, save in India. Because, in spite of saying that this cult of the reptiles is due to the wide distribution and loss of life caused by its bite in our country, they concluded that the Indian cult is "local". That it is "local" is quite true. More so because the Indian worship is free from any trace of fear.

1. Crooke, loc. cit., p.7
The most typical quality of the Indian mind is, right from the earliest times, to look through the form and search, for the spirit in things everywhere. Its age long endeavour has been to exceed the present way of mind, life and body; to live from the inner spirit outwards and dictate to external nature. Consequently the Indian mind had discovered the immanence of life and also affirmed the evolution of the soul in nature from the vegetable and the animal to the human form.  

It is not the purpose of this writer now to trace the vast series of evolutions that have taken place under the supernatural and natural agencies, before an animal is metamorphosed into man, who is able to experience higher spiritual life.  

We, therefore, notice a close connection between man and beast even in religion. This human and animal relation in religion has been described as animism by the westerners for which they say the basis is in the belief of human animality and animal humanity. This is, of course, true to some extent. Yet, it is said that religion takes its origin from the border-land that demarcates man from animals, though the impressions he gets from them leave a lasting imprint on

2. Ibid. p. 68.
his mind more than anything else. He may learn many things from animals. But in so many things he may learn just what he ought not to do. Though the animal worship is in our religion, never did it cease at the physical level. Ours is not mere theriolatry. Man is not to imitate animals. Therefore, the necessity of settling the matter on some other ground.

That he and all things have their being in God, is the thing which his religion never allowed him to forget. This identification and the sense of oneness will never allow fear and apathy to arise. Only out of duality arises fear.\(^1\) Hence, we can conclude that the Indian worship is actuated by a lofty spiritual ideal of oneness or the 'law of harmony', though the primitive man failed to make it explicit until the Vedic times. Shrinking and repulsion are absolutely unknown to it.\(^2\) The worship or religion of the primitive man proceeded through the visible outward manifestations of nature as something greater than his own natural self. and in later times psychic significance was attached to the primitive religion and the same was elaborated and explained as we find in the Vedas and the Vedic literature.

\(^1\) Sri Vidyaprasanandagiri Swamiji, Veetamakarandam, (Sri Sukbrahma Asramam, Kalahasti, andhra Pradesh, 1971) p. 904

\(^2\) Aurobindo, op. cit., p. 221-2
they do not deify a physical feature. They merely recognise the divine form manifest in it. In the Hindu pantheon each god, apart from his special function, is one godhead with the others; each holds in himself the universal divinity, each god is all the other gods. Accordingly, the naga of the Indian worship is at once the snake god and all the other gods, and also the universal divinity. This aspect of the Vedic teaching and worship is quite unintelligible to occidentals. They, therefore, simply branded it as henotheism. Anyhow, worship, devoid of dread, is a realm of our religious system that the human brain ever conceived. At the same time, it is also a means to overcome fear and to experience the law of harmony in all creation. So much for the absence of fear in our religion.

Cosmological Origin:

The Indian mind had also recognised that the laws that govern the spiritual, the psychological and physical existence are not different but one and the same, and many of the truths are being tested and verified by the

1. Aurobindo, op. cit., p. 144
modern science from its own side of the approach to knowledge. They discovered by intuition that the human energy in its restive condition likened unto a coiled serpent and named it after the coiled serpent 'kundalini'; and in its active condition when it moves, it appeared to them in the form of spirals resembling 'naga bandha' (intertwining of two cobras, usually the male and the female). Later, they noticed the same in the motion of etherial or cosmic forces and the 'naga bandha' was viewed as the symbol of power transmission, the male and the female standing for the positive and negative charges, thus completing the circuit, and which science today has also reaffirmed. The same can be observed in the following figure of an atom showing the streams of ether flowing into and

Fig. 72. An Atom more fully represents, with streams of ether flowing into and out of the atomic chambers. The male and female, channelized in the atom above and the electrical ether in the atom below, play the same role as those in the coiled serpent. A vortex forms at vertex A and passes to B and C, and so forth. The figure shows the entire atom in the form of a vortex in a vortex.
out of the atomic channels, and forming a spiral channel of the thermal ethers from the negative to the positive end. But here we have to bear in mind that this sort of superior knowledge was reserved only for the initiates and the mass simply worshipped the forms in all ethical spirit as laid down by the learned seers. Thus, we find different levels in our religion to suit different levels of people. The common sneers which we very often come across now a days with reference to worship or religion are, by and large, due to nothing but ignorance of the fundamental principles of our religion.

**Psychic Origin:**

Yet another factor seems to the writer fit for consideration. That man can do and undo things, is an established fact. So also a cobra can take away life by its bite causing least damage to the physique of the victim, and give it back if it pleases or being called by a chanter of spells. Thus, we see the dual nature at its extreme in a cobra, next to man. Perhaps his psychic semblance, besides its manifold characteristics, must have made it an object of veneration and worship right from the remotest times.

---

\[\text{\textit{Janes Purana quoted by Vogel, op. cit., p. 22}}\]
Mythical Origin:

A mythical account informs us that the nāgas were the descendents of Surabhi, the Kamadhenu or the Fabulous Cow, the daughter of Kasyap. These, after their mother, were called Saurashayas. This account too, like the Puranic one, traces the origin of the nāga cult to immemorial times.

Puranic Origin:

The story given about the origin of nāgas as stated in the Bhavisya Purana is given as under.

In the age of the gods two of the daughters of Naksha Prajapati named Kadru (the Lawny one) a personification of the Earth—the goddess of Heaven—and Vinata (the Bent one)—the goddess of Heaven—were given in marriage to sage Kasyapa. They were exceedingly beautiful and highly modest. Well pleased with his wives, the sage, their husband, asked them to choose any boon they liked, for he was ready to grant them a boon each. At that Kadru chose that she might become the mother of a thousand nāgas, all of equal splendour. Then Vinata prayed him to grant her two sons stronger than those of her sister. Eventually Kadru conceived a thousand eggs and Vinata two. These eggs were preserved and well guarded for full five hundred years.

hence the thousand nāga sons of kadru came out in their full-fledged form. Vinata who was abashed and anxious at not seeing her sons come out of eggs even after the birth of the nāgas, broke one of the two eggs in her burning desire for an offspring. But as the time was not ripe for his birth, her premature son possessed only the upper half of his body, the lower part being unformed as such, he was given the name anur (one who does not possess the uru or the thighs), and was the appointed charioteer of the sun-god. In his indignation for his mother who was solely responsible for his deformity, he cursed her to become a slave to her sister kadru for five hundred years. But moved with pity for his mother, he later added that she would be freed from his curse by her second son. After a long time her second son, varuda the prodigious bird that preys on snakes, was born.

But according to another version, it was not kadru but surasa (the well-flavoured one) synonym for earth like kadru, was the nāga-mother. For this reason the nāga sons of kadru were named after her kadraveyas and the nāga sons of surasa as suraseyas. The puranas say kadru, surasa and vinata are the three of the seven consorts of kasyapa. Anyhow, these myths agree dictionary (andhra sabda hatnakaramu, Venkatarama & Co., madras, 1970) p. 2227 offers meaning for "suraseyas" as "descendents of surushi such as cows, buffaloes, and other quadrupeds, but not the nāgas. 1. shisvya purana - 1 - 32,33,34,37 parts. 2. anur (vogel, op.cit. p.47 and 50). It is not "aruna" as mentioned but "anur", the eldest son of vinata, for reasons above cited. "aruna" means "bright red of the rising sun and also a synonym for the sun in sanskrit. 3. telugu dictionary, loc.cit. p.16
on the point that the serpents had their birth much in advance to man. Thus, the puranic account traces the origin of the nāgas to the remotest times.

**Legendary Origin:**

The legendary account of how the nāga-worship came into being, as believed in Andhra Pradesh, is as follows:

Once upon a time there was a Brahman who had seven sons and all of them were married. They lived together in a village. It so happened that the youngest daughter-in-law was an orphan and so while her sisters-in-law went to their parents or relatives during festivals, she had none to go to. Consequently, when others taunted her, she cursed herself saying out of ennui she had the serpents alone to go to and wept.

As she did so several times in the year, Sēga, the king of serpents, was moved to pity and out of commiseration for the poor girl took the form of an aged uncle returned from a pilgrimage and approached the girl's father-in-law asking permission to take his niece away for a few days to his home. The old Brahman wondered wherein god's name had the prodigal been hiding all these days.

The girl on hearing this cock and bull story was frankly suspicious at first, but finally opted for going with the old man being disgusted by the ridicule of her mother and sisters-in-law.
The fake uncle took the girl to his abode, the entrance for which was a rat-hole and there he assumed his true form. Asking her to sit on his hood, Ŝeṣa took her to nag-loka to his glittering palace where he entrusted her to the care of his wife whom he asked to bestow all affection and comforts. Ŝeṣa further decreed that none of his denizens should harm the girl.

She lived in the nag-loka for some time, when Ŝeṣa's wife became pregnant and, in due course, delivered a new brood of snakes. The girl was given a heavy brass lamp to hold in her hands while she walked lest she should trample on the young crawling things.

By an accident, however, the girl dropped the lamp which fell on some young ones severing their tails. But, the mother-snake took no offence. After a few days of his incident the brahman girl was restored to her husband.

One day the young serpents who had lost their tails became self-conscious and approached their mother and asked her why they were maimed while their brothers were not. The lady told them of the incident of the brahman girl little suspecting that it would become a hot issue. The young ones became very angry and at once decided to avenge on the girl. So all of them rushed to the girl's village and hid themselves outside her house waiting for her to come out.
It was the fifth day of Śrāvaṇa (July/August) and the brahman girl, as was her wont, drew the figures of serpents on the decorated ground and was loudly offering prayers to Śiva for protecting her beloved snake-brothers as she fondly called them. When the hiding snakes heard these words, they were ashamed of their intention to kill her and absolved of their qualms, showed themselves before her. The girl was mightily pleased and offered them all milk and other jaggery preparations. They partook of the sisterly meal and presented her with a costly jewel made of their gems.

Since that day, the fifth day of Śrāvaṇa is observed as a sacred day for serpents, the underlying idea being that they, besides not harming those who worship them, will bestow on them happiness and well-being not merely in riches but in children too, of which they are very potent.

Whatever be the truth of the story, the Nāga-pancami is a forceful reminder one of the noble law of Hinduism, of compassion to the meanest or most loathful of God's creation.

Another legendary account of the origin of the naga-worship largely in circulation in northern India is as follows:

1. P.J. Heoras, op. cit., p. 10
in a certain city called manipura lived an ignorant u-aur Brahman. One day as he was ploughing, the young ones of a nagin (a female cobra) perished under the plough. The nagin on her return found her children mangled and lying in a pool of blood. With a burning rage for revenging the wholesale murder of her children, she rushed to the Brahman's house and put an end to all the inmates of the house with her venomous bite. By instinct she knew that a daughter of the same Brahman was married and was living in the next village. The nagin then set out to the next village with the idea of extinguishing the entire family of the Brahman. When she went there in her unabated anger, the pious girl offered her oblations with due adoration, burning frankincense and lamps. The nagin was well pleased with the girl's goodness and veneration, told the girl in detail the purpose of her visitation and left her without biting. At this the girl implored the nagin to bring all her dead members back to life and tell her how to expiate the sin of having killed snakes wittingly or otherwise. Thereupon, the nagin said: "Now from this day, when the month of Caravan cometh, thou shouldst worship the nagins on the fifth day of the bright fortnight offering frankincense and oblations. And thou shall not dig, neither shalt thou kill any being on that day". Later she offered the girl some nectar-like substance to be sprinkled over the dead bodies to restore them to life and disappeared.
The next morning she took it to her father's village and sprinkled it over all her dead people. Before the eyes of the villagers, all the dead persons rose as though waking up from sleep: at that moment, she told them what all she was told by the nagin the previous night, and since then naga-worship has become customary with all the people all over the country on the fifth day of Shravan.

Thus, the legend offers an explanation for the present day continuance of the naga-worship besides extolling the goodness and greatness of the nagas and their ability to take away and give back the life of their victims.

The above two legendary accounts, in addition to tracing the origin of the naga-cult, serve to illustrate how worship fosters goodness even in the minds of one's bitter foes. From these two accounts we may infer that the idea behind worship is not fear but the observance of the 'law of harmony' that manifests itself in the form of 'love for all beings' and the gains that befall the cultivator of such a quality or temperament.

Though all the above mentioned various theories put forth different reasons for the origin of the naga-worship, they fail to give the exact date of commencement of this cult. But from the available evidence of the carved stone figures of the palaeolithic people, we may conjecture.

---

that this cult must have had its beginning in the
remotest times among the aborigins of this land.
Whatever the case may be, it is a fact that no reptile
has been given so much prominence in worship as the
serpent all over the world, except where it does not
exist. So much for the origin and antiquity of snake-
worship all the world over and in our country in par-
cular. Verily that this cult of our country is 'local'
not simply because it is free from 'fear or dread' but
as it embodies all the above mentioned attributes or
aspects with a predominance of the feeling of love
and respect for all beings in the entire creation of
God.

**Historical Origin:**

It is quite interesting to note that an amulet un-
earthed at Harappa unravels on its obverse the figure of
a bird with its unfurled wings bearing on either of its
wings a long and sinuous snake. Some historians intere-
ted in the study of antiquities made use of this amulet
to trace the origin of the snake-cult as far back as the
proto Indo-mediterranean culture. Some other historians
held the view of a dual social system wherein they presume
the prevalence of two totemistic groups - the Carudas and
the Nagas who bore respective totems for their groups -
each trying to dominate the other. Of course, both the

---

1. Rather Heras, Studies in Proto Indo-Mediterranean Culture, Fig. 219 (St. Xavier's College, Bombay, 1952) opp. p. 369


---
Interpretations unequivocally push back the origin of the snake-cult to pre-historic antiquity, much more ancient than the Harappan period.

The various aspects dealt with hitherto in this chapter, prove beyond doubt the existence of the snake-cult from a very early period and its unique popularity all over the world, though it is hard to assign a particular reason for its origin. No less difficult it is to fix up the period of its commencement and the precise place of its origination in view of the manifold evidences of its existence in yore all over the world and in our country in particular. And we will see in the coming chapters how the primitive snake-cult had taken new dimensions until it is evolved into an elaborated ritual with organised symbols manifesting in various works of art and modes of worship.

**Indus Valley Civilization and Snake-worship**

Snake-cult was there in our country even before the advent of the Aryans as has been said above. From the Indus valley remains, we are driven to believe that the Indus people had a religion somewhat akin to that of our own in these days. The excavations at Harappa unearthed...
one carved figure of snake. But the reptile could be seen occasionally on the painted pottery. A clay amulet also contained this reptile before a low stool on which would appear to be an offering, perhaps of milk. All these obviously show that the inhabitants of the Indus Valley not only believed in nágas or snake-spirits but also worshipped them regularly. Further, among the various art objects excavated in the upper Vánësi valley, snake too was there along with other animals and things. This suggests that during the course of the establishment of the Indus Valley civilization, some sections of people who lived before the Vedic Aryans continued their faiths and practices even in other parts of the country. The snake-cult of our country has its parallels on the continent, since this appears alike in ancient Crete and in the Indus Valley remains. It, therefore, appears to be a much more ancient phenomenon. It is evidently pre-Aryan and pre-Vedic and can be called the proto-Dravidian religion.

1. Earnest Mackay, Early Indus civilisation (Alma and Company Ltd., London, 1948) p. 65
4. Bouquet, op. cit., p. 19
The historical evidences cited above not only confirm the continuance of the snake-cult during the pre-Vedic period but also mark the beginning of its spread in the other parts of the country. Thus, the Indus Valley civilization seems to have paved the way for the growth and development of this cult in the coming ages.

From the facts already mentioned, it is clear, that the aborigines of our country as well as the Indus Valley people worshipped the snakes and other animals.

The Vedic and Snakes-worship

When the Vedic Aryans advanced into various parts of India, they naturally had to confront the native people who were, or whom they, called vrtras. That there was bitter rivalry between them was certain for they were constantly at war with one another as we see in the Ṛg Veda. The idea behind the mythology is that there was considerable struggle for survival among the followers of different gods. These battles prove this contention.

For this reason, we frequently come across the word "vrtras"1, the plural of "vrtra" in the Ṛg Veda. The indigenes were also described as the "ahis"2, probably in view of their snake-worship or the Aryans must have considered them as detestable as serpents. But as the latter view does not get any support either from the

1. Ṛg Veda VI-29-6; 33-3
   VII -19-4; 83-9
   IA -88-4.
   K -83-7
2. Ibid IA -88-4.
Veda or at least from the later three Vedas, it goes without saying that the Vrtras were only snake-worshippers. This view seems to be more correct in the historical point of view, because Indra, the favourite god of the Vedic people killed his enemy Vrtra and won the title Vrtrahan (Vrtra-slayer) with which he was very often raised in the Rig Veda. This may be the reason that drove certain critics to remark that "there was no snake worship in the Rig Veda". But there are grounds for believing that the snake-cult was recognized and was given a place in the religion of the early Vedic people, though it was opposed at first. A sort of compromise seems to have been affected gradually between the worshippers of Indra and the serpent-worshippers, when the sage Aruda, a rsi of the Rig Veda and a serpent rsi (as he was also mentioned as a Kaurava sarpa) was allowed to preside over a soma-sacrifice. Thus a mythological explanation for the acceptance and the following of the cult of snake-worship by the early Vedic Aryans is offered in the Rig Veda.

Though the early Vedic Aryans subdued the indigenous snake-worshippers in the beginning, in course of time as...
... they had to get on with them and live in their midst. Eventually they got adjusted with the "lives and to their customs and practices, and the spirit of compromise enabled both of them to accept and receive whatever good they found in the other. Thus they ennobled themselves and enriched their religion. The Vedic people accepted the snake-worship, and the indigenes the Vedic deities.

The Pancajana, the five classes of beings mentioned in the Ṛgveda, include the serpents. It is surprising that P.V. Kane, accepting the worshipful rank to which the serpents were raised on par with the other four castes of the Pancajana, strangely denies the existence of the snake-worship in the Vedic period. Further, in the number of the worshipful deities shot up, meaning the different aspects of both life and nature, among the cadres serpent found a venerable place. Thus, among the eleven Maruts, the embodiments of moral and heroic deeds and of the exuberance of youth, and who ail in the north, is seen the serpent. Similarly, the serpent is one of the eleven Kudras. These eleven Kudras, twelve Adityas coupled with the eight Vasus,

---

Ṛgveda VIII-55-4 (according to P.V. Kane Ṛgveda 1-55-4)
I-83-10 (quoted in the Cultural heritage of India, vol. I, Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Committee, Calcutta, n.d.) p. 8
Swamy Sarvananda, essay on "The Vedas and their religious teaching. The Cultural heritage of India, vol. I (Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Committee, Calcutta, n.d.) p. 9
Ṛgveda op.cit. 1-199-6
sky (sky) and earth (earth) together form the 22 deities spoken of in the Ṛg Veda.\(^1\) Elsewhere the Ṛg Veda puts the number of the deities as 3329.\(^2\)

but in no division is the serpent absent.

further, Ahirbudnya, the serpent of the deep, was elevated to a supreme position. He is described as the giver of rain water and also as one who takes away all water from the earth. In the first aspect, he is considered divine; in the latter a demon.\(^3\)

The symbolism explains the struggle between the dark and the bright forces of the cosmos. So also Vṛtra is an enemy of the solar deities. Indra's killing of Vṛtra indicates the conquest of light over darkness. Thus, the serpent stands for both the good and evil spirits manifest both in life and nature.\(^4\)

"This ambivalent attitude towards this creature has persisted through the centuries in India down to the present times."

\(^1\) Ṛg Veda, op.-cit., p.10294-8
\(^2\) Ibid., III-9-9
\(^3\) Ibid., VII-34-16-17
\(^4\) T.V. Mahalingan, The ages in Indian History & Culture (published by the Editor of the Journal of Indian History, Trivandrum, 1965), p. 28

5. K.C. Majumdar, Ed. The age of imperial unity (Shans publications, Bombay, 1953), p.47
This proves beyond doubt that there had been snake-worship in the Ṛg Vedic period. The whole trouble with the Ṛg Veda is that it does not state anything explicitly and thus gives room for the Vedic literature to elaborate and explain it. Therefore, it puts the unaware reader to doubt. and we are more likely to be frustrated than not, if we attempted to make out a history out of the Vedas. Because, they are loaded with the essence of spiritualism draped in symbolism, but not with a mere chronological information of the carnal life of the common man.

All the Vedic godheads have an outer and an inner function. All are in their external character powers of physical nature; all have in their inner meaning a psychic function and psychological ascriptions. The Yajurveda tries to explain at length the psychic significance of the snake-cult along with other religious rites, it offers an indirect explanation for the worship of the naga.

1. Ṛg Veda 1-1-13--1-2-7
2. Aurobindo, op. cit., p.144
The Black Yajurveda describes that in olden times the favourite gods of serpents contemplated more and more on how to overcome the physical deterioration caused by the advancement of age. Then Vasamira, a Kadraveya (a son of Hadru, the wife of Vasayapa Rajapati) found the 'Bhumirbhumana' spell to be quite efficacious and effective to leave out the worn-out body (skin) and to get a new one in its stead. It is said that because of the strength of the spell serpents have been able to have a new skin leaving out the worn-out one till today.

The last part of the same spell 'Barparagnia' enjoins that the person who does the ritual should invoke the fire god with the 'Cks' or spells called 'Barparagnia' to render him (the god) afresh, pure and free from becoming old or worn-out. He should instal fire for his ritual.

---

1. Black Yajurveda 1-3-4: शून्यमुद्यनमां व्याक्षरिताः स्वामाबद्धः सप्तवृज्ञे जीर्णतेः। मानस्य सकलसंधारेः कार्तकेयो भवन्ति भगवं वस्त्रातन्त्र वस्त्रात।

2. Ibid. 1-5-4: सर्वेऽरिण्या करिष्ठागीतिपत्माय दृष्टि चुल्लेवेमवैन मणि रङ्गा धारात्यो भूतमेव शीत्विम्यां जोिवन्यमितन्त्र।
The implied sense is that these spells if recited as they should be and regularly, are sure to rejuvenate and increase the vigour of youth, as we find in the case of snakes in the physical phenomenon. With this idea behind, salutations are prescribed for serpents dwelling in different worlds as follows:

1. Salutations to the serpents of the Celestial world (djuloka) of the intermediary space (antariksa) and of the terrain (bnurloka).

2. Salutations unto the serpents in the sphere of the Sun, to those in the Sun’s rays, and to those that dwell in waters.

3. Salutations unto the snakes that are used as arrows by demons, to those that dwell in the (sandal) woods and to those that dwell in ant-hills.

---

1. Black Yajurveda 4-2-8-1
2. Ibid. 4-2-8-2
3. Ibid. 4-2-8-3
Referring to the presiding deities for the twenty eight constellations, it is said that the serpent is the presiding deity of the constellation नाश्रेष्ठ.

The Yajurveda also contains the 'sarpa sūkta' in which we find the praise of some important serpent lords followed by a threat at the end that whichever snake ignores the word given to नाशिका and bites anyone indifferently, the head of such a one will break itself into a hundred pieces like the mountains broken to pieces hit by the Vajra, the weapon of Indra.

"The Vedic religion, thus, accepted also the form in which early man everywhere expressed his sense of the relation between himself and the godheads of nature. It adopted as its central symbol of the act and ritual of a physical sacrifice."  

Thus, at the physical level, religion is made to respond to the needs of the common man. The common man in so observing the rites, is able to appease the venomous snakes and thus is not only able to

1. Black Yajurveda, 4-4-10
2. Aurobindo, op. cit., p. 142
keep himself safe from the danger of losing life bitten by them but is also helped by them positively in different ways of which we will know more in the following pages.

whoever does offer oblations to the fire god with the prescribed twelve mantras or spells commencing from 'krithiyai Svaha' and ending with 'jarisrupchya Svaha' will come to no harm at the hands of either yaksas, demons, genii or snakes.

The *Arsha Yajurveda* also says that if serpent heads are offered in oblation to fire god, the tame and wild animals as well will come to no harm and the doer gets the brilliance of snakes.

It is said in the *Sukla Yajurveda* that the various parts of the victim are to be offered in oblation to a host of deities and others deified for the occasion during the course of asvamedha (the horse-sacrifice). Among the oblations to be made it is stated that the seventh rib on the left side of the victim should be assigned to the serpents.

The same Veda also gives a ruling that a ritualist should offer to ahavaniya fire his oblations

---

1. *Arsha Yajurveda* p-2-9-5,6
reciting the following chants.

"Homage paid to serpents unto all of them that are on earth; to those that dwell in air, to those that dwell in sky be homage paid;

"To those that are in the demons darts, to those that live upon the trees, to all the serpents that lie low in holes be adoration paid"!

The Yajurveda, thus, explains that serpents had attained immortality by over-coming decrepitude. The Sarparłąaḥ Mkṣ confirm the divinity of the snakes which is further attested to by their getting a share in the ásavamedha sacrifice. We also learn from it that they exist all through the universe and that they follow a certain code of conduct, for the violation of which they have to pay with the penalty of death. The serpent was also considered to be the presiding deity for a constellation. All these things are proof of their position being not only elevated but also more strengthened than before. Thus, this Veda marks the progress of the snakes towards divinity or godhead. In the historical sense the same stands for a token of understanding or compromise between different races following different cults thus helping to establish a sort of religious synthesis.

1. Griffith, op. cit., p.227
The *Atharva Veda* differing slightly from the *Yajurveda*, offers, not only the propitiatory methods to invoke the serpents and solicit their protection against their own tribe but also certain charms to avert the deadly snakes, to counteract their magical power and potent poison of their bite, and some cures too to antidote their poison.

At the outset, they have been described as powerful superhuman beings.¹ This occurs in connection with the homage paid to the gods of the quarters. The second part of the 26th hymn corresponds with the hymn of the *Krsna Yajurveda*.² Similarly, we can notice the serpents being enumerated among the orders of the supernatural beings.³

This *Veda* describes some of the serpents as possessing many sided greatness and such serpents of unusual powers are alone to be revered and adored.

Salutations unto those serpent species of unbounded power and excellence born in fire, herbs, water and

---

1. *Atharva Veda* III – 26, 27.
2. *Krsna Yajurveda* IV-2-8-1.
lightning, may these deliver us from woe. Thus, the Veda affirms that the individual is sure to be granted riches and health and protection by those great serpents, if he regularly pays his adorations reciting the spell "Ye agnija....."

Curiously enough the *Atharva Veda* traces the origin of the snake-cult to quite remote times. In the *Kausika Sutra* which is closely connected with the *Atharva Veda*, we find a bali described for the protection of the house. It is to be offered in different parts of the dwelling to various deities among whom Vasuki, Chitrasena, Chitraratha, Raksaka and Upataksaka are also seen. This occurs in a ceremony or sacrifice performed on preparing a foundation or while entering a new mansion. From this it is evident that the abovementioned five great serpents/serpent kings have been considered as presiding deities or guardian spirits of the household.

Three hymns of the *Atharva Veda*, according to the *Kausika Sutra* are intended to be addressed to Raksaka.

1. *Atharva Veda* 1-4-23. 2. Ibid. VIII-7-23 & VIII-9-16, 24
3. *Kausika Sutra* 74-3 (quoted by Vogel, op.cit., p.199)
4. *Atharva Veda*, IV-6; V-3; VI-4; VIII-10
In one hymn he is mentioned by name. In this hymn the cosmic principle viraj is successively associated with various classes of beings: gods, asuras, men, manes (pitrs), tree-spirits (vanaspati), the seven-seers, gandharvas and apsarases, yaksas (called "other folks") and snakes (sarpa). In each case, the two chief representatives of the group are mentioned as the calf (vatsa) and the milker of viraj, which evidently is conceived as a cow. The process of milking is performed with a vessel varying in material according to the peculiar class of beings which are supposed to use it. The substance produced in each case by the milking operation varies likewise. Now, in the case of the snakes (sarpas) the 'calf' is raksaka vaśaleya, the 'milker' is dhṛtarāśtra arīvāta, the vessel used is the "gourd-vessel" (alābu-patra) and the substance produced is poison. 2

What we notice here is the mention of raksaka vaśaleya and dhṛtarāśtra arīvāta on par with each other as the chief representatives of the serpent race, though we find a different account of these two in other works of the succeeding times of which we know in the later part of this work.

1. атхарва Веда. VII-10
The Atharva Veda records a kind of classification of serpents in connection with paying homages as given below:

"Homage be to Asita, homage to Tiraciraji,
Homage to Svaja (and) Babhru, etc."

"The four terms Asita (black) Tiraciraji (cross-lined), Svaja (adder) and Babhru (brown) are said to denote certain extant species of snakes." It seems to be a classification mostly based upon their physical appearance. In addition to these we also come across other kinds of snakes being mentioned such as Airatan or Arait, an awfully venomous, little spotted serpent, Rdaiku (adder), Timalan, Arbudi and Nyarbudi etc. The black serpents have been described as highly offensive. Arbudi seems to have been originally a kindred being of similar nature and powers (like Arbuda), but willing and able to assist those who invoke his aid.

1. Atharva Veda-VII-10-29 (Whitney's trans. loc.cit.p.38, p.325
2. Ibid. VI-56
3. Ibid. VI-56-1
4. Ibid. VI-56-6
5. Ibid. VI-13-5
6. Ibid. VI-13-6
7. Ibid. VI-13-5 (Of black serpents, offensive ones—Stand ye not upon the track of my comrade.)
"God-folk, Arbudi, with the army breaking (bhanj) the army of our enemies, envelop it with (thy) coils (bhoja)!

It is in this sense 'Aroudi' has been considered the agent of the snake-weapon (nagastra).

It is interesting to note in this regard the comment of M.V. Magnavulu who makes no distinction between "arbuda" and "arbudi".

In the Atharva Veda we come across the word 'sarkota' which is felt to have been akin to 'karkota' by some scholars. The word 'karkota' as an appellative

==================================================================================================

1. उद्विषुस्त देवजनाबासै सेनाया शह अंजन प्रित्रितं सेनों भोजेनि: परिवर्तयः

(Atharva Veda 11-9-3, Whitney's trans. 5-5)

2. अबुदियावादि शायै तुम्हारे कर्मार्थकम्

3. वारिमेला वेरा माधाबुलु (हिस्टरी ऑफ द अंबर्केन एंड अजीस्थ कालिया मार्काना लिंगामा हिंडु विज्ञानाराणा बारिट्रा (अॅै, नाकिनादा, 1972) पृ. 116.

But the Aitareya Brahmana VI-1 informs us of "arbuda" as a serpent-sage declaring "arbudi" and "Hy arbudi" as his two sons (Whitney's trans. Atharva Veda VI-1, 1962) p.651.

has for one of its meanings 'different plants', whereas 'sarkota' is used to indicate some kind of 'poisonous snake'. But Henry renders 'sarkota' of the Atharva Veda as 'scorpion'. Therefore, this author does not like to agree with those who equate 'sarkota' with 'marmot a'. It may also be one of the extant snake species such as asita, Tirasciraji, swaja, ozonru, etc.

The Atharva Veda, besides the above mentioned benevolent qualities of the nagas, also supplies numerous references to their evil aspect and therefore provides us with various spells used as remedies or antidotes to nullify the effect of their deadly bite as follows:

a) "I have given about the race of snakes, as the sun about the sky, as night about living creatures, other than the swan, thereby do I ward off thy poison."

3. Ibid., p.426.
b) "what was known of old by priests (brahmans)
what by seers, what by gods, what is bhuta
is to be that was a mouth — therewith do I
ward off thy poison."

"with poison I smite thy poison"¹ is also used as a
charm against venomous snakes.

The Veda, besides offering several spells to counteract poison, also gives many healing methods of which one is to counteract poison with poison. "Visasya visamou-
sadham".² Here it is to be remembered that vegetable poison (sthavara visa) counteracts animal poison (jan-
gama visa) and vice-versa.

Snakes are worshipped and invoked for conquering and even to put an end to one's own enemies. This element can be observed in the invocations to ārudi and āyarudi.³ Particularly, the following spells best illustrate this point.

1. Atharva Veda. V-13-4
2. Ibid. VIII-10-26
3. Ibid. Al- 1 to 26
(a) "Stand thou up, Ul god-folk arbudi, with the army, breaking (bhanj) the army of our enemies, envelop it with (tay, coils (bhoga))" 

(b) "Let thine arms be confounded and what thought-and-design is in their heart; let not anything of them be left in case of thy bite, Ul arbudi".  

(c) "Ul arbudi do thou make our enemies to see, and do thou show forth spectress to confound one's enemies.  

(d) "Let our enemy be squelched, crusnec, slain, Ul nyarbudi; let tongues of fire, tufts of smoke go conquering with the army."  

Further, during the Atharva Veda period like many deities of the orthodox vedic pantheon, the nagas were subordinated to the chief sectarian gods and goddesses. The Nasupati of the preimitive people and Nudra 5 of the Vedic people merged themselves giving rise to a new god in the name of Lord Siva, who has been very popular since then. Thereafter, Pasupati and Nudra became synonyms of Siva. 6 Snakes were made his ornaments;
and the bull his conveyance. It was in this connec-
tion that Desa became the couch of Lord Visnu, and
almost all the gods were given snakes for important
ornaments. The Atharva Veda, thus, marks the culmi-
nation of the religious synthesis that had commenced
during the Rigvedic period. and for the same reason,
it also becomes a landmark in the ancient history
of our country.

The extensive treatment of snake charms and cures
for snake poison, without ignoring the greatness and
superhuman powers possessed by some of them, drives us
to think that this Veda had paid greater attention to
practicalities of the day-to-day life than the Rig and
the Yajur Vedas, thus serving the public at large, must
have contributed largely for the amalgamation of various
races of people, who otherwise would have remained
scattered and segregated.

From a study of the Vedas it is clear that they
knew serpents not merely as reptiles, but they threshed
out every aspect concerning them in detail. Of course,
they stress the need of worshipping serpents in dif-
ferent ways for different attainments such as obtain-
ing more and more wealth and gold, for bumper crops
and plenty of animals, for destroying one's enemies, to
overcome decrepitude, to regain increased vigour of
youth, to get the splendour of serpents, and to solicit
protection from other evil serpents. The above account of the Vedas also reveals the growth and prevalence of the snake-cult. In other words, the Vedas accept the divine status of at least some of the serpents. This greatness of the divine host of serpents can be found being established in the Samhitas, the Brahmanas and the Upanisads. Along with it, we also find certain antidotes and hymns in connection with the removal of the poison. In the literature, we have studied the spiritual good and evil aspects have been mentioned in detail. The author's made an attempt the snake was a useful rather than an awesome species.

Snake worship in the Samhitas:

In some of the Samhitas, we find a reference to the naga-worship. The Maritirya, the Athaka, the Vajasaneya and the Aitrayani Samhitas repeat the spell we find in the Yajurveda, the translation of which is as follows:

1. Salutations to the serpents of the Celestial world (Byuloma) of the intermediary space (Antariksa) and of the terrain (Uhrloka).

1. 14-2-8-3
2. 15
3. 6 to 8
4. 7-15
5. loc. cit. p. 32
2. Salutations unto the serpents in the sphere of the Sun to those in the Sun's rays, and to those that dwell in waters.

3. Salutations unto the snakes that are used as arrows by demons, to those that dwell in the (sandal) woods and to those that dwell in ant-hills.

Beyond this, we find certain verses, especially from the Vajasneva Samhita\(^1\) being made use of particularly in Sravana karma in which snakes are worshipped and oblations offered.

Thus, we notice the ritual rank of the nagas being continued in the Samhitas, which finds certain elevation in the Brahmanas.

**Snake worship in the Brahmanas:**

Some Brahmanas like the Aitareya, the Kaushitaki, the Satapatha and the Taittiriya throw some light on the nagas and their worshipful rank and on the nagar worship.

The oldest of the Brahmanas, the Aitareya\(^2\) makes a mention of the serpent-sage Arbuda and declares that Scoudi and Hyaroudi to be his two sons. Further, it

---

1. Ai-50,52 and As-29.
2. VI-1
describes Arudha as a maker of mantras. This elevated status of the serpent rsi clearly reflects on the one hand the goodness of the Aryans to forget their old rivalries and reckon greatness wherever it was, and on the other the worthiness of the nagas that compelled admiration even from their former enemies. We also find in it the enumeration 2 of the "rançajana" (mentioned in the Ṛg Veda VIII-53-4) as gods, men, Gandharvas, apsarasas, snakes and pitrs. This signifies indirectly of the acceptance of the worshipful rank of serpents even in the Ṛg Veda which has been denied by many a learned man.

The Brahmana 3 also says: "they (the gods) smote away evil; in accordance with their smiting away the serpents smote away evil; having smitten away evil, they lay aside their old worn-out skin and continue with a new one; he smiteth away evil who knoweth this:"

Though the idea of leaving out the worn-out skin reminds us of the Yajurveda description 4 but the explanation for it offered here is entirely different. Here we find the serpents as implicit followers of gods.

1. itārya Brahmana VII-1
2. Ibid III-7
3. Ibid VI-1
4. Black iajurveda 1-5-4
strictly adhering to godly ways, snakes purging themselves of the evil leave their old skins. This points to the observance of cleanliness by snakes internally and externally i.e. physically and mentally. Therefore, it is said that those who know this principle (who keep their body and mind as cleanly as serpents at all times) is sure to be freed from the clutches of evil. On the other hand, this passage also indicates the attempt of the nagas to stand on par with gods.

An idea somewhat akin to the above one is seen expressed in the Kausitaki Brahmana which runs as follows:

"like a snake’s skin, dead and cast off, lieth upon an ant-hill, likewise lieth this body; but that which is bodyless, immortal and life, is pure brahman is pure light."

Here the idea of sloughing of a snake is shown as an example for man to free himself from the sorrows of this life and attain salvation. In other words, man should renounce all mundane pleasures without which he fails to realise brahma.
in pursuance of the godly status by snakes, the *Vandya Mahabrahmana* refers to a sacrifice celebrated by the snakes. The officiating priests for this sacrifice include some prominent nāgarajas namely Dārtharastra, Airavata, Makṣak and Janamejaya. The text says: "by this sacrifice, verily, the snakes have conquered death; death is conquered by those who will perform this sacrifice. Therefore, they cast off their old skin, and having cast the same, they creep out of it. The snakes are adityas; like unto the splendour of the adityas is the splendour of those who perform this sacrifice."

From the above passage, we can understand that the attainment of immortality is evidently a godly attribute, newly achieved by the snakes, marking their progress to godhead. Further, the snakes are spoken of as 'adityas', The term 'adityas' confirms the consummation of godhead of the serpents as all gods are said to be adityas, the off-springs of ṛṣi. It also states that they had attained the celestial brilliance by performing that sacrifice. Therefore, it is assured that those who perform this sacrifice will doubtlessly acquire the splendour of adityas. Other remarkable things

1. xxv - 19 (Quoted by Vogel, op.cit. P14)
in this passage are the mention of श्वरतारास्त्र and अरवता separately (unlike in the अथर्ववेद/ and mention of श्वरतारास्त्र and भा/का as नागरकास but not as the chief representatives of the serpents as mentioned apriori and the mention of the name of another नागराजा, वानामेजया.

The तात्त्वरीया/ goes ahead and declares unequivocally गods are serpents (देव वाई सर्पान). it makes no difference between गods and serpents, and tells us that the earth is the queen of the serpentine गods. It further states that, like गods, even the planets take fancy to assume the serpentine form.

The above passage leads us to suppose that the serpentine form may facilitate गods and planets speedy and stealthy movement.

In the अथविद्यना ब्राह्मण is prescribed a ceremony called 'वास्तु सामना' to be performed at the time of laying foundation of a new mansion and while entering afresh a newly constructed building. This sacrifice closes with the offerings offered to the ten regents of the ten regions invoking them to help the inmates get more and more wealth and gold, bumper crops and good number of animals. one

1. loc. cit. p.38
2. I-2-6-2
among the ten regents whose aid is earnestly sought is the nāgārjā vasuki, the presiding deity of the ether world, and hence bali is offered or thrown in the downward direction in his name with the words “vasuka ye svaheti”. Thus, it means that the snake is equated with other gods and his blessings are sought after in order to get all worldly things.

This Brahmana also prescribes a charm that frees any one from the fear of serpents. It says that first of all “sankhapuspi” and “sarpa sugandha” should be ground well and made into a three-tiered ball-like structure. Then a fire-ritual should be done whence a thousand times oblations are to be offered to the fire-god. Later, that herbal ball should be wound with cotton thread a hundred times and then it should be worn either on the head or round the neck. Besides it, the wearer should recite the famous ‘sarpa sama’ as many times as he can intending that he should be freed forever from the fear of serpents. Any person who does so, will not only get rid himself of the fear of serpents but also be freed from all kinds of sufferings caused by poison.

The ‘sarpa sama’ rather reminds us of the in-summable spells and remedies contained in the Aitarna Veda.  

2. Ibid, p.111
3. loc. cit. p.41
in the Satapatha Brahmana sarpa vidya has been dealt with separately as against devajana vidya. It tells us at length about the rites for propitiating the divine host of serpents. Further, it declares that 'sarpa vidya' is a Veda by itself.

Thus, we notice the serpents being hailed as a heavenly host in the Brahmanas. This idea fortifies the worshipful rank given to serpents on the one hand and the competence of the serpent cult on the other, for which we also find a few references in the Upanisads.

The Satapatha also provides us with a description of the world-serpent Seva in association with the third incarnation of Visnu. In the very beginning of creation after the world-flood, Lord Visnu, assuming the form of a giant Sank bu boar, dived deep into the primeval waters and lifted up the earth balancing it between his huge tusks when he was supported by Seva. This primitive myth in later times found expression both in sculpture and plastic art as we will see in the succeeding pages. Of course, the same account can also be seen in the Taittiriya Brahmana.

It is only in these two Brahmanas we find a somewhat subordinate position of snake for the first time along with the independent status of yore.

1. Satapatha Brahmana 13-4-5-9
2. Ibid. 14-1-2-11 & Taittiriya Brahmana 1-1-3-5.
The elevated status of snakes as we have seen in the Brahmanas is further maintained, though in a somewhat different manner, in the philosophic treatises (Upanisads) as we see next.

Snake worship in the Upanisads:

As the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa enumerates the "panca-jana" of the Ṛg Veda, the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad enumerates the 3 and 33 and again 3339 gods mentioned in the Ṛg Veda. Yāsnavalkya in this Upaniṣad raises the number of gods to 33 crores, meaning the countless number of deities presiding over the different aspects of life and nature. In each of the later three divisions, the serpent is offered a place. The place offered to snakes in most of the above enumerations is a proof of the continued worshipful rank of the serpents. Further, in the Brhadāraṇyak and in the Brāhmaṇa as well, "there are references to the cast off slough of serpents mentioned as Pādodara." But strangely enough it does not convey that sense. It means (pada = feet; udara = stomach or belly) that which uses its stomach for feet or that which creeps on its own belly; and it is one of the synonyms for a snake in general. Never does 'Pādodara' mean the slough of a serpent and certainly it is not a mistake to have been committed by a learned man like Lane.

1. 3-9-1-3
2. 4-4-7
3. 4-5
The nāga-worship, thus, having its origin in the pre-historic times, began to get a shape in the form of carved figures, and clay amulets containing its image at the hands of the early historical people remaining in the Indus-valley civilisation. Then in the 4th Vedic period snakes were raised to the rank of a divine god and this status was thoroughly established in the 1st Vedic period. The snake cult find sufficient mention in the samhitas and brāhmaṇas with the detailed rituals and elaborate sacrifices. The divine aspect was kept intact and also the snake was classed as the other gods in the hindu pantheon thus invoking his blessing for worldly objects. The upanisads generally deal with philosophically subtle topics also gave some references to the snake-worship, it means that the follower of the snake cult was sufficiently widespread as to catch the attention of some eminent philosophical thinkers. The snake cult in course of time became the part and parcel of religious fabric of the hindus to which we will see in the next chapter also.