V. SYMBOLISM

Religion and cults have designed the symbols to define the abstract as an intermediary between the unknown and the known. The use and purpose of the symbols is to visualise which cannot be fully expressed to the limited faculty of the human mind. The Hindu faith, having the unlimited vocabulary with beauty and suggestiveness and utmost delicacy, had provided with appropriate symbols formed on the strength for the benefit of the masses. Hence, in Hindu way of worship the symbol was proved a guide to higher thoughts where any form or language fails to express the visibility. This has been the case regard with all Indian religions and creeds, the snake-cult included.

The snake is symbolised as watery elements embracing the god prosperity. The Holy books referred Varuṇa as Narayana dwelling upon the waters and always shown along with the seven hooded snake Ananta (the endless) or Śeṣa, the symbol of watery elements who embraces the god protectivity. Zimmer also confirms that Śeṣa, the serpent Endless, representative of Cosmic waters, who is the source of all waters. He further adds that

'Serpent kings and queens (nāga, nāgin) personifying and directing the terrestrial waters of the lakes and ponds, rivers and oceans; the goddesses of three sacred streams, Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati: 

...sacred elephants (nāga—same term as for 'serpent'), who, even now, on earth, retain the power to attract their rain bearing; earlier companions; bestow upon the children of the world all the boons of earthly happiness — abundance of crops and cattle, prosperity, offspring, health and a long life.¹

Further, it is also evident that the gods were having the powers of changing forms as they wish (kāmarūpa). This power was also available or known to the nāgas. This is supported by the replicas in respect of representation of nāgas to Lord Buddha in the shape of half-human and half-serpent. In the Gandhara school, the nāga has preserved the same shape which the ancient Indian art has described him. In one of the replicas of Gandhara school the nāga king approached Buddha in the form of half human and half serpent for representing his desire to admit himself to the order.²

In Yoga, kundalini is the power of cosmic energy. It is nothing but snake-worship. The person who attains

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¹ Zimmer, op.cit., p. 59
² Vitsaxis, op.cit., p. 106
this power will get supreme energy and knows past, present and future; and everything becomes subservient to him. The sculpture found at Kanheri caves, Buddha sitting on a lotus-throne upholding by the nāgas, symbolises the divinity or control over cosmic energy attained by him. ¹

The seekers of progeny instal idols of entwined serpent-pair of nāgabandha under the trees or on the banks of rivers and tanks as a symbol of fertility in India, particularly in South. The idols of nāgakais installed in the state of Karnataka, South India are in varied forms; some as entwined serpent pairs (nāgabandha); some as mermaid type etc. The entwined serpent pair symbolises the fertility, whereas the mermaid type idols holding two serpent children in the folded āmsa arms represent the giving birth and bringing up of children. ² The installation and worship of entwined serpent pairs (nāgabandha) is a world-wide practice, standing for progeny. For example, Zimmer reveals that the said custom was being observed in Mesopotamia. According to him, 'in Mesopotamia this device appears in a very early design traced on the sacrificial goblet of king Gudea of Lagash. In this work of the Sumerian period,

1. Grunwedel, op.cit., p.107 (fig. No.60)
2. Zimmer, op.cit., p.73
2600 B.C., we find the familiar pair of serpents, entwine, and facing each other. The motif must have been diffused into India at an extremely remote era before the arrival of the Aryans. Together with certain other non-Vedic, pre-Aryan, aboriginal traits, it is preserved to this day in the conservative local traditions particularly of central and south Indian folk-lore.¹

In addition to that, snakes are also regarded as symbolic symbol of healing. Not only in India, but even the Greeks have also attached to snakes as god of medicine.² The Mesopotamians and the Greeks have named the snake as Ningishzida, the god of healing and Asklepios, the god of medicine respectively and the medical profession of India followed suit.

The eagle and the serpent being naturally enemical are pictured the eagle, holding the folded snake with the claws symbolising the vitality.³ As we find the both ends of the positive and the negative generates the energy bringing the both in contact, the two rival forces, i.e. the two fold symbol of the eagle and the serpent represents production of vitality.

¹. Zimmern, op.cit., p.73
². Ibid., p.74
³. Ibid., p.74
The serpent is an amphibian — quite common to the two elements of the earth and water. It stands for life both in a positive sense and in a negative sense as well. On the one hand it stands for life, wisdom, power and immortality; on the other it also represents the base, dark, evil and the low. Thus, it signifies both the good and evil aspects of creation, hence, the significance of the constructive and destructive nature as stated above of the serpent is quite baffling, paradoxical, and subtle. The serpent thus, stands for a very complicated symbol.

In Yoga, Skanda or Subrahmanya is the power of chastity. But he rides on the peacock, the killer of serpents, for he defeats the most subtle instincts that bind the spirit of man in his body. (The six nurses of Kumara or Skanda or Sammukha are connected with the six subtle centres through which Kumara develops). Kumara converts poison into ambrosia. The serpent, furthermore, represents the cycle of the years. The peacock (like Garuda, as said above, is semen) is thus the killer of Time. Thus, it plays the double role of the Destroyer and Preserver of life, the two mutually contradictory roles alike all the same.

1. "The ideas of mere terror and death suggested by the venomous or the crushing reptile could never have given away thus completely before those of
This subtlety is beyond the reach of common men; and therefore, quite bewildering.

The nāga is said to be an enemy of gods, but it is not unfavourable to man. It is an enemy, because this energy increases sexual appetite, if the practiser is unaware and thus throws him down to abysmal depths. But, still it is not unfavourable to man as it helps him in his spiritual ascension. As it is enables the practiser to have the vision of the heavenly host, it is also considered as "the bridge to paradise."

The long life and the act of sloughing of a serpent serve to suggest the ideas of immortality and resurrection or purification.

The hood-spread nāga hanging down from shoulders to waist in the nude nāgin sculpture (Ramappa temple) stands for the exuberance of youthful fervour.

The hood-erect nāga is an emblem of knowledge. It also stands for authority as we find on the seals of certain ancient kings.

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life, healing and safety, is obvious enough and the later ideas alone are associated with the serpent i as the object of adoration" (Rev. Sir George W. Cox, The mythology of the aryan Natives (The Ghowkhamba Sanskrit studies Vol.AVII, Varanasi, 1963), p.363)
The emblem of an angry nāga ready to bite and blast others, as we are told of the one on the flag of Duryodhana (Mahabharata), stands for raging revenge.

The movement of the snake symbolises the very offspring and flow of water on the earth. The water flows on the earth in a winding way. It leads into the earth and again comes up offspring and takes the course of flowing on the earth. Similarly, the snakes creep on the ground and then to ant-hills. The coming up of the snake from its hole and spreading its hood afterwards, resembles the offspring-fountain from the earth. And again, the next movement of the snake also takes the course of water, creeping on the earth.

In the Bando school of karate, one of the offensive tricks in which they are trained, is called 'cobra', the opposite of 'viper'. 'Cobra' stands symbolically for attacking or striking the upper vital points or centres of the enemy or the opponent.

The nāgabandha or the snake twine we very often notice in most of the Hindu temples, may also signify on the physical plane the fervent congenital desire to further the race, which is the creative principle.

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1. Zimmer, op. cit., p. 75
It also further stands for the cosmic power transmission on the spiritual plane.

The nāga or nāgini of the Ajanta sculpture in all unperturbed calmness stands for spiritual poise or tranquility.

Apart from his symbolism with so many, the snake also symbolises the Earth. Naturally, the Earth is the primordial mother of life, feeding all creatures out of her substance and again devours all; she is the common grave. Likewise, the snake is the blesser of life, health, wealth and prosperity and as well the destructive point through his bite.

The symbolism, as a whole, represents the masculine principle, as typified by heaven, light fire, strength in which the spiritual life tops and hybridism goes out. In the entire spiritual domain it is the serpent (power) alone that rules and dictates the individual. And, therefore, the serpent is once more lifted high.

1. Zimmer, op. cit., p. 75