CONCLUSION

The place and position of snake in ancient Indian culture and their subsequent worship can date back to prehistoric time (Wakankar 2005). Though they are depicted in the prehistoric rock paintings, the sculptural representation and literary reference of snake can be traced back to 2nd millennium BC. The excavation at Harappan sites like Lothal and Mohenjo-Daro (Ravindran 1993; Kaul 2008; Hartel 1976) and the Vedic literature provides reference to the representation of snake (Acharya 1988; Rele 1931). However it is not certain whether their appearance is for the ritual purposes or otherwise.

There are large varieties of snakes found across India and quite a few of them are poisonous. People dying out of snake bite are a very common occurrence in many parts of the country. Naturally there is a fear for snake bite among all the populace whoever is leaving in different regions in the country. More so the people, who are living in these areas where deadly poisonous snakes inhabit, are bound to come across then quite often and face their furry. All the natural elements like fire, wind, lightning, water and rain were sometimes worshipped probably for their fears full representation at times. The snakes might have similarly created a fear psychosis from the very beginning. This amphibious creature lived in water, land, lived in the trees and as well as a borrowing animal. According to Hindu mythology it probably occupied all the three worlds. These characteristics of snake probably influenced all ancient Indian religion invariably to accept it as a part of their association. The Brahmancial religion, Buddhism, Jainism and also ethnic religious practices adopted snake in different forms. Evidences of association with all these religions tells us that there were some situations which necessitated then to be revered and rituals got associated.
In the Epics and later during the developments of Brahmanical icons they vividly portray the importance of the snakes in human life. For example, Mahābhārata talks about Kāliyamardana (Kāliya-dahana) and also talks about Samudramanthana where snakes played a vital role. In the subsequent Brahmanical tradition, the trinities seems to be directly or indirectly associated with the snake. In the scenes of Viśnu Śeṣasāyi; Viśnu reclines on the snake in the ocean and Brahma sits on the lotus emerging from the Viśnu navel. It seems Śeṣa is taking the load of both Viśnu and Brahma. Śiva Maheswar, the other important deity of brahmanical faith is predominately shown associated with snake both as an ornament surrounded in the neck or tied in the waist or as an attribute. The most important of them are Adiśeṣa and Kāliya. All these might have been the cause of initial process of reverence. The influence of snake in Buddhism and Jainism is very much evident from Buddhism related literature and monuments. Ajanta has beautiful image of Nāgarāja associated with the monument. The great snake Muchilinda protected Śidhartha from rain while meditating. Similarly Mahāvīra is depicted with five hooded Nāgas as a kind of canopy over his head. In the subsequent literature we see that snake bite related religions emerge which influenced various rituals. Among the notable Nāga in the Buddhist tradition are Mucchilinda and Nāgarāja and they protected Buddha as mentioned in Vināyaka Sūtra (Vitsaxis 1977). Two disciples of Buddha; Sariputra and Moggallana are both referred as Mahanāgās.

Some of the most important Nāgas mentioned in literature are Adiśeṣa who has got thousand heads and known as limitless eternity and Kāliya the King of Nāgas conquered by Krśna. Similarly Mānasa stands for curing the illness and she is also the goddesses of curer of snake bite. She was the sister of Vāsuki. The other important snakes were Mucchilinda who
protected Buddha, Takśaka the king of Nāgas and subsequently Vāsuki, a king of the Nāgas who helped dēvās to recover amrit during the Samudramanathana.

Nāgas are depicted in various ways. One that is found on the back of a tank near Sanchi can be dated back to the 2nd-1st century BC (Shaw 2000). They started appearing in the Buddhist monuments during this time in Bharhūt and Sānchi. Later Buddhist monuments like Amrāvati and Nāgarjunkōnda give a wide range of evidence in a large number of Stūpas depicting snakes or associated stories of Nāga in different forms. It shows a strong religious background of snakes and probably cult emerging surrounding snake worship.

Besides general snake worship, the Nāgapanchami day is practiced in almost in major parts of India. Though they are not practiced in Kerala but Kerala has a district tradition of Snake/Nāga worship. This Nāga worship forms a very important religious practice in Kerala in general and central Kerala in particular. Though some of the ethnic tribe like Pulluvar, whose ancestry may not back to very earlier times and are traditionally Nāga worshippers. It is believed that Pulluvar migrated from Karnataka and ancient Tamilakam. However, the antiquity of Nāga worship cannot be definitely ascertained in Kerala. The communities like Pulluvar and Vannān do believe in the snake cult and participate by singing the snake lore associated with traditional musical instruments but do not have a ritual space or images worshipped in their settlement. They generally participate in the rituals carried out/ observed by higher community in the society. Pulluvar and the Brahmins seem to have settled in Kerala not from very early times. During the exploration in central part of Kerala, the researcher came across several tribal communities and their settlement surrounded by forest and inhabited by some of the most deadly poisonous snake like King Cobra. It was found that none of them worship snake and do not have any concepts of fear living among them. These indigenous tribes are probably the people who
settled much before such religious belief and practice began. They lived in the natural surroundings and got used to the environment, looked at snake as the part of the natural environment. Hence there is a concept of worship or ritual associated with those who migrated to Kerala at the later date like Pulluvar especially to the Northern Kerala and Brahmins from Northern part of the country. During this period the advent of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism probably took a strong position in Kerala. The movement of these people and their accepted snake related belief, coupled with religion and the snake infested landscape are probably the background for developing such a cult specifically devoted to snake worship. Moreover with the background of the snake worship, the landscape of Kerala and the deadly snakes might have evoked strong bias for such a cult to develop further.

There is also a caste bias among the worshippers and also it determines the placement of the images. Other Nāga worshipping communities like Nairs and Ezhava keep the images in the south western corner of their households (Sarppakkāvu). This sarppakkāvu can occupy a few square meters/ half an acre / 1 acre or more depending upon the family economic background. The Brahmins are mostly consecrating their sarppakkāvu in the north eastern portion of house compound. This location is the most important and apt for consecrating Nāga images according to rules of Vastuśaśtra. This sarppakkāvu has the image representation of the snakes. It can be of three types: anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and symbolic representation. It is usually surrounded by vegetation, trees and plants creating a natural surrounding like the snakes abode. More than that, the concept of sacred grove gives the idea of balanced and rich ecological niche on each family where there is Sarppakkāvūs. It also can be said that the existence of sarppakkāvūs helps to organize a well ecological systems which comprises different medicinal, non-medicinal flora and different types of wild faunas balancing the ecosystem. Quite often they
are associated with water bodies like that seen at Sanchi. So sarppakkāvu is an imitation of forest as such with forest with water bodies. So in Kerala particularly in Central Kerala, it is believed that nearly 1500 sacred groves existed in the past altogether. Though there are a number of isolated sculpture as well as sarppakkāvūs in memory, but not more than 150 ritual spaces have physical remains of sarppakkāvu at present and have been documented. The analytical study of the distribution of these ritual spaces explains the occurrences of two types of ritual spaces i.e. Household and Temple related ritual spaces. The customs and rituals for propitiating Nāga are dominating the household related sarppakkāvūs (100) rather than the temples related ritual spaces (50) throughout the study area. Majority of Nāga deities in the temple related sarppakkāvūs are associated with God Siva and Bhagavati (Kāli). Thiruvanchikkulam Śiva and Bhagavati temple at Kodungallur are the earliest temples having the depiction of Nāga both as animal and spiritual aspects. So there is a possibility to say that the association of Nāga with these earlier higher religious sects became the reason for the development of Nāga worship in central part of Kerala. The study can also give the details of the distribution and the association of Nāga worship with the individual households and particular communities in this area. An interesting factor is that, these types of sarppakkāvūs are more prominent than the sarppakkāvūs at the temples. Most of these household sarppakkāvūs are dominating either by Brahmin or Nāyar community. Such types of ritual spaces have been identified mostly from the districts of Ernakulam and Trissur. So it can be say that the representations of Nāga Gods and Goddesses have a close connection and influences on the daily life of individuals and their families than any other Gods in Central Kerala. The details of some of these grooves have already given in the fifth chapter. The occurrences of sacred groves or sarppakkāvūs help to support the ecological systems of this area.
There are different types of Nāga images found in central Kerala. They have been described in details and identified according to the variations in the depictions of Nāga images. All such details have been described in the iconographic chapter (Chapter 6). While taking the count of the images in general, the female Nāga figures (195) are represented more than male Nāga (105). Nāga cult in Central Kerala seems to be dominated by the female Nāga especially Nāgayakshi. The depiction of the images are not only governed by the canonical text mentioned earlier but it depends more on the tantris or astrologer who gives a detail idea of the icon to be carved according to the astrology of the person who is going to donate the sculpture. Hence there is variability in minute depiction of the sculptures in Central Kerala. Sometimes these Sarppakkāvus are also occupied by other deities like Durga, Kāli, Śāsta, Śiva, Muruga and Saptamāтриka.

The worshipping of the snakes is carried out by the communities daily, seasonally, on auspicious occasions and annually depending upon the caste communities associated. In some of the Brahmin houses (Kizhakkedathu Madom) at Pala Taluk, Kottayam district the annual ritual is a very important event where all the relatives and the whole village and the communities living in the neighborhood are invited to the rituals accompanied by feast. It shows how important this snake cult is with the upper strata of the society though they worship other god and goddesses in a normal way. It is difficult to say how it perculated to the upper strata of society as well as remained also in some lower strata of the society. The introduction of Brahmanical tradition and subsequently the spread of Buddhism and Jainism in Kerala probably had a combine effect in the emergence of snake cult which was probably influenced by the natural habitat of some of the deadly poisonous snake found in Kerala. A glimpse into the mythology of creation of Kerala also reveals that Paraśurāma created Kerala out of sea and made place (south-western portion of
household) for snakes to live. The association of sea, hill and hillocks, forests, people living over there and the religious beliefs of all sects probably had some effect in the development of the snake worship. The earliest monument (temple) dedicated to snake located in Mannārasāla at Alappuzha district, belong to mediaeval period.

The exploration and documentation of Sarppakkāvu and snake deities carried out in central Kerala has given the evidence of 150 site and many more are remembered by the inhabitants where practical evidences is missing. Some of the important sites are Pambinmekkat at Mala in Trissur district, Kizhakkedathu Madom at Pala in Kottayam district and Mankombu in Veliyanadu village at Alappuzha etc. The distribution of sarppakkāvūs in all these districts shows a clear dispersal of the cult to each and every corner of landscape. Within the settlements when it is viewed are located in the compound of the houses but quite a few of the Nāgarāja images are found scattered in the farm yards and they are abandoned. These isolated images are not under worship. It is difficult to evaluate the chronology of icons depending upon their iconographic features on the sculptural depictions or the kinds of āyudham they are holding. The place and positions of these Nāgarāja can very well be visualized in the present cultural scenario. The abandoned areas do not get the kind of patronization as the household have moved out and are not under worship. This suggests when the family moves, the sarppakkāvūs does not move and a new one is probably made.

Quite often the coiled snake pedestal are raised and held by the ganas. So it certainly shows that the divine places for the Nāgarāja like the other god and goddesses of Brahmanical pantheon where ganas are shown as helping them in a subservient position. Some of the Nāga images carry āyudhas like the Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses. Like one of the Nāgarāja is shown holding Paraśu and Kamaṇḍalu at Tripunithura, Nadama village at Ernakulam district
whereas Nāgarāja from Vaikkom, Vaikkom village at Kottayam district holds khadga on right hand and daṇḍa in the left hand. The rituals associated with are quite elaborate beginning with fasting and keeping austerity in some communities for 41 days. People who participate in the rituals have to purify themselves otherwise they believe that they will be cursed.

The depiction of Nāgas very often have a clear spectacle marks on them, which is found in common Indian Cobra. There are some images where they are shown very faintly. They probably represent King Cobra. The general perception is that, King Cobra is more poisonous than the common Cobra and hence there should have been more representation of King Cobra, but it is otherwise. In reality the common cobra venom is more poisonous than the King Cobra, while the King Cobra releases more venom in one stroke in comparison to the Common Cobra, which causes more harm. Moreover the Common Cobra is found everywhere and people are bitten more by this type of Cobra. Thus Nāga worship in Central Kerala is representation of Common Cobra and also suggests this belief as well as practice.

So far the gender differentiations in the ritual processes of this particular cult is concern, it has been seen that women play a predominant role in comparison with the men in the society. For example, the most important temple in relation to Nāga cult is Mannāraśāla in Alappuzha district and belongs to the Brahmin community where women form an important part of the ritual process. Hence during the time of the pūjas it is carried out by the elder female member of the family called as Valiyamma.

The Nāga worship still remains a very important religious activity in central Kerala and forms an integral part of cultural behavior. It is so much show that it is reflected in various dance forms practiced in Kerala called as Nāgatheyyangal. Such rituals stand for the integration of the society through the religious ritualistic customs. Because, almost all people from different
religions in the society can participates in the ritual and share the experience. There are certain fundamental religious values in these rituals and that holds the society together. So it can be said that the worship of Nāga not only belong to the people of Brahmanical religions but incorporates people from different faith. Even people belonging from other religions like Christians and Muslims are used come to the temples dedicated to the Nāga and gives offerings to the Nāga Gods for getting his/her boon. The Nāga temple at Amedamangalam, Ernakulam district is worshipped by all these communities coming from all different religious faith. So these kinds of religious atmosphere, helps to bind the socio religious integrity in the concerned areas.