

Snake Worship in North-East India: A Historical Overview

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ABSTRACT

Snake worship, or *Ophiolatry*, has long been an integral part of the cultural and religious landscape of Northeast India, deeply embedded in the animistic beliefs of indigenous tribes that view snakes as divine entities symbolizing fertility, protection, and wisdom. Using textual analysis of historical literary sources and ethnographic accounts, this study investigates the intricacies of snake worship. The study places snake worship in its larger cultural context by critically analyzing the writings of authors like Hmingchhuan and Narayana. It illuminates the myths and historical narratives surrounding the practice. The paper synthesizes findings from various primary and secondary texts, including scholarly articles and ethnographies, to provide a comprehensive perspective on the significance of snake worship in the region. It emphasizes the role of literary references as crucial to understanding the nuances of the practice, while also recognizing gaps in existing scholarship that warrant further exploration. Drawing on historiographical insights from scholars like G. Ravindran Nair and Shanta Rameshwar Rao, this study advocates for a deeper investigation into the cultural relevance of snake worship and its implications for understanding local vernacular traditions. This research aims to enrich the discourse surrounding snake worship by employing textual analysis as its primary methodology, highlighting the potential for future studies in this vital area.

Keywords- Snake Worship, Animistic beliefs, Devi Manasa, North-East India.

I. INTRODUCTION

In early human civilizations, snakes were revered within religious customs due to their awe-inspiring qualities—like their venomous bite and ability to shed skin—which led to their ascription of divine characteristics. The worship of serpents is prominently featured in ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas, and its origins may be traced back to the Turanian people or even Ancient Egypt (Deane). Although the Vedic Aryans initially did not engage with serpent veneration, it eventually became assimilated into their beliefs. In Northeast India, the goddess Manasa, also known as Shaitol Bishohori (Barman), exemplifies the interconnected narratives of snake worship across cultures, including Buddhist traditions (Barman). Snakes, referred to as 'Nāgas,' symbolize fertility,

protection, and guardianship over water bodies, with annual observances like Nāga Panchami reflecting their significance in local rituals. Indigenous tribes in this region, notably the Nagas, and Mizos, uphold animistic beliefs that treat snakes as sacred entities with roles that embody nurturing and destructive forces (Prabhakar, Anil and Santosh). Local folklore, such as Assamese tales regarding Manasa, emphasizes the respect afforded to snakes, seen as protectors against bites and providers of prosperity.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SNAKE WORSHIP

Throughout generations, snake worship in Northeast India has become integral to cultural identity,

influencing agriculture through beliefs that serpents protect crops (Bhaumik). Snakes, symbolically linked to fertility and life cycles, are revered as deities in festivals such as Lai Haraoba in Manipur. The Ambubachi Mela in Assam celebrates the goddess Kamakhya, who embodies a serpent, highlighting snakes' ecological and spiritual significance and their role in societal rituals emphasizing power, protection, and fertility. Animism, rooted in the belief that spiritual beings influence natural phenomena, varies across cultures and reflects historical social frameworks (Fox). While animism is common in less developed societies, it has also been present in advanced civilizations like Ancient Egypt and Babylon. Understanding the relationship between early humans, animals, and nature—reflected in laws, religions, and ecological practices—demands empathy (Read). In Northeast India, rituals and cultural traditions honoring snake deities reinforce appreciation for life's interconnectedness, intertwining snake worship with Buddhism, Hinduism, and local beliefs.

III. THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SNAKES

The practice of snake worship in Northeast India emerges as a vibrant tapestry woven from indigenous beliefs, cultural identities, and historical narratives, attracting scholarly attention from researchers like G. Ravindran Nair and Shanta Rameshwar Rao. While pinpointing the introduction of the Manasa cult in Assam proves challenging, a prevailing legend connects its origins to Hara and Gauri, who had a daughter named Padma, or Manasa. After her birth, Padma was appointed to rule over the serpents but became dissatisfied with her sovereignty, yearning for honor and worship from all humanity (Rao). Her primary adversary, Chando Sadagar—a devout follower of Siva—vehemently refused to acknowledge Manasa, sparking a series of tragic repercussions, including the death of his sons and his eventual downfall.

The narrative of Manasa, characterized by her vengeance and subsequent veneration, is reflected in various rituals, such as the *Deodhani dance*, they are held at the Kamakhya shrine, where dancers invoke the Goddess through deep meditation (Garigliano). This practice transcends Assam, manifesting similarly in Bengal during the Jhapan festival, where snake charmers display various species while chanting sacred hymns (Kasarabada). One of the oldest Vedic traditions, the Manasa cult frequently interacts with many schools of Indian philosophy, particularly the Yoga sect, which aims to capture kundalini, or serpentine energy, to achieve spiritual enlightenment. When taken as a whole, these scholars' varied viewpoints and the rich stories surrounding the cult of Manasa confirm that snake worship, which is ingrained in Northeast India's culture, is not just a holdover from the past but rather a vital and

vital part of modern identity and ecological knowledge (Warburg and F. Mainland).

IV. TEXTUAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

In North-East India, the culturally significant practice of snake worship is shaped by regional myths and traditions, particularly among ethnic groups such as the Nagas, Manipuris, and Assamese, wherein snakes symbolize fertility, protection, and the life-death cycle. Some tribes regard snakes as guardians of the land and as embodiments of ancestral spirits, reflected in myths like "*Naga Mizing*," which portray serpents as protectors and symbols of guardianship and calamity. In Assamese culture, the veneration of the goddess Manasa Devi highlights the importance of snakes, it is celebrated for their nurturing aspects and linked to themes of redemption. Rituals like Nag Panchami involve offering milk and fruits to snake idols, reinforcing community bonds, and demonstrating a cultural aversion to harming snakes, as evident in sacred groves as their habitats. Snakes are vital for ecological balance and biodiversity, yet modernized these traditions, prompting cultural organizations to work towards their preservation. Fieldwork and participant observations are essential for understanding the significance of snake worship, allowing researchers to engage in rituals and gain insight into community members' emotional connections to snakes, which are viewed as protectors. The blending of experiential research with narratives from community practitioners reveals the deep cultural ties to myths and rituals that support communal identity. This synthesis showcases the adaptability of snake worship amid contemporary influences, underlining how ecological beliefs intertwine with cultural identity, fostering respect for nature that persists across generations, and positioning snake worship as a dynamic, evolving tradition that remains integral to the region's cultural heritage.

V. CULTURAL CONTEXT AND BROADER SIGNIFICANCE

The cultural context of snake worship in North-East India extends beyond mere rituals; it embodies a rich tapestry of ecological awareness, social cohesion, and spiritual continuity that holds broader significance. Snake worship depicts the deep connection that Indigenous societies have with nature, as they ground their identities in reverence for their ancestors and the cyclical awareness of life and death. The customs around the snakes support biodiversity and exemplify sustainable practices, strengthening ties throughout the community and promoting environmental stewardship. In this context, the symbolic representation of ophiolatry also resonates with contemporary concerns

about ecological degradation and modernity's encroachment upon traditional ways of life. Efforts by cultural organizations to document and preserve snake worship highlight its relevance in addressing today's environmental challenges while fostering a sense of pride among younger generations. In a landscape where urbanization threatens to dilute these ancient beliefs, ophiolatry is a resilient form of cultural expression and ecological awareness. Through ongoing research and community engagement, the narratives surrounding this tradition serve as vital reminders of the necessity for balance between modernity and cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of preserving these practices not only for the sake of identity but also for sustaining the delicate ecosystems that nurture both humans and snakes alike. This dynamic interplay underlines the broader significance of snake worship as a living tradition, capable of adapting to contemporary challenges while maintaining its roots in a harmonious relationship with nature.

VI. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Oral traditions and textual documentation crucially help to preserve and revitalize cultural practices associated with snake worship in North-East India. By combining these two forms of expression, communities can effectively communicate their beliefs, rituals, and ecological knowledge. Oral traditions bring vibrancy and immediacy, while written records provide permanence and a wider reach. This relationship facilitates dynamic engagement with modern contexts. For example, as younger generations increasingly embrace digital platforms, adapting oral narratives into audiovisual formats can revitalize interest and participation in traditional practices. Additionally, scholarly research that draws upon these oral histories lends academic legitimacy to indigenous beliefs and highlights their relevance in contemporary discussions about biodiversity and conservation. By documenting these oral traditions, communities empower themselves to assert their narratives in a broader societal context, fostering pride and ownership. When these stories resonate beyond local borders, they invite a diverse audience to appreciate the ecological wisdom inherent in snake worship. This exchange, alongside the synergy between oral and written forms, and understanding of cultural heritage, encourages appreciation and advocacy for diverse ecosystems and the traditions that honor them. Environmental education programs that highlight the ecological roles of snakes and emphasize the necessity of their conservation can further bridge the divide between traditional beliefs and modern scientific understanding. This comprehensive approach ensures that the significance of snake worship is preserved and recontextualized in light of current environmental challenges, fostering a shared sense of responsibility for cultural heritage and biodiversity conservation. As

communities grapple with the complexities of modernization, these initiatives can empower them to not only maintain their identity but also advocate for ecological stewardship that enriches both their culture and the environment

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on snake worship in North-East India should prioritize comparative studies with other cultures that practice similar forms of animal veneration, such as in Africa and South America, to uncover universal themes and foster cross-cultural understanding (Bhaumik, "Kashyapa Rishi of the Mahabharata becomes Dhanvantari Ojha of the Manasa Mangal Kavya: Transmission and Diffusion of an Ancient Snakebite-Curer's Story"). Interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate sociology, anthropology, and environmental science are essential to gaining comprehensive insights into the social dynamics, symbolic meanings, and ecological roles associated with snake worship (Bhaumik, "Indian Snakes and Snaky India: British Orientalist Construction of a Snake-Ridden Landscape during the Nineteenth Century"). Preserving Indigenous knowledge in the face of modernization and globalization is crucial, necessitating collaborative documentation efforts that prioritize Indigenous perspectives and utilize modern technology to archive cultural practices and oral histories. Training community members in digital storytelling can facilitate the effective transmission of knowledge to younger generations, while creating dialogue spaces around sustainable development allows Indigenous voices to contribute to broader discussions on conservation (Singh). By embracing these approaches, future research can enhance academic discourse and cultural vitality, ultimately benefiting the community and the global society eager to learn from these traditions (Kumar).

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, snake worship in Northeast India holds profound significance, representing a vital aspect of the region's rich cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs. This practice shows the community's reverence for snakes, often viewed as guardians or symbols of the core of fertility and, at the same time, reinforces social ties and local identity. The research findings reveal the intricate interplay between spirituality, nature, and community life, highlighting how such traditions contribute to the region's cultural diversity and resilience. As we reflect on these insights, we acknowledge the continued relevance of snake worship in contemporary times, where socio-cultural practices are often at risk of being overshadowed by rapid globalization. Immediate action is needed to safeguard and enhance our understanding of these

invaluable traditions. It is essential to conduct future research that explores the sociocultural and ecological aspects of snake worship more deeply. Furthermore, encouraging collaboration among anthropologists, ecologists, artists, and cultural historians will significantly enhance this study area. This cooperation can lead to a broader understanding of snake worship and its implications for community well-being, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. By joining forces, we can help ensure that these ancient practices are maintained for future generations and can thrive in an ever-evolving world.

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