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Sculptural Expressions of Naga Worship: A Study of Nagamatha and Odisha's Sacred Sites

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ABSTRACT:

This report presents a comparative study of the sculptures at Nagamatha, a sacred site near Nemalo in Odisha, focusing on its detached sculptures and their archaeological, historical, and cultural significance. The site features a Naga (serpent goddess) image, along with other sculptures, such as a horse rider, Chamunda, and a fragment of a Navagraha panel. Naga worship in Odisha, deeply rooted in ancient traditions, is explored, with references to various deities and festivals associated with serpents. The sculptures at Nagamatha are compared with similar ones found at other Odisha sites, including the Svarnajaleswar Temple and Patamundai Hill, revealing shared themes in Naga worship across different religious traditions. The study highlights the importance of Nagamatha in understanding the region's diverse religious practices, with particular emphasis on the integration of Naga worship in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Key Words: Nagamatha at Chitrakula river side, Nemal Road, Detached Sculptures

INTRODUCTION

Odisha has played a significant role in Indian history from ancient times to the present. It is a land of diverse religious traditions, where many village deities are worshipped under specific names. A tradition known as "Swapnadesa" has led to the establishment of numerous sacred places. Over time, sculptures have been introduced, gaining special significance in local beliefs. These sculptures often evolve into famous gods or goddesses, deeply revered by the local communities. For example, in Kadala village of Dharماسala block, Jajpur district, an Umamaheswar image is worshipped as Duarasuni, a village deity. Similarly, many villages in Odisha have gods and goddesses with unique names and origins.

The Citrakula Valley offers a glimpse into Odisha's ancient heritage. Near this valley lies Nemalo, home to a site called Nagamatha, where a Naga (serpent goddess) image and other detached sculptures are worshipped by

local villagers. I conducted a survey of this site and prepared a brief archaeological report, gathering information from the locals. This study aims to compare the sculptures at Nagamatha with those at other sites in Odisha, providing insights into their archaeological, historical, and cultural significance.

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THE NAGA CULT IN INDIAN RELIGIONS

The worship of the Naga (serpent) was a prominent aspect of primitive cults in ancient India. However, with the rise of higher religious orders, the independent status of the Naga cult diminished. Over time, various religious thoughts and beliefs assimilated, reflecting the integration of diverse races and cultures in India. This process led to the incorporation of Naga worship into major religious traditions, where it often found a prominent or even dominant place. Odisha, known for its rich repository of relics and antiquities, offers significant evidence of the Naga's association with Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions.

HINDUISM

Aryans and the Naga Cult

There is a belief that the Aryans, the progenitors of Hinduism, were opposed to the Naga cult. Instances such as the Indra-Vrita myth and the serpent sacrifice of King Janamejaya are often cited as evidence of this opposition. However, the Indra-Vrita myth, rooted in the Rigveda, is thought to reflect the Babylonian myth of Marduk and Tiamat and has little connection to Aryan beliefs. Moreover, during the serpent sacrifice by King Janamejaya, the Aryan god Indra acted as the protector of the serpent king Takshaka. Folk tales, such as those from Punjab, further interpret the serpent sacrifice as rooted in personal conflicts rather than outright rejection of Naga worship.

The Aryans ultimately assimilated aspects of Naga worship into their religious practices. Vedic religion underwent significant transformations, leading to the emergence of Hinduism. Among Hindu sects, the association of the Naga is most evident in Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism.

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism, which venerates Lord Vishnu, incorporates significant elements of serpent worship. The serpent Shesha Naga is considered a manifestation of Vishnu, often depicted as supporting Vishnu as he reclines and contemplates the creation of the world. Iconography of Vishnu reclining on Shesha Naga is widespread, particularly in Odisha's temples, such as the unique Vishnu temple at Sambalpur and others in Bhatra, Bhubaneswar, and Kakatpur.

Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna, is also associated with Shesha Naga. At the time of his death, Balarama's

soul is said to have exited his body in the form of a serpent. Images of Balarama with serpent hoods have been discovered across India. The worship of Baladeva during the full moon of Shravan in Odisha reflects the assimilation of the Naga cult into Vaishnavism.

Shaivism

The Naga is closely associated with Lord Shiva. In some instances, the Naga replaces Shiva as the primary deity in Shaiva temples, such as those in Varanasi and Nagpur. In Odisha, temples like the one at Maneswar feature brass idols of the Naga as presiding deities. The Nathas, traditional Shaiva worshippers, carry Naga idols made of copper or brass as they collect alms and offer blessings.

Shaktism

The worship of the Mother Goddess, popular during the Bhaumakara reign in Odisha, also incorporates Naga elements. Temples such as the Vaital temple and the Chandi temple at Belkhandi highlight this connection. Goddesses like Mahishamardini Durga, Viraja, Chamunda, and Kali are often depicted with serpents as weapons or as integral parts of their iconography. For instance, the serpent appears on the head of Goddess Viraja at Jajpur and over the head of Chamunda at the Vaital temple in Bhubaneswar.

Buddhism

It is believed that Gautama Buddha had connections to the serpent lineage. Some scholars suggest that the ruling dynasty of Magadha during Buddha's time belonged to the Naga race, which helped propagate Buddhism. Artistic representations of Naga figures in association with Buddha, such as the serpent king Muchalinda sheltering Buddha during meditation, are found in sites like Sanchi and Amaravati.

While early Buddhist monuments in Odisha lack extensive decorative motifs, remnants such as the Janguli serpent goddess of Mahayana Buddhism have been discovered in places like Kenduli and Sambalpur. These figures are now worshipped as local deities.

Jainism

In Jainism, the 23rd Tirthankara, Parshvanatha, is closely associated with the Naga. He is often depicted with a seven-hooded serpent over his head or seated on a serpent's hoods. According to legend, the serpent king Dharanendra protected Parshvanatha during meditation by sheltering him with his hoods. Such depictions are found in Jain monuments at Khandagiri and Udayagiri in Odisha. Modern Jain practices also include the worship of trees and serpents.

Others Representations

A recurring theme in Hinduism is Krishna's fight with the serpent Kaliya, symbolizing the suppression of the primitive Naga cult by the newer Krishna cult. This episode is celebrated through fairs and sculptural representations in Odisha, such as those seen during the Dhanu Yatra in Bargarh.

NAGA WORSHIP IN ODISHA

Naga worship in Odisha dates back to ancient times and continues to be celebrated today. A significant festival, Naga Chaturthi, is held annually. In modern Hinduism, Naga Panchami, celebrated in the month of Shravana (July–August), honors the birth of serpents. According to the *Mahabharata* and *Varaha Purana*, the sage Kashyapa fathered seven great serpents—Vasuki, Takshaka, Karkotaka, Padma, Mahapadma, Shankhapala, and Kulika—with Dakshayani, the daughter of Daksha. These seven Nagas are detailed in the *Mayasilpa*.

The Sanskrit word “Naga” means serpent. Naga images are found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, often depicted as semi-divine beings with half-human, half-cobra forms. They are associated with water bodies, fertility, treasure, and protection. Notable Nagas include Shesha or Ananta, Vasuki, and Takshaka. Female Nagas (Naginis) are often depicted as beautiful serpent princesses.

In Buddhism, Nagas are seen as door guardians or minor deities. The Naga king Muchalinda famously sheltered the Buddha during his meditation. In Jainism, the Tirthankara Parshvanatha is depicted with a canopy of Naga hoods.

Details of Sculptures at Nagamatha

- **Main Deity (Naga) or Manasa**
- **Location:** 20°27'27" N, 86°9'49" E, 72 km from Bhubaneswar.
- **Description:** A Nagi in Padmasana pose with Namaskar Mudra, holding a pot. The seven-headed serpent canopy adorns her head. The sculpture made of Khondalite stone, measures 53.5 cm in height, 24 cm in width, and 25 cm in thickness.
- **Horse Rider or Kalki Abatara of Lord Jagannatha**
- **Description:** A horse rider holding a sword in the left hand, possibly a hero stone or a depiction of Kalki, the future incarnation of Lord Jagannatha. The figure has a hallowed hairstyle and a large earring. The sculpture measures 66.5 cm in height, 36 cm in width, and 17 cm in thickness.

- **Chamunda**

- **Description:** A rare Chamunda image sitting on a Vishwapadma with a dead body beneath. Two Ganas and Pretas are depicted in a standing pose nearby. The sculpture measures 43 cm in height, 24 cm in width, and 14 cm in thickness.

- **Navagraha Panel Fragment**

- **Description:** A broken part of a Navagraha panel, with a two-armed deity in Padmasana poses. The fragment measures 15 cm in height, 21 cm in width, and 15 cm in thickness.

Comparison with Other Naga Sculptures in Odisha

Naga sculptures from Nagamatha share similarities with those found at other sites in Odisha. For example:

- A seven-headed Naga figure from Svarnajaleswar Temple in Bhubaneswar.
- The Naga dynasty of Mayurbhanj worshipped Naga as their tutelary deity, with notable sculptures at Patamundai Hill.
- A headless Naga Raja sculpture in the Odisha State Museum.
- Naga columns at Chateswar Temple near Salepur.
- A rare Nagi image from Tundura, Balasore, holding a child with a seven-headed serpent canopy.
- The Muchalinda Buddha from Ganiapali is distinct, showcasing unique features compared to other Naga sculptures.
- Similar type of Manasa image recovered from Dharmasala area of Jajpur which was now preserved at state museum Bhubaneswar.

CONCLUSION

The Naga cult, once an independent form of worship, became deeply integrated into India's major religions through a process of cultural and religious assimilation. From Hinduism to Buddhism and Jainism, the serpent holds symbolic and ritualistic significance, reflecting its enduring legacy in Indian spirituality and art. Nagamatha's sculptures are significant in understanding the cultural and religious heritage of Odisha. While the site currently has limited sculptures, it is part of a broader historical landscape, including nearby Buddhist and Brahmanical temples. The comparative study highlights the diversity of Naga worship and its integration into various religious traditions across Odisha. It is a rare image of Odisha and Naga image worshiped there a special faith and believer of local peoples.



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AM & AKT was responsible for the first manuscript draft. All authors contributed to subsequent drafts and approved the final version.

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