



TREE AND SERPENT WORSHIP.

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Round about Bangalor, more especially towards the Lil Bigh and *Peta*,—as the native town is called,—three or more stones are to be found together, having representations of serpents carved upon them, and of which the accompanying sketch will give some idea. These stones are erected always under the sacred fig-tree by some pious person, whose means and piety determine the care and finish with which they are executed.

Judging from the number of these stones, the worship of the serpent appears to be more prevalent in the Bangalor district than in other parts of the province. I have seen stones like No. 1b in other parts of Maisur, but their appearance would lead one to think that in the present day they are not worshipped, while those in the immediate vicinity of Bangalor are often adorned with saffron, &c. I have been able to learn but little about these stones. No priest is ever in charge of them. There is no objection to men doing so, but, from custom or for some reason—perhaps because the serpent is supposed to confer fertility on barren women—the worshipping of these stones, which takes place during the Gauri feast, is confined to women of all Hindu classes and creeds.

In fig. 1, *a* represents a seven-headed cobra* and is called *Subramanya*. *b*, a female, the lower portion of whose body is that of a snake. She is called *Mudama*, and is the principal and most important figure in the group. *b* represents two serpents entwined, the children of *c*. These three representations are necessary to a complete and orthodox group.

These stones, when properly erected, ought to be on a built-up stone platform facing the rising sun; and under the shade of two *pipal* (*ficus religiosa*) trees—a male and female growing together, and wedded by ceremonies in every respect the same as in the case of human beings—close by and growing in the same platform a *nimb* (*margosa*) and *bilpatra* † (a kind of wood-apple), which are supposed to be living witnesses of the marriage. The expense of performing the marriage ceremony is too heavy for ordinary persons, and so we generally find only one *pipal* and a *nimb* on the platform.

By the common people these two are supposed to represent man and wife.

The reason given to me for the *nimb* and *bilpatra* trees being selected as witnesses proves that the Saivite religion is in some manner—and this is further borne out by the *lingam* being engraved on *a* and *b*—connected with this form of tree and serpent worship.

The fruit of the *nimb* and *bilpatra* is the only one which in any way resembles a *lingam*, and by placing the fruit of either of these trees on the leaf of the *pipal*, which represents the *yonis*, you have a fair representation of an entire *lingam*.

The custom among Brahmins, still acted up to, that under certain circumstances men must marry plants, is curious. If a Brahmin is desirous of taking to himself a third wife, he goes through the marriage ceremony correctly, but abbreviated in details, with a *yekke gida* (*Aristolochia indica*). This is looked upon as the third marriage; after the ceremony has been completed the *yekke gida* is cut down and burnt. The man is now free, without fear of evil consequences, to wed the woman who is nominally his fourth wife.

This custom owes its origin not to tree-worship, but to the belief that the number three is an unlucky one. By burning the third wife all bad luck is averted.

It sometimes happens that the elder brother, not having come across a suitable wife, is still unmarried when the younger brother wishes to get married. Before the younger can do so, however, the elder goes through the ceremony of marriage with a plantain tree, which is afterwards cut down, and the younger is then free to wed.

The privileges of chewing betel-nut, wearing flowers in the hair, using sandalwood paste on the body, and tying up the cloth behind in a particular manner, are confined to married men only. By going through the ceremony of marriage with a plantain tree, the unfortunate bachelor who cannot get a wife is entitled to exercise all the coveted privileges.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.

All over Western and Southern India we find the serpent more or less venerated, and a collec-

* This stone was about 4½ feet high.

† *Crataeva religiosa*?—ED.

tion of the sculptured representations of the many forms employed could not fail to be interesting. Sketches of a few varieties of serpent images are given in the *Report on the Archaeological Survey of Western India* for last season; and from these figs. 3, 5, and 6 are taken. Fig. 2 is from a village in the Belgâm district; Figs. 3 and 5 are from a photograph of six sculptured stones in the principal temple at Sînde-Manauli, on the Mûlaprabhî, of which two are carved with nine figures each of Hindu *devas* or gods, seated in a line, and another bears a figure of a single hooded snake, a fourth of a pair—the male with three hoods and the female with one; the fifth (fig. 3) had a single snake with seven heads (one of them broken off) very neatly carved in a compact porphyritic slab,—each head has a crest, and over the whole is the *chattrâ* or umbrella, emblematic of sovereignty; the sixth (fig. 5) has a pair of crested snakes, the male only with its hood expanded. No. 4 is from a stone at Aiholli or Aiwalli,* further down the same river, in the Dhârwad zillâ; and No. 6 is from the door-jamb of a deserted temple at Huli, not far from Manauli.

At Thân, in Kâthiâwad, is a temple of 'Bâshanji,' as Śesha Nârâyaṇa is locally called. The principal image is a three-headed cobra with two smaller monocephalous ones—one on each side—carved on the same slab. To the spectator's right of them is a figure of Viṣṇu in the human form, with four arms: while on, and in front of the altar on which the images are placed are *śaligrâmas* and *śankh* shells. A common votive offering at this shrine seems to be a representation of the three snakes in alto-rilievo on a flat earthenware tile. Near the same town is a shrine of Bândiâ Nâga, † where there is an image but no temple. As snake-worship prevails among the Kâthîs, similar shrines are doubtless to be met with in many places throughout the peninsula; and an account of the

traditions, beliefs, and rites connected with them would be specially interesting.

The following notice of the worship of the living serpent is given by Dr. Cornish, in the *Report of the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871* (vol. I. pp. 105-6):—"In many places," he says, "the living serpent is to this day sought out and propitiated. About two years ago, at Râjamandri, I came upon an old ant-hill by the side of a public road, on which was placed a modern stone representation of a cobra, and the ground all around was stuck over with pieces of wood carved very rudely in the shape of a snake. These were the offerings left by devotees, at the abode taken up by an old snake, who occasionally would come out of his hole, and feast on the milk, eggs, and ghee left for him by his adorers.

"Around this place I saw many women who had come to make their prayers at the shrine. If they chanced to see the cobra, I was assured that the omen was to be interpreted favourably, and that their prayers for progeny would be granted. There is a place also near Vaisarpadi, close to Madras, in which the worship of the living snake draws crowds of votaries, who make holiday excursions to the temple (generally on Sundays) in the hope of seeing the snakes which are preserved in the temple grounds: and probably so long as the desire of offspring is a leading characteristic of the Indian people, so long will the worship of the serpent, or of snake-stones, be a popular cult. In all probability the snake-stones were originally set up in commemoration of a living snake, formerly tenanted the spot. In most places the stones are to be counted by the dozen, or score; and, judging from the modern practice, as I saw it myself at Râjamandri, they were probably set up in fulfilment of vows, and in remembrance of blessings flowing to the donors through snake-worship."