

## A Note on the Recently Explored Nāga Sculptures in Pamba River Basin, Pathanamithitta District, Kerala

*Ambily C S*

Recent exploration by the author brought to light some interesting Nāga sculptures in the middle ranges of Pamba basin. Pamba is one of the important and third longest rivers in Kerala. In medieval period Pamba basin apparently harbored prosperous settlement like Kaviyur, Thiruvanmandoor, Perunnayil and Thiruvalla. Except some Buddhist sculptures reported from Karumadi and Mavelikkara no in depth study of this region has been done so far. The present discoveries show a concrete picture of the sanctity of Pamba basin from archaeological and historical viewpoints. During the field-work, seven female and five male granite Nāga images were discovered from Pamba river basin, which is the subject matter of this paper.



Fig.1 : Nāgī (single-hooded),  
Niramakulam



Fig.2 : Nāgī (three-hooded),  
Kakkara



Fig.3 : Nāgī (three-hooded),  
Kakkara

The female Nāgī figures are discovered from Niramakulam (single-hooded - Fig.1), Kakkara (three-hooded - Figs.2-3) and Kokkathode (single-hooded - Fig.4) in Pamba river basin. These Nāgī images are wearing *kuṇḍalas*, *grīvā*, *kirīṭa*, *kaṅkaṇa*, *keyūra* like ornaments and holding snake in hands. The figure from Niramakulam is fixed on a stone pedestal placed under a tree, while others do not have any pedestal.

Among Nāga figures, one is discovered from Kakkara having five-hooded snake canopy, showing *abhaya* and *varada mudrā* and ornaments like *kuṇḍala*, *yojñīopavīta*, *udarabhandha*, *kirīṭa* and a band tied on the head. His seat is supported by a *bhāravāhī* figure (Fig.5).

The other Nāga figures are discovered from Kokkathode (Fig.6) and Kattathippara. They have three and five snake-hoods, respectively. In other details, the Kokkathode figure is very much similar to Kakkara figure. Nāga figure from Kattathippara shows a *gaṇa* lifting the deity seated in *yogāsana*. Above the Nāgarāja, a big snake with coils is depicted.

There are other male and female figures. One female devotee is seen in *namaskāra-mudrā* sitting on the snake-coil with serpent-hood. Other has a single snake-hood holding snake in the hands. The male figures are shown seated in *sarvjalalitāsana* with an *udarabandha* depicted like a snake.



Fig.4 : Nāgī (single-hooded), Kokkathode



Fig.5 : Nāgarāja, Kakkara



Fig.6 : Nāgarāja, Kokkathode

## Conclusion

Usually the Nāga figures are in three forms, i.e. with many heads, in human form with serpent-hood and a combination of the two, i.e. the upper part of human and lower of serpent. The texts from Kerala, like *Śilparatna*, *Tantra-samuccaya* and *Dhyānaślokaṅgal* refer the Nāga worship.

In the field of iconography a unified and evolutionary account is lacking. But with the help of available materials it can be classified into three phases, i.e., from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and from 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The Nāgarājas with decoration of *keyūra*, *kañkaṇa*, *yajñopavīta*, *kuṇḍalas* and *grīvā* show similarities with those male Nāga sculptures found at Kollam and Mannarasala. Nāgayakṣīs with three or five hooded canopies are similar to other reported images, but one of the noticeable feature of the female Nāga sculptures from Pathanamthitta is appearance of a big snake in two hands. Generally the reported images from Kerala show either the deity carrying snakes in either hands or holding a baby snake with her two hands like a mother. Other striking feature of these sculptures is the back portion of the images shows a complete snake hanging down from the back. This sort of depiction can be marked in the images found at Mathura.

The earliest evidence of serpent worship in Kerala can be traced from the megalithic period. Dr. P. Rajendran excavated a cist burial at Oliyani in Kottayam district and retrieved three smaller iron serpentine motifs. Several myths and legends are associated with the origin of serpent worship in Kerala. Plenty of Nāgas were housed in the equatorial forest of Kerala, which was considered as 'Nāgaloka'. Keralites propitiated various offerings, rituals and ceremonies. The still existing centers of serpent worship in Kerala are Mannarasala, Vetticode, Pampumekavu, etc.

## Rejoinder (Dr. N. P. Joshi)

Ambily CS has sent a CD of Nāga sculptures discovered by her in Pamba basin (Kerala) for identification along with her above note. As I could see, the total lot can be grouped under the following three types: (i) anthropomorphic female Nāgīs, (ii) similar seated males (Nāgas) and (iii) entwined zoomorphic snake pairs depicted vertically on uprights (Figs.7-8). The Nāgīs and Nāgas have snake-hood canopies on head and full reptile on reverse. None of them is multi-armed.

The Nāgī figures, who are more in number than the Nāgas, carry a snake in both of their hands. This snake is not their emblem (*āyudha*); on the other hand it looks like a baby being fondled by a loving mother. In other words, they represent some snake-mother (*Sarpamātā*) commanding worship by the local people.

Two-armed seated Nāgas have their hands in *varada* and *abhaya mudrā*. Their seats are being uplifted by load-bearing (*bhāravāhī*) figures. Both these features confirm their divine status befitting to be called Nāgarāja.

The entwined reptile (*sarpa*) pairs are also objects of worship as indicated by presence of a devotee in the composition.

Now we have two words, *nāga* and *sarpa*. Though often used as synonyms, they actually stand for two distinct species. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa describing his *vibhūtis* calls himself Ananta<sup>1</sup> among the Nāgas and Vāsuki among the *Sarpas*. More light comes from the Purāṇas.<sup>2</sup>

Among several wives of the sage Kaśyapa, Kadru had produced the Nāgas and Surasā brought forth the *Sarpas*. We do not know much about Kadru except that she had played a foul game against Vinatā, another wife of Kaśyapa and had even cursed her sons.<sup>3</sup> It has also been said that as Skandagraha, Kadru entering the womb of a pregnant woman, kills it and causes birth of a snake thereby.<sup>4</sup> *Sarpamātā* Surasā finds mention both in the *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>5</sup> and *Mahābhārata*<sup>6</sup>. Requested by the gods, she had tested valour and intellect of Hanumān, who was crossing South Ocean (*dakṣiṇodadhi*) on way to Laṅkā and ultimately had blessed him for successful mission. This event indirectly suggests her presence in South. On basis of the above, we venture to identify the snake-mothers fondling serpent in hands as *Sarpamātā* Surasā. The word *sarpa* literally suggests a reptile.

Regarding the Nāga chief Nāgarāja, the Purāṇas supply some interesting information. Among the sons of Kadru (Kārdaveyas) Śeṣa was the eldest, followed by Vāsuki and several others. Śeṣa, displeased with his mother and other brothers, left them, practiced penance and, as directed by Brahmā, went to Pātāla and bore the Globe (Pṛthvī) on his head to provide her a firm base.<sup>7</sup> Now the Nāgas took Vāsuki as their chief, anointed him and he became Nāgarāja.<sup>8</sup> He was further anointed by the gods (*Devas*) also.<sup>9</sup> It was Nāgarāja Vāsuki, who had played significant role to save serpents from being burnt in the Serpent-sacrifice (*Nāgayajña*) of King Janmejaya.<sup>10</sup> We find him seated on throne in the beautiful Court scene (c. 100 CE) hailing from Sonkh in Mathura district.<sup>11</sup> We also have temple of Vāsuki at Allahabad. Considering the available evidences at hand, the male Nāga figures from Pamba basin seem to represent Nāgarāja Vāsuki.



Fig.7 : Entwined Serpents



Fig.8 : Entwined Serpents (double)

## Entwined Serpents

This type hailing from Pamba basin evinces following peculiarities :

1. These are vertically depicted usually with a devotee at the bottom (Figs.7-8).
2. In some cases, the snakes have entwined themselves in opposite direction to each other; that is, one faces the top while the other has its face downwards (Fig.7).
3. As can be seen in the photographs, in some cases the serpent appears to have two faces - one on top and other on tail side (Fig.8).
4. A few pieces show two depictions, parallel to each other on one and the same upright (Fig.8).

Reasons for depiction of entwined serpents and their identification are matters of further research. Identification of *Sarpamātā* Surasā and Nāgarāja Vāsuki are tentative. A deep probe in local traditions, folk tales and songs are likely to throw more light of definite nature on the points concerned.

## Endnotes

1. *Gītā*, x.28-29.
2. E.g. *Padma*, Sṛṣṭī, 6.69, p.353; *Matsya*, 6.37, p.14; *Kūrma*, 16.5, p.70; *Agni*, 19.16, p.33.
3. *Mahābhārata*, Ādi., *adhyāya* 20.22,23, p.87ff.
4. *Ibid.*, Vana., 30.37-38, p.1607  
कद्रुः सूक्ष्मवपुर्भूत्वा गर्भिणीं प्रविश्यथ ॥  
भुङ्क्ते सा तत्र तं गर्भं सा तु नागं प्रसूयते ॥
5. Valmikīya *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sundara., 1.144.
6. *Mahābhārata*, Ādi., 66.69-70, dākṣiṇātya pāṭha, pp.190-191.
7. *Ibid.*, Ādi., 36.2-24, p.115ff.
8. *Ibid.*, Ādi., 36.25, followed by dākṣiṇātya pāṭha, p.117.
9. *Ibid.*, Śalya., 37.30-32, p.4235.
10. *Ibid.*, Ādi., *adhyāya* 37-54, p.117ff.
11. H. Härtel, *Excavations at Sonkh*, p.420, pp.429-30; N.P. Joshi, A.L. Srivastava, *Śilpa-Sahasradala*, Vol.II, Entry No. Upd.224, p.442.

(The Purāṇas cited are the publications of Mansukh Rai, Mor, Calcutta and the *Mahābhārata* is of Gita Press, Gorakhpur).