

Brahmanization of Popular Cults: Nagas in the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata¹

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Abstract: The story of the Mahabharata was transmitted by bhrigus, a bardic Brahmanical clan. The epic was tampered and expanded over the period. The author would focus on the first book of the Mahabharata, the Adi Parva that has plethora of source material on popular cults. It is the complexity of the text and here is an attempt to trace mythical conceptions in hierarchy of power. There is evidence of contestations at every point. Assimilation cannot be without contestations as no religious tradition is without contestation. If critique emerges tradition can be still carried ahead though with ruptures. Despite contestations, assimilation and confluence is not always a very happy one. The ideas appear to be seeking position in mythology. We intend to explain myth and historically co relate the aspect to demystify. There are conjectures that we should keep in mind. How far was the process truly assimilative and osmotic? On what lines were power contestations perceptible? Cultic practices allowed the incorporations of popular practices around nagas and nagis and many other semi divine beings. The popular cults manifested power tensions and tried to make inroads into mainstream traditions. This dual complexity of the assimilative process made it fluid and rich at the same time. The study would unravel diverse voices within the mythic and ritual traditions as well as their location on the geographical expanse. The paper explores the process of brahmanization that reflected power tensions between brahmanic and popular beliefs and the author attempts to perceive some of these notions. The conditions compelled the brahmanas to take notice of the sub strata of the society and the lesser traditions.

Key words: bhrigus, nagas, myths, yakshas, brahmanas, assimilative, interactive, popular, Kshatriyas.

1. Introduction:

The text Mahabharata cannot be taken as a monolithic type as it was under composition over eight centuries c.400BCE to c.400CE or more. However, it is generally held that some kind of 'Bharata' text had come into existence around 400 BCE. It may eventually have become a Brahmanical text but during its inception it was part of the popular folklore. In the process of popular traditions by bards, the text eventually gets brahmanized and has elite authorship. In its evolution and expansion it may have assimilated local beliefs and made them mouth piece to spread ideas. Their stories have been told and recounted in a specific manner by the narrator. In the Mahabharata, the action is focused in the Ganga-Yamuna doab and the adjoining areas.

2. Aims and Objective:

The Aim of the paper is to explore the process of brahmanization that reflected power relations and at times tensions between brahmanas and the popular cults. It is imperative to understand the osmosis that takes place between popular and mainstream tradition, and leaves neither untouched. This interaction has shown that the brahmanical tradition has been shaped by alternative traditions. The references to many popular traditions would reinforce our understanding that the author was attempting at multiple perspectives on their position which might have had diverse implications. Manifestations in beliefs of semi-divine are found in abundance in the Adi Parva. The popular beliefs are not just minor deities of Indian religious tradition rather they are major in their own stand and do have potential to sway the masses. Such traditions are part of interactive Indian culture and symbol of marginal identities which can construct historical identities. Here we attempt to consider *naga* traditions and worshippers/community as part of interaction, assimilation and integration.

The objective of study is to hypothetically understand the myths as exemplified by tussle between Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit elements. As an outcome of this how far was the process truly assimilative? Were Power contestations also perceptible? Cultic practices allowed the incorporation of popular practices/traditions such as of *naga worshippers*. Who really exercised power in the process of interaction: Brahmanas or Local practitioners? Is the ideology subservient to the interests of the dominant groups? Was the popular tradition subordinated? In the process of brahmanization, do the *bhrigus*/Bhargava brahmanas actually acknowledge dominance of popular cults or exercise

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almost forcible control on local traditions. If Brahmins grudgingly acknowledged some aspects of local cults what were these? Were the popular beings challenging and had potential to get absorbed in wider beliefs? If yes, how do the myths help and relate to it. In the text, *yajnas* are presented as the occasions for the dissemination of an evolving brahmanical lore.

3. Methodology: Sources and Literature Review

Some scholars provide a window to see the popular cults which existed in its popular form and their interactions and relations with other traditions are also examined. The *naga* cult got thrashed but was not smashed rather was assimilated in wider religious system. A gamut of historians have worked on these popular beliefs ambitiously looking through literature and art forms. Scholars like V.Fausboll have tried to look into these popular beliefs as aborigines or communities at times. E.W.Hopkins in his work has designated the lower mythology as demonic but has attempted to illustrate relationship amongst the deities which helps to build up Indian mythology either through the nomenclatures as benevolent or malevolent beings. It was J.P.Vogel who actually constructed the argument on serpent worship in India, recommending them as demonic spirits who were propitiated as water deities and even for wealth. He attempted to make a comparative analysis in relation with *asuras*, *yakshas* and *rakshasas*. Not many works are found on the *naga* beliefs or worshippers but the works by A.K.Coomaraswamy, Moti Chandra are indirectly of use as they throw light on the *yakshas* as part on mainstream religion. It was V.S.Agrawala who gives an insight into and helps unveil the mystery of the popular beliefs in the epic and how the popular beliefs were adopted by the higher deities and got pacified.ⁱ Monographs are written by R.N.Misra portaying *yakshas* in iconography and literature where they did not belong to any one religious system rather to those ideas which flourished amongst the masses and were eventually adopted into diverse religious systems.ⁱⁱ S.H.Blackburn wrote an article on the folk cults in Hinduism and is able to justify the status of the popular cults in Indian religious traditions and has referred to they being rarely patronised by the high status groups to the religious ideas were aligned with social hierarchy.ⁱⁱⁱ G.H.Sutherland has talked about demonic and assimilative aspect of the *yakshas* with the higher gods. The term demon was also applied to *nagas*.^{iv} The review literature however is lacking in terms of *naga* cults. Taking these historical works into cognisance, we can infer that the term popular was changing axis.

Here is an attempt to peep into the literary text that is based extensively on the assimilation of *naga* beliefs at the level of myth. The primary text moved away from oral tradition of the bards into the hands of Bhargava brahmanas. It is a microscopic study of a text *Adi Parva* and the choice is made in context of very many references to the popular beliefs especially *naga* beliefs that appear undying. The underlying fact of the text is that it passed through many hands and was tampered as well as inflated over time. Its origin from oral tradition to written, witnessed numerous manuscripts that belong to different versions. The last of it was the text agglomeration by critical Poona edition. It was V.S. Sukthankar who drew attention to the Bhargava involvement in shaping the *Mahabharata* which also led to the change in the structure of the text. It is the popular beliefs that are embedded in the myths that help to spread certain ideas. The mythical tradition expanded over the time period and was evident in the entire epic. Bhargava material is very much incorporated in *Mahabharata* and many stories of *bhrigus* have been included. As a genre, the epic is not only narrative but it also tends to be oral in origin and their stories have been told in a specific manner. Each narrator has recounted the tale in his own way that he considered relevant elucidating even through the benefits of listening to them (*phalashruti*). It is also broadly understood that the text has its roots in older bardic literature about warriors and conflict to control upper Ganga and Yamuna region which has been identified as the geographical locale of the epic as a whole.

My focus is on the first book of the *Mahabharata*, the *Adi Parva*. On one hand these beliefs manifested power tensions, on the other they sought to make inroads into mainstream traditions. We cannot rule out the fact that these cultic traditions were part of an interactive milieu that was assimilative in nature. The traffic of ideas between different communities either brahmanas or locals was a two way process. The popular beliefs during early India at times appear only in mythology, art and literature and though not always in the cult. Such beliefs can construct new historical identities through the myths. Myths generate interest as they encapsulate hidden assumptions of a society. The attempt here is to unravel diverse voices within the mythic traditions.

Adi Parva reflects on diverse as well as fluctuating power relations. The text initiates with an act of annihilation of *naga* beliefs, evidently revealing tension between brahmanas and the *naga* community. In the myths we also come across intense complexity between brahmanas and kshatriyas. A kshatriya named Janamejaya obliterated snakes by holding a *sarpasattra* (snake sacrifice). Whereas a Bhargava brahmana *Astika* came to rescue the frightened snakes who were part of his maternal family from being slaughtered in the fire. Some kind of contestation is getting evident through the snake sacrifice. In a nuanced way it is anticipated that it is the duty of a kshatriya to wield the sceptre and not that of the brahmana. Since the text is brahmanical, such fluctuations are distinctly perceptible.

In the mythology we come across diverse *naga* beliefs. Probably the *naga* believers contested against hegemony of the other. The snake is considered to represent the element of immortality as is evident from its act of shedding carcass. The animal is also symbolic of darkness, death and his physical attributes have been linked to other such ideas in the myths. There is also an aspect of animal worship involved through these myths and issues of concern are also

animal symbolism. It is important to look into inhabiting places which *naga* worshippers occupied in the myths as their residence underneath the earth; the Netherlands and even the fresh water bodies. Among many parts of the world in mythology we find the snake as the guardian of the house and at times is also seen as a garden deity. The myths pertaining to digging of the earth to reach Netherlands are symbolic of *nagas* being associated with an agrarian society. Great sacrifices, in which hundreds of animals were sometimes slaughtered, accompanied some kind of cult observances. In early India, there was a lot of propitiation of snake-worship in literature as well as in art forms. In many places snake cults were built, established near reservoirs for example tirtha of *nagi* Ulupin.

4. Tools of study: Myths

Here is an attempt to churn into some stories or myths in the text^v and sieve out the ideas. To start with the myth of Kadru (mother of *nagas*) and Vinata (mother of birds Garuda and Aruna) who are sisters and also co-wives of Kasyapa. Kadru tricks Vinata in a bet by directing her sons to coil around the horse's tail, causing it to appear black. As an outcome Vinata loses to Kadru and she along with her two sons are enslaved to Kadru and the *nagas*.^{vi} Is this symbolic of interaction between *naga* worshippers/traditions and Garuda(eagle) worshippers? Kadru even cursed all her own sons who initially refused to be part of her deceit. This can be example of an extended family, inter family feuds or can we call it an intra family tension? There are very many snakes who were desirous of becoming *nagaraja* or the overlord of the snakes.

Naga community, who feared death due to their mother's curse, after consultation arrived at the conclusion that they should do their mother's bidding, for if she failed in obtaining her desire she might withdraw her affection and burn them all in Agni (fire). There is also respect and place for mother in the myth. We need to analyse as to why the *nagas* were cursed by their mother Kadru, and why Vinata was cursed by her own son Aruna that she will be enslaved? The social relations are important and implicit as it becomes evident through this myth. In the myth curse is approved by Brahma who for the protection of all creatures had made a provision for it since the *nagas* had multiplied and would bite many. However at the same time there is anticipation that the snakes will survive the sacrifice. The snakes are feared due to their venomous and maligned tendencies but the popular belief survives and the process appears assimilative. Myths while decoded throw light on continuity in relation between Indra and the *nagas* especially with the *naga* Takshaka. This probably was symbolic of a symbiotic relationship with an Aryan deity Indra. There is an attempt at Brahmanization as individual *nagas* get assimilated either with Indra or Narayana through the myths and their relevance becomes distinctly evident after getting adapted with the higher tradition.

Garuda could be freed from bondage only with an act of Prowess^{vii}. Since he is desirous to be freed from the bondage he goes to get Amrita, a potion to become immortal, for the *nagas*. It is after this point, at the level of the myth, the snakes are deceived by Garuda and the gods who take away potion that was kept on the Kusa grass. The *nagas* lick the kusa grass where the potion was kept but their tongue splits into two. The myth takes a turn at this point as the snakes are henceforth identified as food for Garuda. There is a cultic rivalry that becomes distinctly evident. There is probably an attempt to show the superiority of Garuda, after being freed from the bondage, he gets assimilated with the brahmanical deities. We realise that the popularity of *naga* cults is strong and assimilative and cannot be erased from the minds either due to its fear or even otherwise. Attempts were made to disapprove of them but they are able to sustain despite all the odds. Each of the important *naga* has a way of responding to Kadru's curse. Sesha *naga* leaves the family of snakes considering them to be malevolent and attains ascetic way of life. Whereas Vasuki *naga* wants to save the community and make the *nagas* survive the curse.

Another myth that we attempt to decode which is also the basis of the text is about the *sarpasattra*, 'The snake sacrifice'. The epic tale is recounted during the intervals of this snake sacrifice conducted by Janamejaya to take revenge of his father Parikshit's demise who was bitten by *naga* Takshaka. In this revengeful act of annihilation all snakes were to perish as the rituals were being conducted by the *Ritwiks* the sacrificial priests, clad in black garments and their eyes red from contact with smoke. They poured clarified butter into the blazing fire, uttering appropriate mantras. Some kind of magical spells are evident to control *naga* worshippers who trembled with fear. This sacrifice was a kind of a magical spell to control and expel danger of *nagas*.^{viii} Hundreds of thousands and millions and tens of millions of *nagas* of different variety perished powerless, punished by their mother Kadru's curse and rivers full of snake-fat and snake-marrow flowed. *Naga* Takshaka took shelter with Indra who granted him refuge. To sustain the *naga* community or popular traditions other deities like Indra get assimilated with them. All the *naga* myths in this parva get woven around this legend of snake sacrifice.

The *sattra*² was a hallowed Vedic institution, and it is not altogether surprising that it features in the very first chapter of the epic Mahabharata, that describes itself as the fifth Veda. The descriptions of Janamejaya's *sarpasattra* is actually a very grim act. The Suta Ugrashravas heard Mahabharata stories at Janamejaya's sacrifice, recounted by Vyasa's brahmana pupil Vaisampayana amidst kshatriyas and brahmanas, and the slaughter of snakes. He later

² *Sattra* would continue for many years and tales were recounted during its intervals

repertoires them at a *sattra* by Shaunaka to the brahmanas in the forest who are probably his only audience. Though we assume that their wives too would also have heard the stories. Janamejaya's *sarpasattra* appears against the norm since it clearly has a non-brahmana the kshatriya ruler Janamejaya conducting the *sattra* which invariably was the right of the brahmana. In its final chapter, the Mahabharata locates Janamejaya's *sarpasattra* in Taxila- in (XVIII.5.29) that is where Janamejaya returns from and then goes to Hastinapura after the completion of rites. However, in the Adi parva the reference to this location cannot be traced. It can be assumed that Taxila was identified with *naga* Takshaka if we consider the hymn in the final chapter where the sacrifice took place. Do we come across power tensions between brahmanas and kshatriyas and the popular beliefs being made the main issue of the contestations?

We do come across power tensions between brahmanas and popular beliefs which becomes the main issue of the contestations in this myth. Indeed, the Mbh's *sarpasattra* is linked to a vast network of material, both Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic, which is concerned with warding off or curing snakebite. The annihilation and contestation of *naga* community reflects power tensions. The *naga* cult is popular and it is being crushed both by the brahmanas and the kshatriyas. In the text the brahmanas who are upper caste (hegemonic) they become the saviors of the *naga* cult. As a result the myth of this cult gets woven with that of the brahmanas. They even share identical names for eg. Jaratkaru an ascetic and Jaratkaru a female snake are parents to Astika. (a brahmana saviour of *nagas*). In this brahmanical text there is an attempt to give voices to the *nagas* who are revealing their distinct visibility.

The legend of *sarpasattra* goes back to tussle between Parikshit (Pandava descendent) who was cursed and died of Takshaka's sting, and snake Takshaka who had bitten the king to death. There are other references of animosity between Takshaka and the Pandavas in the Adi Parva through the legend of burning of Khandavaprastha where many of these semi divine beings get killed but some gain to survive at the level of myth. C. Minkowsky points out that the location of the *sarpasattra* in Baudhyana Srautasutra is at Khandavaprastha where the priests were Janamejaya and Takshaka were conducting *sattra* for the benefit of snakes.^{ix} The Vedic sacrifice was held to confer immortality on its performers whereas it turned into a revengeful rite in the Adi Parva that killed thousands of snakes. In the Adi Parva, it is Krishna Vasudeva and Arjuna³ who burn down the Khandava forest and mercilessly massacred its inhabitants, including the *naga* worshippers.^x There is change in the site of the sacrifice from Khandavaprastha in the Baudhyana Srautasutra (Vedic literature) to Takshila in the Mbh. though Khandavaprastha still remains a place where the semi divine are burnt by Agni. Takshaka manages to escape this since he is at Kurukshetra. Indra protects some other *nagas* by not letting Agni kill them in the forest fire.

During Janamejaya snake sacrifice Takshaka was petrified and hid himself in the upper garment of Indra thus becoming invisible. Brahmanas fearing that Takshaka may be saved by Indra and Indra who fearing his own demise returned to his abode leaving the *naga* hanging in mid air. Through this myth there is an attempt to break the ties of *nagas* with Indra at the level of the myth who otherwise shared a very strong bond. *Naga* Takshaka, who was thrown off Indra's hands, remained stranded in the mid air and was not sucked by the fire as the other snakes were. His survival actually perturbed all present at the gathering. It was probably the rites of those wise brahmanas were not potent enough to make Takshaka fall into the fire. It was already predicted that the Janamejaya snake sacrifice will not be completed, and that a brahmana will be the cause of its disruption. The *naga* traditions are made to survive at the hands of a brahmana named Astika. It was Astika who came to the rescue of *nagas* as he halted the sacrifice and soon the others, who wanted the sacrifice to conclude, joined him. To this the king Janamejaya willingly accepted and stopped the agonistic act. The brahmanical control becomes evident to which a kshatriya king also willingly surrenders. At the end of the sacrifice the king gave away wealth despite the sacrifice not being completed. It can be ridiculed that all wanted the *naga* cult to survive. The sacrifice here is the basis of the text, a gathering when myths were carved, where animals are sacrificed with immense flow of blood and meat happened. This myth is a good example of *nagas* who probably were tribals or living at the margins, or a community of snake worshippers survived and conquered death.

In the myth of Astika, a brahmana who eradicated the danger of his matriarchal kin (*nagas*) who were on the verge of getting extinct. In this legend he halted the sacrifice and the *naga* worshippers conquered death. He asked a price in form of a boon i.e. that all brahmanas and other men should read the sacred account of his this act, which will help ward off the fear of the snakes.^{xi} We can introspect that Astika taking support of *nagas* who are his maternal family to sustain his glory and also wanted that no one to fear from the venomous snakes. A symbiotic relationship can be identified between brahmanas and *naga* believers despite contestations.

Astika was born to seer Jaratkaru who promised his ancestors that he will marry a virgin of his name if she is offered to him by her relatives. It was snake Vasuki's sister who happened to be named Jaratkaru. Out of this wedlock Astika was born who then saved his maternal family from death. By fathering Astika Jaratkaru provided an heir for his

³ Character of Arjuna is showing two strands one in relation as kshatriya a tradition of annihilation and through his relationship with *nagi* Ulupin of assimilation in the Adiparva (1.206.33-34). So both elements of tension and assimilation are present and can be elucidated. In a later Parva Arjuna has a son of the name of *naga* Airavata with whom he shares cordial relationship.

ancestors and a saviour to the snakes. Some kind of cultic activity is evident as a marriage between female snake and brahmana at the level of the myth takes place. In the Astika parva as deliberated it was to neutralise Kadru's curse that the chief of the snakes married his sister to seer Jaratkaru. Vasuki had learnt from the snake Elapatra that it was Brahma who had endorsed Kadru's curse, for that god felt that there were too many evil snakes and that Janamejaya would hold a snake sacrifice. However, Brahma had also prophesied that Astika, the son of the Jaratkaru and a female of the same name, would save the snakes from annihilation. So the snakes are being cursed to death and also made to survive. Here Brahma is neutralising the curse and also endorsing Bhargava control through the snake mother curse. In this myth of Astika, suta Ugrasravas built the story to the point where Vasuki prepared to introduce his sister to the male Jaratkaru as his only possible wife. Astika relieved the *nagas*, viz., his brothers and maternal uncles and other snakes to be killed by Agni. Janamejaya fails to complete his *sattra* but what is important is the sacrifice gives way to telling the tales of the *naga* tradition. The kshatriyas falter and the brahmanas take charge of protecting *nagas*. Astika asks for a boon, says anyone who recites his tale will never be in danger from snakes. So, recounting the story of the *sarpasattra*, in fact, becomes a way of doing what Parikshit and Janamejaya could not do: it guards those who recite it, or listen to it, from death by snakebite and can ward off fear of snakes. The end of The Book of Astika also includes spells to guard against danger from snakes (1.53.22-23).

It was *naga* Vasuki who was desirous to save his own clan from extinction due to his mother Kadru's curse that he agrees to this wedlock of the Jaratkaru to whom Astika the saviour is born. This again is symbolic of a process of brahmanization of popular beliefs. It is important to understand why *naga* cult is so important and is continuously woven in the myths of the Bhargavas. The brahmanas are using such narratives to assimilate popular beliefs and let the popular cults survive. Two examples emerge one of female snake Jaratkaru concerned for good of her relatives. On the other hand Kadru the mother of the snakes who is made to curse her sons to be burnt by Agni the fire during Janamejaya snake sacrifice. The female voices are evident both in positive and negative way. It was understood that the curse by mother Kadru was not easy to have a remedy as *nagas* were to be burnt but they were saved.

In another myth pertaining to Uttanka a brahmana who had informed Janamejaya that the snake *nagaraja* Takshaka a thief^{xii} had bitten and killed his father, Parikshit. Uttanka convinced the king to burn the snake at a sacrifice in order to avenge the death of his father. The Uttanka - Janamejaya encounter actually precipitates the telling of Vyasa's 'entire thought' of the narrative or recounting of the tale by Vaisampayana at Janamejaya's Sarpasattra. Uttanka had himself encountered Takshaka, who disguised as beggar had stolen earrings. As a result Uttanka entered Netherlands with the help of Indra's thunder bolt and was able to retrieve the earrings. There is deliberate weaving of the myths describing the residence and beauty of *nagas* in the Netherlands. Amrita (potion) was available in the form of cow dung. We get evidence of animal symbolism through the description of the place of *naga* residence that is the Netherlands which was magnificent as well as full of life. The myths through Dhata and Vidhata symbolise life in Patalloka. Uttanka is all praise of the *nagas* to retrieve his earrings. In the Netherlands where Takshaka entered, Purandara i.e. Indra was already there who burnt the place for Takshaka to come out to return the earrings. Stories are woven to show conflict between Takshaka and Indra despite their accepted friendship in the text.

There is reference to various from the *naga* community who were able to evolve and survive at their own level. Many were desirous of being the *nagaraja* or the overlords. When snake Vasuki heard about his mother's curse, he sought a way of saving his kind from extinction and consulted his brothers to look for a solution. Whereas Sessa *naga* moved out of the community and assimilated with deities as Vishnu. Agni has been identified and used by gods for the killing of the *nagas* either through the snake sacrifice or forest burning. However Vasuki feels that it is gods who force Agni to kill snakes against its wishes. The voice of Vasuki which reveals some cultic assimilations with Agni who otherwise is identified a constant enemy. *Naga* community are identified as venomous, malevolent in the literature and to be cursed and killed probably because they were feared. A thread can be taken through all the myths in the Adi Parva that leads to annihilation of the snakes but there emerge means through which they survive and escape the dreadful calamity either through assimilation or with help and wish of a brahmana.

5. Popular traditions as part of discourse

Scholars like V.S. Sukthankar have drawn attention to Ruru a brahmana is being discouraged from killing living creatures. He is told that ahimsa and forbearance are the dharma of a brahmana. Wielding the staff and violence do not become of brahmanas as they are associated with kshatriyas. It was a kshatriya Janamejaya who slaughtered snakes by holding a *sarpasattra*. A brahmana - Astika - rescued the frightened snakes. Alf Hiltebeitel went on to develop both Dumézil and Biardeu's approaches in his early works on the Mahabharata, arguing for the equal importance of myth and ritual to show how characters are structured in the Mahabharata narrative

Nagas in mythical creation and cultic interactions

From the myths it becomes evident that *naga* worshippers were diversely visible in the mythical creation. The *nagas* are said to be gifted with great energy and incapable of being easily overcome. Parikshit's anecdote and the snake-session of Janamejaya have been described giving *naga* material in the Astika-Parva. The names of many serpents

have appeared in chapter 31 and again in chapter 52 of the text. The classified nomenclature of several names originating in the clans of these principal serpents are Seshanaga, Vasuki, Takshaka, Airavata, Kauravyas, Dhritarashtra and Srutasena. All residing in different places and addressed either as kings or princes and many were with multiple heads. There is also mention of snakes of Dundubha variety who would not bite and so should not be killed. Some words were put up in his mouth that a brahmana was never to kill any one.

There is reference of many *Nagas* including Sesha who amongst them practised hard ascetic penances^{xiii}. Evidently living upon air and rigidly observing his vows and moving to diverse tirthas. The myth is good example of acculturation and assimilation of Sesha with Brahma and Garuda. He is given a boon to hold earth on his back with help of son of Vinata. The voices assimilate the *nagas* with many deities. The *naga* cult was so infused with life that it survived intrusions of other religious beliefs. It is their popularity that sustained their existence as popular beliefs and practices representing the aspirations and ideas of the people at large. This cultic deity had parallel relations with other popular beliefs. Earth is abode of the *nagas* and is referred to as their mother (Sarparagini) whom Sesha was made to hold. They are considered as rightful owners of the depositories of the hidden wealth in the earth or protectors of wealth is the attribute added to the *naga* cult. It is these symbols that also enhance mythical traditions.

The myths through Dhata and Vidhata symbolise life in Netherlands including mention of seasons.^{xiv} It is indicative of an agrarian economy where *naga* worshippers can be related to. Uttanka who followed Takshaka in the *nagaloka* survived because he had eaten dung of the Bull (an epithet also used for naga Airavata). The myths weave various symbols with which we identify these popular beliefs. Takshaka is an enigmatic *naga* and survives all odds. He is friend to Indra across the myths who invariably saves him. Is it because of Indra that brahmanas choose him often in the myths and he is made to survive death. Is Taxila named after him where probably the sacrifice was conducted? He is powerful and is not really affected by the curse despite being the main target. He even bribes Kasayap a physician at the proper time speedily entered the city of Hastinapura to kill Parikshit who was of Pandava lineage. Takshaka appears to be symbolic of contestations between brahmanas and kshatriyas. The cultic interactions between Indra and *nagas* reflect some implicit relationship. Kadru mother of *nagas* is referred to as worshipping Indra for pouring rains to protect them from heat as they are moving from one place to another. *Naga* worshippers related to water and trees, their venom and amrita have myths woven around as venom is also an antidote. The conflict between *naga* traditions and Garuda worshippers is some kind of cultic altercations with Garuda and Agni and Indra and *nagas* together reflecting some interactions between cults in these myths.

Naga beliefs and some Intracultic tensions

Intra cultic rivalries and tensions in the *nagas* are evident. Takshaka residing at Kurukshetra and also in Khandava forest at banks of Ikshumati. Srutsena resided at holy place Mahadyumna. Ganges is also referred to as residing place of *nagas*. To obtain lordship of *nagas* Srutsena propitiates Surya. Some of the *nagas* like Airavata wearing earrings and is regarded as beautiful especially by a brahmana Uttanka. Each of the *nagas* are desirous of lordship as some are addressed as *nagaraja* or king so some kind of cultic tensions within cannot be ruled out. Sesha felt that his uterine brothers were all wicked and jealous and thus he showed kindness for Vinata and her sons. Sesha is referred to as mentioned to casting off his skin (also symbolic of immortality), to avoid companionship with them, even in another state of life. Airavata is also name for celestial elephant a vehicle of Indra. Airavata is also an epithet for bull that Indra mounted in the Netherlands. Even Uttanka glorified the serpents in the myths especially Airavata who is addressed as king. As a repercussion of the curse Sesha *naga* left his mother and indulged in ascetic penances. He moved to the tirtha which is symbolic of movement of the *naga* cult in terms of space. He holds unsteady earth on his back which symbolises some natural calamity that a myth gets woven. Sesha is given epithets as Bhagvana and Dharmadeva. Such connotations infused with the popular beliefs can be identified as cultic assimilation. He is also getting linked to Baldevji ansa of Krishna. Garuda took position of flagstaff of Indra and also helped Sesha to bear the earth. There is also reference of *naga* Vasuki being used as a cord for churning of ocean. Sesha during churning was on the side of the Narayana. The agglomeration of myths lead us towards *sarpasattra* a session of magical spells and an agonistic act. Such beliefs are propitiated, controlled, killed but they continue to survive.

6. Conclusion:

The above discussion throws light on the layered tradition of the myths. There is assimilation and contestation as well a power hierarchy. The interaction at different levels is evident between *naga* worshippers, brahmanas and kshatriyas. While kshatriyas indulge in annihilation of *naga* community the brahmanas rescue their tradition and *naga* worshippers. In the myth of Takshaka, Indra represented Aryan deity where *naga* tradition was also very relevant. The myth shows survival tactics of the *naga* worshippers. Taxila appears to be center of *naga* beliefs. The assimilative process is tension ridden and fluctuating power equations can be deliberated. It is by controlling popular characters that the elite sustain in mythical ideology. Study of myths shows power relations, assimilation through brahmanization which was not always peaceful process but it did become evident through the *naga* cult. In ancient India, there was a lot of propitiation of snake-worship. In many places snake cults were built, especially near reservoirs. Myths have a hidden

kernel of truth in them and *naga* tradition are part of the mythical creation. To explore the identity of this popular cult we did put some myths under enquiry. This cult had parallel relations with many other popular beliefs. The epic was narrated at the *sarpasattra* leads us to legend of *nagaraj* Takshaka who stole earrings and hid in his abode Pataloka. Earth is referred to their mother of the *naga* community in *Adi Parva* (*Sarparagini*). They are considered at rightful owners of the depositories of the hidden wealth in the earth or protectors of wealth is the attribute added to the *nagas* just as they brush shoulders with other semi divine beings like *yakshas*. Uttanka who followed Takshaka in the Netherland survived because he had eaten dung of the Bull. The myths weave various symbols with which we identify these popular beliefs that have survived through the time.

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ⁱ Agrawala, V. S. (1970). *Ancient Indian Folk Cults* pp.70-72

ⁱⁱ R.N.Misra *Yaksha Cult and iconography* 1981p.145

ⁱⁱⁱ Blackburn, S. H. (1985). Death and deification: Folk cults in Hinduism. *History of religions*, 24(3), pp. 255-274.

^{iv} *The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism*

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^v All references to the Mbh. verses unless specified, otherwise are from the critical edition of the *Adi Parva*

^{vi} *Ibid* I.14.17-18

^{vii} *Ibid* 1.23.11

^{viii} M.Winternitz, 'The serpent sacrifice as mentioned in Mahabharata, in N.B. Utgikar (trans.), journal of Bombay branch of Royal Asiatic society, JBRAS, 1926 P.35

^{ix} Minkowski, "Snakes, Sattras and the Mahabharata," pp. 386-90.

^x *Ibid* 1.216.6

^{xi} Mbh. 1.51.23

^{xii} *Ibid* 1.3.130-137

^{xiii} *Ibid* 1.36.17

^{xiii} *Ibid* 1.3.172-173