

MANASA

Manasa is the Snake Goddess whose name derives from the Sanskrit root *manas*, meaning of the mind. Her names include Padmavati, in connection with the lotus leaf born goddess Laksmi and Visahari in *vasahari vidya* or “the science of poison removal”, as she is believed to be the curer of snake bites (William 15,16). The story of her existence begins when Siva slips away from his wife Durga to meditate by the banks of the Kalidaha pool. There, he is stimulated by the erotic setting, and thinking of his beautiful wife Durga, spills his semen. It runs down the stalk of a lotus leaf to the underworld and there Manasa is born from it. Vasuki, king of the *nagas* (serpents) grants her reign over all snakes. Thus she is the *Nagesvari* or Queen of the Snakes. Certain scholars suggest that the Nagas were not originally snakes, but in ancient Indian art are depicted as people with cobra hoods who were worshipped as gods and demigods by the ‘solar race’ peoples and in many instances some civilizations revered the serpent and the sun as closely connected. The Nagas were people who claimed descent from the Sun and used the hooded serpents (cobras) as their totem (Khumar Maity 15 and 25).

Snake worship or ophiolatry is an ancient cult among Indians and other races of the world. It is believed that the fear of the snake and the wonder of it brought about its worship all over the world to become a universally revered divinity (Khumar Maity 11). Serpent worship and its cult following in India may have been contributed to by the Proto Dravidians with the worship going as far back as the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley. However, even though historical evidence is lacking in its origins, snakes can still be seen on the proto-ithyphallic Siva seal (Khumar Maity 12, 13). Snake worship is closely tied with the god Siva and Manasa being the daughter of Siva is believed by most scholars to be the reason for her snake worship (Khumar Maity 24). It is also believed that snake worship went hand in hand with those civilizations that

worshipped the sun. It is an ancient folklore belief that should anyone bring harm to a snake he/she will fall to leprosy and sterility (Khumar Maity 13). Snake worship and the Nagas are also referenced in Indian literature and religious books, such as the Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, the Puranas and the Jatakas (Khumar Maity 14).

In the mythic account Manasa returns, ascending the lotus leaf from which she descended and presents herself in front of her father Siva, urging him to take her home with him to Mount Kailasa. Reluctantly, he agrees and hides her in a flower basket for he fears what his wife Durga will think. Before he can explain her existence, Durga finds her in the basket and mistaking her for one of her husband's temptresses beats her and blinds her in the left eye. This is how she became known as 'the one eyed goddess' (William 42). Her left eye is known as her "evil eye" or *bisadrsti*. It is her poisonous eye from which she can kill with one glance as she releases all her malignant powers with it. Her right eye is her nectar eye or *amrtanayan* in which she can restore life to whomever she has killed with her left eye. It is believe in India that those people who are blind in one eye possess the evil eye and are seen as an ill-omens (William 17). In classical Indian mythology as well as modern folklore the evil eye or 'poison eye' is a characteristic of most snakes. Manasa is equated with Kadru, the mother of the serpents, who is also one eyed (William 18).

Manasa appears in many forms. One is her true self which is envious, malicious and easily angered where she kills with no remorse and is compared to resemble the *cenga* fish, a snake-headed fish that is so revolting it is deemed unfit to eat. Her true form is compared to a one-eyed, fish-faced limping old hag (a witch) (William 21). Another form is the conventional, beautiful and voluptuous goddess with four arms and yellow tinted skin. Her body is decorated only with snakes, much like her father Siva. Her *vahana* (vehicle) is either the swan or the snake.

The *Sij* plant; of the cactus family, is sacred to Manasa as it has abilities to cure poisons, but on most occasions is not used for worship (William 21, 22). She is usually depicted in two different forms of iconography, one being her four-arm depiction and the other, a two armed one. In her four armed image she is surrounded by a canopy of seven snake hoods and in her upper right and left hands she holds a snake and a pot, her lower hands are holding a rosary and a manuscript. Some other depictions of her four-armed image include one with one of her hands in the 'granting a wish posture' (*varada mudra*). Her two-arm depiction is of her seated on a lotus flower, under the canopy of seven snakes, a lotus bud in her right hand in the *varada* pose and a snake in her left hand (Khumar Maity 207-209). Her most common *dhyana*, which gives a description of her characteristic features and recited in Manasa worship is, "I adore the goddess, the mother of snakes, whose face is like the moon, who is graceful in appearance, the bountiful, who rides on a swan, the noble one, who wears a red garment, who always gives boons of all kinds, who has smiling face, who is adorned with gold, gems and various other beautiful jewels (obtained) from snakes, who is accompanied by eight snakes, who has prominent breasts, who is a *yogini* and who can take any form at will" (Khumar Maity 212). However, despite Manasa's many forms it does not appear in the Sastra literature that any sort of image worship takes place, but more over worship in the form of earthen images does take place as well as placing a red colored stone under a *sij* tree (Khumar Maity 221 and 265).

Manasa is worshipped during the rainy season (June-August), as the rain and floods force the snakes out of their lairs and the chance of getting bit is significantly higher. During this time it is a communal celebration where some villagers will gather clay pots, garlands, conch-shells, iron bangles, red-bordered saris, incense and food offerings like mangos, melons, bananas and sweets. One or more male goats are also sacrificed. The goddess is represented,

herself, by a sacred pot (*Manasar-bari*), filled with water. This represents her fertility and makes reference to the fertility of the snake. As it is believed the goddess also has inherent power over fertility she is worshipped by women who wish to become mothers (Khumar Maity 269). She is also, in some places known as a curer of diseases, the rain-giver as she is worshipped during the rainy season and since snakes are believed to be the guardians of treasure, Manasa is also seen as a wealth giver (Khumar Maity 273). Manasa is worshipped by all classes and in many different places which include near a *sij* tree or bush, in the home or in private shrines and in some villages, by the bank of a river (Khumar Maity 266).

Her *puja* (worship), by the *Bauris* caste, who are low class earthen workers, perform the ceremony during the rainy season outdoors on an earthen altar. Sticks of bamboo are placed in each corner of the altar and tied together with a cotton thread. The altar is marked with vermilion (red) as is the sacred pot where a mango twig is placed upon it. Among other offerings that are placed on the altar, such as milk, plantain, incense, sandal, lighted lamps, rice (Khumar Maity 269), a *sij* twig is also placed on the altar, wrapped in red cloth. Both the *sij* plant and the pot are independent symbols of Manasa (Khumar Maity 265). After the sacrifice of the goat, or goats in some cases, the performer of the ritual, (any of the villagers can perform the ceremony) places the blood of the goat in another pot and offers it to the goddess asking for protection and wellness. Many other personal sacrifices can be made at this time as well (William 23).

Other forms of worship on a higher class scale include a complex formal rite performed by Brahman priests who rely on manuals and utilize specific prayers, breathing techniques (*pranayam*) and hand movements (*mudra*) to be followed exactly when performing the worship. A priest consults manuscripts for each step of the *puja*: the lifting of a flower, the dabbing of a spot of vermilion on the image, the formalized *mudras* and *mantras* all done while Sanskrit

formulae is recited in the background. The use of Sanskrit is the major difference between the high class Brahmin worship and that of the low class *Bauris* village worship (William 24).

Another type is the household worship which takes place in Aug-Sept, known as *acanthine* or non-cooking. During this time it is forbidden to light the stove, and rice is cooked the day before and left out in uncovered pots. It is believed by the householders that the goddess will keep the food safe from contamination so it will be safe to eat the next day. The women of the household make earthen images of the goddess called *alpana* with the rice paste upon the oven and a *sij* plant is placed over the oven's burners. The cold rice is eaten along with cold vegetables after it has been put in cold water, this is called *panta bhat* (William 23, 24) and then tea is heated on a small fire and drunk to end the day and ceremony.

The *Jhanpan* is an annually held festival where snake charmers gather in the streets and exhibit numerous tricks with their snakes. The charmers risk their lives as it is believed that they are inspired by the goddess, otherwise known as possession or *bhar*. The snake charmers carry their snakes in small wicker baskets called *jhanpis* and will often allow the snakes to bite their arms and curl around their neck as part of the spectacle (Khumar Maity 309).

Some scholars believe that the Manasa cult and worship are dying out and will disappear within a century, as enthusiasm for her worship is low and confined to the uneducated small villages as modern medicine removes Manasa's utility from the more modern villages and worshippers (Khumar Maity 320-321).

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Written by Kelsey Jespersion (Spring 2006), who is solely responsible for its content.