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Sacred Serpents And Divine Feminine: Unveiling The Religiosity Of Devi Manasa

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Abstract:

Worship of serpents in India is an ancient tradition deeply connected to cultural, spiritual, and ecological beliefs. In this context, serpents, or *nagas*, represent fertility, renewal, and the *Duality* of life and death (Jung). The dualistic nature of serpent worship reveals the complicated and often conflicting roles of serpents in different cultures and mythologies, embodying both positive and negative elements of existence. On the positive side, serpents are linked to healing and renewal, as exemplified by the medical symbol of the caduceus, and they symbolize wisdom and fertility in traditions like Hinduism, where they are seen as protective figures (Busenbark). On the other hand, they can also signify deceit and temptation, particularly in Judeo-Christian stories where the serpent tempts Eve and represents chaos and danger, as illustrated in Norse mythology with the prophesized destructive Midgard Serpent.

Key Words: Worship of Serpents, Divine Femininity, Religiosity of Devi Manasa

In Hindu Puranic literature, serpents, or *nagas*, embody a dualism that reflects their protective and dangerous qualities (Elena). Hence, *nagas* are admired as guardians of treasures and cosmic order, as seen in the Vishnu Purana and the symbolic figure of Ananta, who represents renewal and infinity. They also relate closely to deities, participating in divine events like the churning of the ocean (Gokhale and Malashri). Conversely, serpents can symbolize chaos and danger; the tale of Kaliya demonstrates their potential for malice, as Krishna subdues him to restore balance (Bassuk & Bassuk). Additionally, serpents serve as symbols of temptation and moral challenges. Through this complexity, serpent worship in Hinduism illustrates the intricate relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine, signifying the reconciliation of creation and destruction in the natural world (Ramos Castillo et al.). These practices not only honor a rich cultural heritage but foster ecological awareness by promoting respect for serpents as guardians of biodiversity and local ecosystems. Festivals dedicated to Devi Manasa, the Hindu goddess of snakes, further highlight this interconnection, especially in West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Her worship during Naga Panchami involves a blend of rituals, storytelling, and communal bonding, as devotees seek her blessings for health, fertility, and protection, thereby reinforcing cultural identity and community resilience (Parajuli and Paudel). Sacred serpents embody a rich tapestry of dualities—creation and destruction, life and death, healing and danger—across various cultures.

In Hinduism, the Naga serpent symbolizes water, fertility, and protection, acting as a guardian of sacred spaces while simultaneously conveying knowledge and danger, resonating with modern spiritual practices that embrace feminine energies and challenging patriarchal norms. Mesoamerican civilizations viewed serpents as celestial entities, with Quetzalcoatl exemplifying cosmic significance, while ancient Egypt's Uraeus cobra represented sovereignty and divine authority (Frederick). The feminine aspects of worship and healing play

significant roles in spiritual practices, promoting compassion and interconnectedness while highlighting women's essential contributions to communal identity and well-being (Young and Koopsen). Thus, Feminine aspects of worship and healing are deeply woven into the fabric of many spiritual practices, fostering an environment where compassion, nurturing, and interconnectedness thrive. These elements often manifest through rituals that emphasize intuition, emotional expression, and community care, wherein women are frequently at the forefront, guiding collective experiences that enhance spiritual and emotional well-being. From ancient goddess worship to modern-day circles of shared vulnerability, women's roles in these spaces not only reinforce the importance of compassion but also challenge and redefine traditional notions of authority and leadership within spiritual communities (Maxey). The act of healing, often associated with feminine energy, embraces holistic approaches that prioritize relationships and interconnectedness over individualism, highlighting the inherent value of empathy in community life. Furthermore, by recognizing women's contributions, whether as healers, caregivers, or spiritual leaders, these practices forge a shared identity and collective resilience that strengthens communal bonds. This embodiment of feminine spirituality serves as a crucial reminder of the vital role women play in nurturing societal well-being, suggesting that the qualities attributed to the feminine—such as receptivity, cooperation, and emotional intelligence—are indispensable in fostering harmonious and inclusive communities (Martinez). Thus, acknowledging the feminine aspects of worship and healing not only transforms spiritual practices but also elevates women's essential contributions, ensuring that their insights and experiences are integral to the collective identity and health of the community. Historically, women have been custodians of rituals that celebrate life cycles, often prioritizing relational dynamics over hierarchical structures to foster inclusive participation (Collins; Swargiary). Such a shift not only empowers women to reclaim their spiritual authority but also enriches community healing through storytelling, art, and collective rituals that uphold their narratives. Despite facing challenges of marginalization, the recognition and celebration of these feminine dimensions facilitate a reexamination of spirituality that incorporates empathy and collaboration. Contemporary interpretations of serpent worship and goddess veneration invite individuals to connect with themes of femininity and empowerment, urging a reclamation of the divine feminine rooted in ancient wisdom. This revitalization aligns with modern discourse surrounding women's rights and environmental stewardship, fostering inclusive spaces for dialogue about gender and spirituality, ultimately highlighting the enduring relevance of these cultural symbols in navigating identity, empowerment, and ecological consciousness today (Swargiary).

Ophiolatry, which implies reverence for femininity, can be viewed through two contrasting lenses: a feminine perspective that celebrates the strength, resilience, and individuality of women, fostering empowerment and community solidarity, versus a patriarchal perspective that idealizes and objectifies women within narrow definitions of femininity, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms and maintaining power dynamics. While the worship of feminine ideals can serve as a source of empowerment, it is crucial to navigate these expressions thoughtfully to avoid perpetuating restrictive narratives that limit women's roles in society. Ultimately, discussions about ophiolatry highlight the complexities of gender identity and the need for a nuanced understanding that promotes genuine empowerment while challenging patriarchal structures (Collins). The concept of the Divine Feminine emphasizes nurturing, intuition, and creativity, contrasting with masculine traits of authority and reason, thus encouraging a balanced spirituality that honors gender perspective. Goddesses like Lakshmi, Durga, and Manasa illustrate these qualities (Wood). Manasa, the goddess of mental health in eastern India, symbolizes resilience and emotional stability. Her narrative in the Padma Purana reflects her struggle for recognition among deities and her guardianship over snakes, celebrated in festivals like Nag Panchami, which underscore the intertwining of femininity, wellness, and cultural significance in contemporary spirituality and community shaping (De).

Mythology and spirituality are crucial to understanding humanity's quest for meaning, identity, and connection to the mystic. The symbolism of serpents across various cultures reflects a complex interplay of creation, transformation, and duality, often embodying profoundly layered meanings. In many ancient civilizations, snakes were revered as symbols of fertility and renewal, highlighted by figures like the Egyptian goddess Wadjet and the Ouroboros, which represent eternal life. Conversely, in Judeo-Christian contexts, serpents evoke notions of temptation and evil, as illustrated in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Meanwhile, Hindu mythology offers a positive perspective with Nagas, serpent-like beings that symbolize protection and fertility. This multifaceted nature extends to mythology and folklore where serpents often represent knowledge

and deception, serving as guardians or symbols of danger, as seen in figures like Ananta-Sheshsha and Kundalini in Hinduism (De).

This rich tapestry reveals how serpents highlight humanity's intricate relationship with nature, mythology, and the existential cycles of life and death. Additionally, the concept of the Divine Feminine intertwines seamlessly with serpent symbolism, celebrating feminine qualities of nurture, intuition, and healing across various traditions. The intersection of these divine figures and serpent symbolism emphasizes rebirth, healing, and the dual nature of creation and destruction (Collins). Myths serve as cultural blueprints, weaving universal themes—creation, life, death, and the hero's journey—that resonate across diverse backgrounds. Current research utilizes mythology to explore intersections among culture, psychology, and spirituality, suggesting that globalization fosters intercultural exchanges and reinterpretation of mythological concepts, which can inspire new spiritual practices and collective healing. The inclusion of feminist perspectives in mythological studies reveals dynamics of gender, power, and agency, particularly through the lens of the Divine Feminine, which confronts traditional patriarchal narratives. This article examines the complex relationship between the sacred serpent and the Divine Feminine via Goddess Manasa, exploring her narrative to reveal insights into strength, healing, and empowerment in contemporary society, ultimately enriching our understanding of human experience and promoting holistic personal and community growth.

Serpentine forms in Hindu iconography represent strength, protection, and fertility, as illustrated by the goddess Manasa, often depicted as a beautiful woman adorned with serpents. Her raised cobra embodies her role as a fierce guardian and her connection to the earth, while serpents signify her control over natural forces, reflecting themes of destruction and protection. Revered primarily in Bengal and Assam, Manasa's narratives explore devotion and rivalry, particularly her struggle for recognition against her sister Lakshmi and her unity with the serpent king Vasuki. Folklore emphasizes humility, as seen in the story of Chand Saudagar, and the festival of Nag Panchami celebrates her protective qualities. Manasa, an underappreciated figure in Hindu mythology, symbolizes the dualities of life and death and serves as a protective deity against snake bites while granting fertility blessings (Surinder). Her origins trace back to the 7th century CE, with texts like "*Manasa Vadhana*" detailing her role in promoting health among devotees. Artistic representations highlight her vibrant attire and dual identity as a protector and avenger, along with symbols of abundance. Manasa's symbolism encompasses fertility, healing, and the power over venomous creatures, portraying her as both nurturing and fierce. Celebrated as the serpent goddess, she fosters community harmony through rituals invoking her blessings, reinforcing her role as a mediator between the earthly and divine, ultimately inspiring resilience and compassion in her followers.

Goddess Manasa, the revered goddess in Hindu tradition, embodies both protection and nurture, and her association with the sacred serpent plays an important role in revealing these dual aspects (Maity). As the snake goddess, Manasa is closely associated with these animals, often depicted adorned with serpents and associated with their spiritual significance. The serpents symbolize a powerful force in nature and serve as guardians of the earth, representing transformation, healing, and wisdom. In many South Asian cultures, snakes hold a sacred status, revered for their ability to navigate both earthly and spiritual realms. They are seen as mediators between the physical world and the divine. Goddess Manasa's relationship with the serpent allows her to embody their qualities of protection and renewal (Elgood). He is called upon for their powerful ability to ward off evil and bring blessings, as they are believed to have a protective aura that protects devotees from harm. In this case, snakes are seen as allies in the mission of protecting the followers of Goddess Manasa from physical and spiritual danger. Moreover, the upbringing aspect of Goddess Manasa is manifested through her connection to the reincarnation qualities of the serpent. As snakes shed their skins, a symbol of rebirth and transformation, Manasa offers its devotees a chance to renew and heal. This connection emphasizes her role in encouraging the growth and development of the family and community, as she nurtures not only the individual but also the collective spirit of her followers. The rituals and festivals dedicated to Goddess Manasa often include a reverence for her serpent manifestation, highlighting the bond inherent between the goddess and the serpent. Through these celebrations, devotees seek blessings for health, fertility, and protection using the protective qualities of the serpent along with the nurturing power of the goddess. Ultimately, the connection between the goddess Manasa and the sacred serpent symbolizes a deep spiritual connection that

incorporates protection, transformation, and healing — essential elements in the search for harmony and well-being in life (Bose).

The worship of Devi Manasa during early medieval India reflects a complex interplay between female spiritual reverence and patriarchal social structures. As a goddess associated with snakes, fertility, and protection, Manasa's veneration illustrated the duality of feminine power—encompassing both nurturing and destructive traits. Her rituals often involved community participation, allowing women to assert agency and foster social cohesion despite societal constraints. However, within a predominantly patriarchal context, her worship also faced appropriation, where narratives could position her as subordinate to male authority, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies. Consequently, the worship of Manasa serves as a nuanced site of both resistance to and navigation of patriarchal dynamics in early medieval society. Devi Manasa, the revered goddess of snakes and fertility in Hindu tradition, embodies a profound connection to nature and the sacredness of life. Recognized as a significant deity in various folklore, particularly in the eastern regions of India, Manasa is often celebrated for her nurturing attributes and her role as a protector against snake bites and ailments. The veneration of Manasa extends beyond mere rituals; it encompasses a rich tapestry of cultural narratives, artistic expressions, and community practices that reflect the deep-seated beliefs and values surrounding her worship. In rituals and worship, Devi Manasa serves as a focal point for a myriad of spiritual practices aimed at invoking her blessings for health, prosperity, and protection. Her festivals, notably the Manasa Puja, attract devotees who engage in elaborate ceremonies involving offerings, prayers, and traditional songs. These practices not only honor her but also reinforce the communal bonds among worshippers, as they gather to celebrate their faith and seek solace in her divine presence. The worship of Devi Manasa is characterized by an interplay of oral traditions, folk stories, and regional variations, emphasizing her dynamic nature as a goddess. While some may celebrate her through intricate rituals involving the placement of snake images and the recitation of specific mantras, others might engage in simpler, yet equally heartfelt, expressions of devotion. This diversity highlights the adaptability of her worship within the broader framework of Hindu spirituality, where personal and communal expressions of faith coexist harmoniously. As we explore the significance of Devi Manasa in rituals and worship, we shall delve into her mythological origins, the forms of devotion practiced by her devotees, and the sociocultural implications of her worship in contemporary society. The study of Devi Manasa reveals not only the spiritual dimensions of her veneration but also offers insights into the intricate relationships between mythology, nature, and community identity in the ever-evolving landscape of Hindu religious life.

Devi Manasa, the goddess of snakes in Hindu mythology, holds significant relevance in contemporary discussions around environmentalism and sustainability (Krishna). As a symbol of nature and biodiversity, she represents the vital interconnections within ecosystems, underscoring the importance of biodiversity for maintaining ecological balance. Her association with water bodies and fertility fosters a cultural reverence for the environment, encouraging the protection of these natural resources and promoting traditional ecological knowledge. Manasa embodies a dual relationship with nature—one that incorporates both fear and respect—inviting communities to appreciate wildlife while recognizing the dangers it might pose. This perspective resonates with the urgent need for habitat conservation and wildlife protection in the face of modern environmental challenges. Additionally, her portrayal as a female deity highlights women's empowerment, particularly their role as custodians of natural resources. In many societies, women lead efforts in sustainable management of agriculture and water, and invoking Devi Manasa reinforces the importance of gender equity in environmental movements, empowering female leadership in sustainability. Furthermore, the spiritual and ethical dimensions of her worship invoke respect for all living beings, advocating for responsible consumption and a commitment to sustainable living practices. This holistic view encourages individuals and communities to engage in actions that honor the natural world. The ceremonies and festivals dedicated to Manasa, which celebrate the elements of nature such as rivers, plants, and animals, can also be reimagined to promote modern sustainability initiatives, fostering community involvement and collective action toward environmental preservation. By emphasizing harmony with nature and the importance of maintaining ecological relationships, Devi Manasa's narrative can serve as a compelling metaphor for addressing modern crises like climate change. Her teachings inspire a reconnection with the environment that prioritizes preservation over-exploitation, urging societies to adopt restorative approaches to their relationship with nature.

In summary, Devi Manasa's significance in environmentalism and sustainability is multifaceted—she embodies the need for biodiversity, promotes the empowerment of women, and invites ethical stewardship of the Earth, making her a powerful figure for contemporary movements advocating for a more sustainable future. By embracing her cultural and spiritual resonance, communities can reinforce their commitment to preserving the environment and fostering a deeper respect for the interconnectedness of all life. The exploration of sacred serpents and the Divine Feminine, particularly through Goddess Manasa, underscores the interplay of spirituality, cultural narratives, and gender dynamics essential to understanding empowerment and ecological awareness today. Sacred serpents, revered in various cultures, symbolize dualities such as creation and destruction, representing life's cyclical nature. Goddess Manasa embodies fertility and healing, challenging patriarchal narratives and amplifying women's voices in spirituality. Her worship highlights the importance of feminine energies as protectors and nurturers, fostering community identity, especially during the Naga Panchami festival. The growing interest in the Divine Feminine calls for narratives that celebrate women's strengths and their connection to nature, promoting healing and ecological respect. Manasa's symbolism can inspire modern environmental movements by advocating for sustainability and ethical stewardship of the Earth. This recognition of sacred serpents and the Divine Feminine enhances our understanding of empowerment and communal healing, highlighting the contemporary relevance of these ancient traditions. Ultimately, further scholarship on figures like Devi Manasa can illuminate their significance in addressing modern challenges, intersecting with gender studies, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Engaging diverse perspectives will enrich our understanding and foster inclusivity while honoring the wisdom of the past for a more balanced future.

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