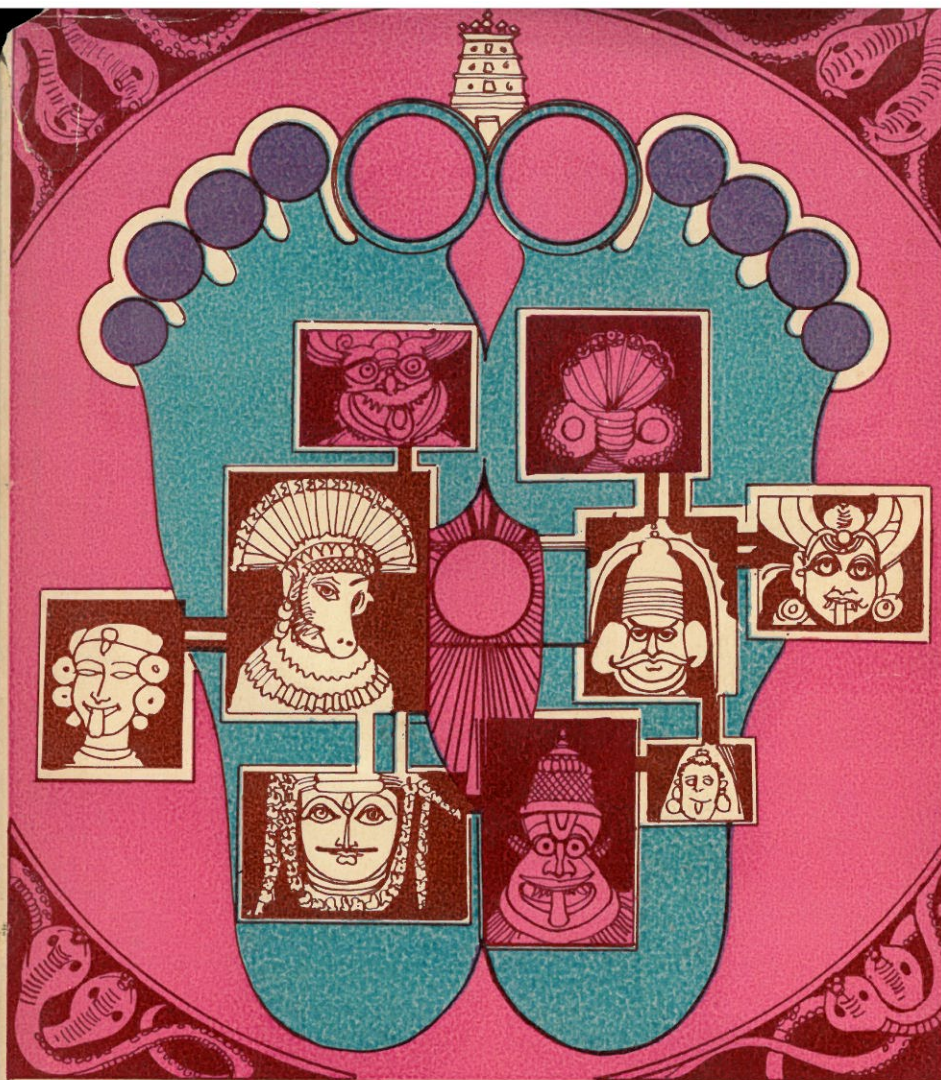




THE FOLK ORIGINS OF
Indian temples

VIDYALANKAR

PROF. S.K. RAMACHANDRA RAO

The Folk Origins of Indian Temples

Vidyalankara

Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao

Line Drawings by the Author



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To
Dharmathma
Dr. V. Vaidyasubramanya Iyer
with profound regards

P R E F A C E

Although the relevance of folk culture in Indian society has been recognized, the folk involvement in the temple tradition has not been sufficiently appreciated. An attempt has here been made to draw attention to the origin of Indian temples in folk beliefs and practices. It is hoped that the cultural continuity of the folk foundation and the sophisticated superstructure will become evident from this study.

The study also traces the source of the Hindu pantheon in the folk mentality. This provides an adequate background for my next book in the series, which deals with iconographic representations of divinities within the temple complex.

S. K. Ramachandra Rao

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CHAPTER I

THE FOLK CONTEXT

India is known as the land of temples. But the world knows only its great temples, the temples that are vast complexes of stylized structures, much of which, however, appears today irrelevant or unused. They are in fact excesses of human effort, designed more for monumental effect than for utility. They are shrines to be seen and admired rather than worshipped in. They were products of political fortunes, economic affluence and technical competence. Royal patronage and craft guilds encouraged a degree of sophistication that was not only beyond the comprehension of the lay folk but was obviously unrelated to their normal needs.

More numerous and more significant than these great temples are the mean shrines that one finds on the road-side or in remote villages. They articulate a more authentic urge and answer a more genuine need. They are not creations of artistic imagination or aristocratic fancy, but are spontaneous and natural.

They belong to small homogenous groups of uncritical people whose attachments are narrow but intense. These are the folk shrines ; and they reveal a remarkable continuity. They persist with an unusual vigour, and exhibit an unmistakable relevance.

To understand this apparent paradox, it is necessary to consider two aspects of Indian life : its character of being an ethnic and cultural mosaic, and its essentially rural slant. India presents a population that is a tangled web of racial admixture. The process of racial admixture began over seven thousand years ago and has since been a continuous one. It is thus that Indian culture has become a veritable museum of beliefs and practices, customs and codes of conduct, approaches and achievements.

In the field of religion, especially, the outsider is likely to despair at the wide variety of conceptions and aspirations, and at their more varied incarnation in shrines and rituals. Rural-urban distinction has always been fundamental in India, although the trend from rural to the urban, from folk to the sophisticated, is widely in evidence all over the country. The village is functionally a small group, more homogenous than otherwise, isolated by and large, and governed by direct person-to-person relation. Rural life is ruled by kinship ties and intimate interests and attachments.

The great temples that steal the show are charac-

teristically urban in their emphasis ; and each of them reflects a regional culture that can almost be described as unique. They are sophisticated institutions. Art, economy, industry, craft, social organization and political involvements have got mixed up here with purely religious feelings and sentiments. They reflect predominantly urban needs, regional orientations, and situational pressures.

They are creatures of time, and bear markedly the impact of the 'spirit' of the times. That is why they lose their relevance when the time passes. It is usual for them to get ruined, more by neglect than by vandalism. They thus succeed in becoming more of show-pieces than they were originally intended ! They exhibit the 'syndrome of decay'.

The folk shrines, on the other hand, continue as they have always been : simple, serene, unsophisticated and intensely human. These shrines do not lose their relevance, because their folk character does not weaken. All temples, great or small, have an essential appeal to the people in whose neighbourhood the temples are located. But sophistication can wedge a gulf between the structure and its function. Great and mighty temples may be historically significant, but they are devoid of the folk content because of sophistication : they cease to be meaningful to the people who live in its neighbourhood.

Sophistication has played its role at several stages of our religious evolution ; but there is a persistence of the most primitive of the assumptions and aspirations beneath the veneer of sophistication. The most primitive can survive the stresses of change only when it is also the most valid in the folk context. The most modern man can survive only because the most ancient instincts are alive in him. The solution to man's problems is always archaic.

The primitive is not to be confused with the 'backward', 'savage' or 'childish'. The primitive is not even pre-literate. It is not merely a condition that is antecedental to modifications and developments. It is the condition that is natural, original and authentic. It is, for this reason, simple and devoid of later accretions and reinforcements that derive from sophistication.

What is primitive may appear irrational and uncritical. It would be more proper to describe it as arational and acritical, for it is not a matter of deficiency but it relates to the folk temperament that is unsophisticated and unanalytical. The intellect is subordinated to faith, criticism to fervour, nationalism to intensity of attachment. The folk canvas is no doubt narrow, but it is deep. It encourages participation of all members in each of its proceedings. The sophisticated facet insists on greater or lesser de-

personalization, while the folk-primitive seeks the maximization of persons and actualization of individuals.

In many of our temples, it is easy to discern the continuum that obtains between the folk and the sophisticated. For in our religion, the primitive and the advanced co-exist remarkably peacefully. No insider will ever break his neck over this paradox. The sophisticated grows out of the folk, and it is not unnatural that the mother and her child are found together. Religion as it is isstylized, systematized and institutionalized. It is the expression of sophistication. The major religions of the world as we know them today are creatures of the intellect and functions of growth. They are developmental coefficients.

But are they not all derived from, and rooted in, the basic needs and urges enshrined in human constitution? In India, the folk element in religion is ubiquitous and persistent. It is natural, therefore, that the Indian temple has a folk undercurrent despite the sophisticated superstructure. When the superstructure is immense and overpowering, it is sophisticated, where as when the primitive is abundant and effective it is described as folk.

Sophistication projects differences and divisions, regional and temporal. It encourages the conscious processes of deliberate planning, rational understand-

ing, and careful rationalizations. It seeks to introduce coherence and harmony by accommodating changes in a welter of acceptances and rejections. Sophistication differentiates and attempts to integrate each differentiated unit.

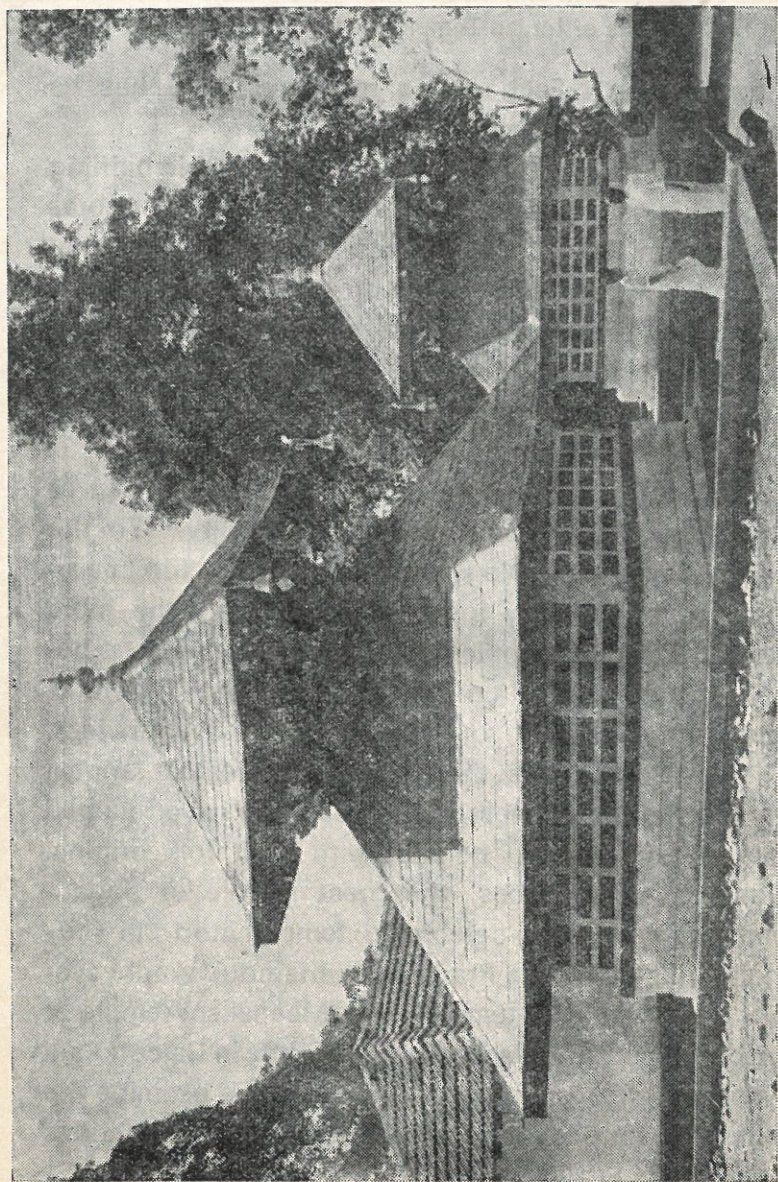
There is, never the less, a conscious master-plan which is sought to be actualized; individuals are moulded by conscious motives and are only loosely held together in a community or neighbourhood, also by conscious threads. The folk elements, on the other hand, are guided solely by unconscious processes. They touch the human depth, beyond the differentiations engineered by sophistication. And they invariably encounter the reality of human existence, which is one and undivided. The folk culture is what is common to all cultures, while sophistication isolates each culture and props up its separate existence.

Indian temples have their regional styles. Their structures and functions have changed in accordance with the needs of the times and with the prevailing ethos. The great temples in the far-removed regions of this sub-continent present a variety that is unmistakable. The great temple of Tanjore in Tamil Nadu and the great temple of Bhubanesvar in Orissa differ both in the way they look and in the manner in which

they function. Each region in the country has its own characteristic temple culture.

But it is easily seen that deep beneath this baffling variety is the common undercurrent of folk mores and ways. This is what unites and integrates what otherwise would be a "thing of shreds and patches." Indian temples can all be related with one another, and can become equally meaningful to people belonging to diverse ethnic and ethnic groups, because they are alike derived from the folk origin.

It is this folk origin of Indian temples that gives them the vitality, the appeal and validity. To the extent that the temple is removed from its folk moorings, it increasingly loses its relevance; the more sophisticated a temple is, the less authentic it becomes and is well on the way to ruin. The ruins may be magnificent, but they are ruins nevertheless. The Indian temples that have the greatest appeal among the Indian masses are those that have retained intact their intimate contact with their folk origins. Consider, as instances, the great temple of Jagannatha at Puri, the celebrated temple atop the Tirumalai hills in Andhra Pradesh, the famous Vindhyavasini and Kamakhya temples, the Meenakshi temple at Madhurai in Tamil Nadu, the Kali temple in Calcutta, and Vaishnavi-devi shrine in Kashmir. If we examine the cults that are peculiarly associated with these shrines



The *bhuta* shrines on the hill top in Dharmasthala in South Kanara

and the seemingly strange practices that are prevalent in them, we would not fail to discover folk elements that are not only dominant but universal. The folk elements are dominant because they concern the basic human urges, and they are universal because of the same reason.

The various temples in India that continue to be popular (not among the tourists but among the devotees) are like so many peaks on a mountain range. They are distinct inasmuch as they stand out separately, apart from each other in space and time ; but their separate existences are made possible by the continuous folk mass that spreads uniformly beneath them. This folk mass comprehends not only the unsophisticated, unanalytical bulk of our population (strewn over different geographical areas, belonging to several linguistic zones, accommodated in diverse caste groups and exhibiting different degrees of urbanization) but the so-called tribals also.

The tribal population in India today has been estimated to be about forty million ; it is large, relative to Indian population. It is also diverse, about four hundred tribes inhabiting different regions and speaking different languages. It is important to note that tribals are not 'outsiders' to the general mass of our unsophisticated, unanalytical population.

They represent an earlier phase of our life that has

somehow survived till our own day. We were all tribals once upon a time, but we managed to become increasingly sophisticated and leave behind our tribal stage. But some of our customs and practices today, both at home and in the community, distinctly reveal our tribal background ! Especially our religious assumptions and aspirations, however concealed by layers of modernity, hearken to the tribal moorings. In many of the great temples (such as the Jagannatha temple at Puri, Vindhyavasini temple, Kamakhya temple, and the Tirumalai temple) we find even today survivals of customs and practices which are clearly tribal ; and among the devotees that throng at these shrines tribals figure prominently.

It is well-known that the present fabric of Indian population was fashioned out of the tribal-nomadic threads of Negritos (who arrived in India in a remote past from Africa through Arabia, Iran and Baluchistan), Pro-Australoids (who migrated into India from the West), and other nomadic tribes that streamed into India and settled down here. The population that was more or less well-integrated, incorporating all these tribal hordes, has been called proto-Indic. It is this primitive population that was responsible for the genesis of what may be called Indian culture, the first historical expression of which was the Indus Valley civilization, followed by the Vedic

period of redintegration and reorientation around 3000 B. C.

Indian culture is thus basically a tribal culture, individuals owning allegiance to small, close-knit and direct encounter groups. There has been an unbroken continuity of this culture all through our history, despite successive spasms of sophistication. Its early phase, characterized as the 'Vratya', was essentially folk, in its content as well as orientation. It was the pre-sophistication stage. It is interesting that in a medieval grammatical work (Bhattoji-dikshita's comm. on Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*, 5, 2, 21) we find the explanation of *Vratya* as the people who preferred to lead simple lives by manual labour (*sarirayasa*) rather than by the glamour of intelligence (*buddhi-vaibhava*). Intelligence did introduce a major shift in emphasis in later times, and the folk character of Indian culture was successfully camouflaged by aspects of sophistication.

Temples in India began as elements of folk culture, incidental to the 'Vratya' temperament. They were structures that were designed to fulfil simple and direct needs of small groups of closely-knit people. They were thus no more than mean shrines, often in jungles, on the outskirts of villages, or in the centre of the tribal settlements. They were mainly enclosures facilitating periodical congregations, around a

cult-object more frequently improvised for the occasion than permanently fixed. Rituals were naturally more important than the icons, although icons themselves were looked upon with especial reverence and fear.

CHAPTER II

EARLY SHRINES AND MASKS

A shrine is the material basis for an unusual or supernatural presence. This presence may be spontaneous and may permanently abide in a place (sanctum) or in an object (icon). Alternately, it may be invoked on occasions by a special procedure known as ritual. The folk shrine answers to the latter description. It comes into being as occasion demands, and its validity depends upon the efficacy with which the rituals are conducted. The folk temple is thus an enclosure set apart for ritualistic procedures (songs, dances, incantations, magical acts and so on). The enclosure itself is not regarded with religious sentiments; it acquires sanctity when it becomes the scene of rituals and ceremonial congregations.

Anthropologists characterize primitive beliefs and practices as animistic, an expression that has acquired a rather unfavourable value. Animism is, as a matter of fact, a belief that all things, even the supposedly inanimate objects, are animated by life in their essen-

tial nature. Some cultures, however, identify life with a 'living soul', and thus animism has come to mean attribution of personality or soul to all objects around us. Anthropologists are prone to ignore the fact that such attribution is not indiscriminate, unaltered or universal. It is only some objects that are selected for this attribution and the attribution is accomplished by rituals. The emphasis is not so much on the presence of the animating principle as on the manner in which it is actualized.

Malinowski hit upon a truth when he said that magic and animism go together to constitute man's response to his sense of insecurity in the world, although the famous anthropologist did not realize the full import of this clubbing of the terms together. Magic derives its rationale from animism, and animism as a mere belief acquires practical value only by magic. Magic has no basis apart from animism, and animism bears no fruit without magic. It is magic that animates an object that is otherwise inanimate. The folk shrine is a site for magical proceedings.

The shrine with an icon in it is a later achievement. In many of the folk cults in India, the shrine is merely a place where the masks, the weapons, the ornaments and musical instruments that the dancers employ during the occasions of spirit-invokation are preserved. In the West coast (Tulu-nadu), there are

numerous shrines which are either empty enclosures or which contain a bare room with a swing-cot placed in it. Often a small lamp will illumine the dark interior. The paraphernalia of the dancer (masks made of wood, silver or gold, a sword, a bell, fly-whisk, head-dress elaborately prepared, bangles, anklets etc.) are kept there: it is called the 'treasure' (bhandara) of the spirit, whom the dancer impersonates.

Such shrines were originally thatched huts (*kottige* or 'shed') which were more in the nature of store-houses than spots of worship. During special occasions, they would construct large and tastefully decorated pandals, not only to provide space for the dance-rituals but to accommodate large numbers of people that would gather. The old name for such assemblies was 'ayana', which later came to mean 'festival' (*utsava*). The place housing the thatched hut (or the brick and mortar building with a circular tiled roof, as it came to be later) and including the area necessary for the pandal to be occasionally erected was consecrated as the shrine. It was consecrated only in the sense that it was kept apart for this purpose, and it was out of bounds for people who were unclean or outside the tribe. It was a community enclosure, not owned by any individual but belonging to the whole group or tribe. The rituals were occa-

sions for all the members of the tribe to assemble and participate in the proceedings.

Usually the enclosure was under or near a large tree, and the tribal regard that was accorded to the enclosure was shared by the tree. Oftentimes, the enclosure was devoid of any material structure such as the shrine-hut or the fence around the enclosure : the enclosure was an abstract entity, identified by the people solely by folk memory. In such a case, the tree associated with the enclosure would naturally assume considerable importance : it stood for the sacred enclosure, and thus partook of the sanctity of the enclosure.

The sacred enclosure would readily materialize during festivals or occasional ceremonies, and hold the attention of the people. The enclosure came to be known as 'mandapa', which means the area which constitutes the very essence of tribal existence. Decoration of the shrine, dance of the priest whom the spirit was supposed to possess, oracular consultations with him, fire-walking, animal sacrifices, community feast and other tribal entertainments would highlight the occasional functions within the enclosure.

During the rest of the time, the tree would be there to remind the tribals of the sanctified enclosure. It would be there as a mute but interested witness to

all the proceedings that would go on during the festive occasions inside the pandal. The tree would be a more continuous and more concrete presence. The pandal would appear and disappear; but the tree would continue for all time. The spirit that would be invoked during the ritual, and that would possess the dancing priest (*patri*) on the occasion, would otherwise reside in the tree. Thus the tree came to represent the spirit, or at any rate its natural habitat, and evoked among the unsophisticated folk feelings of awe, fear and reverence.

The spirit that resided in the tree has no form; but the form and movements of the tree would represent the presence and activities of the spirit. The spirit was the central concept in tribal life; it not only integrated the individual and protected him from dangers and death, but organized the simple society of the tribe. By an act of transference the tree became the central fact in tribal life.

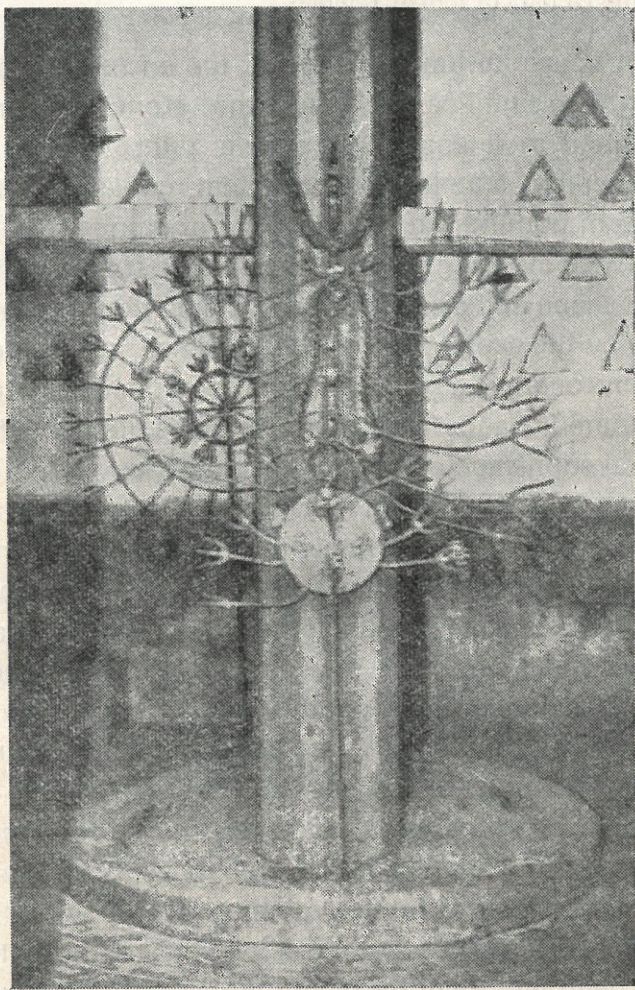
Scholars who seek to explain tree worship in India by taking recourse to animistic, totemistic, erotic and other theories appear to ignore the simple but obvious fact that Indians do not worship all the trees and plants that have grown on this soil. Not even all the specimens of the so-called 'sacred' trees (like the *asvattha*, *vata* and *bilva*) are worshipped. It is only

the tree that is associated with a shrine that is worshipped. In a village, not more than two or three trees among the hundreds that might be there receive special attention and devotion. A tree does not become sacred merely because it is a tree ; its sanctity is dependent upon its association with a sacred enclosure. We should also remember in this context that most of the famous temples in India have their own specific trees, and that these trees are all called 'enclosure trees' (*sthala-vrksha*). Another tree of the same species growing outside the temple-enclosure will fail to receive any attention ! It is the enclosure that makes all the difference.

When a mighty tree is not to be found in or around the consecrated enclosure, the place is identified by a rock that might be there, or an unusual boulder, or an odd-looking large stone. This would discharge the same function as the tree : it would be the normal habitat of the spirit, and it would be the guardian of the enclosure and of the people who periodically assemble in the enclosure. The rock or stone represents the spirit, and merits worship. Again, not every rock or stone in the country is worshipped by Indians, notwithstanding the frequent charge of barbaric animism against them. It is only the stone that is associated with a sacred enclosure that is worshipped.

In course of time, however, the enclosure loses its tribal significance, and the stone becomes enshrined in a temple in its own right. There are innumerable temples in India that contain in their sanctum nothing but natural rocks or stones that are otherwise indistinguishable from other stones of the same shape and size. These rocks and stones, untouched by the sculptor's chisel or hammer, are regarded as icons or rather as aniconic representations of divinity. There are instances of famous temples dedicated to several sophisticated gods and goddesses (like Siva, Vishnu, Ganesa, Durga and Subrahmanya), which house in their sanctums only rocks, or large or small stones: Kedareshwara in Kedarnath, Visvanatha in Banaras, Kamakhya in Kamarup, Mahakala in Ujjain, Narasimha in Ahobilam, Mukambika in Kollur, Ganapathi in Kumbhasi (Anegudde) and Mangala-devi of Mangalore are among the better known of such temples.

Here indeed is to be found the genesis of *linga*-worship in our country. We will have occasion to deal with it in a future volume. But it should be mentioned here that the oldest shrines are those that have been built over rocks and stones, and the purpose was to commemorate the tribal significance of these stones as representatives of the enclosure meant for tribal rituals. Oftentimes, the area covered



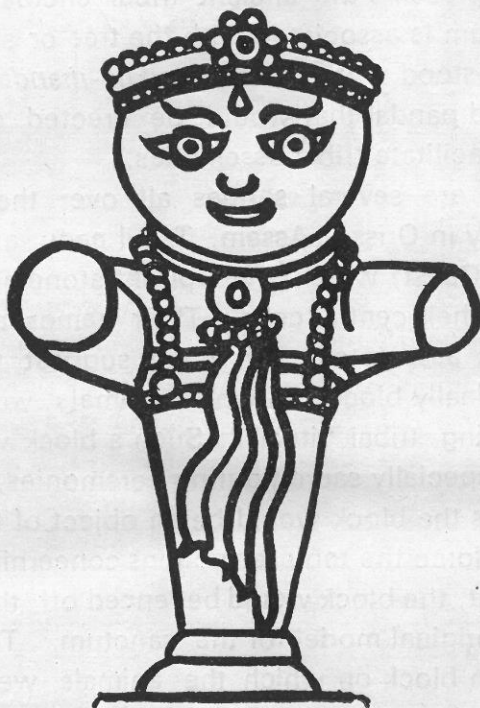
Ranabheri-amma in Kolar. A pillar worshipped as the guardian-goddess, associated with battles and drums

by the outer compound-walls (*prakaras*) of a stylized temple represents the ancient tribal enclosure ; and the sanctum is associated with the tree or stone that originally stood within it. The *mukha-mandapa* stands for the old pandal that would be erected on occasions to facilitate tribal assemblies.

There are several shrines all over the country, (especially in Orissa, Assam, Tamil nadu and along the West Coast) which have upright stone or wooden blocks in their central cells. Their names as well as the rituals associated with them suggest that they were originally blocks on which animals were sacrificed during tribal rituals. Such a block would be held as especially sacred during ceremonies, and on other days the block would be an object of tabu.

To enforce the tabu restrictions concerning physical contact, the block would be fenced off, thus providing the original model for the sanctum. The stone or wooden block on which the animals were sacrificed would soon be enclosed in a shrine, and the animal sacrifice would require another wooden or stone block in front of it and in the open. This latter contrivance was the prototype of the later altar (*bali-pitha*) in the stylized temple. Interesting and relevant is the Agama description of the altar as the duplicate of the sanctum. It is a custom in many temples in the South as well as the North for the devotees to

break the cocoanut and place their offerings at the altar.



The wooden block carved as jagannatha

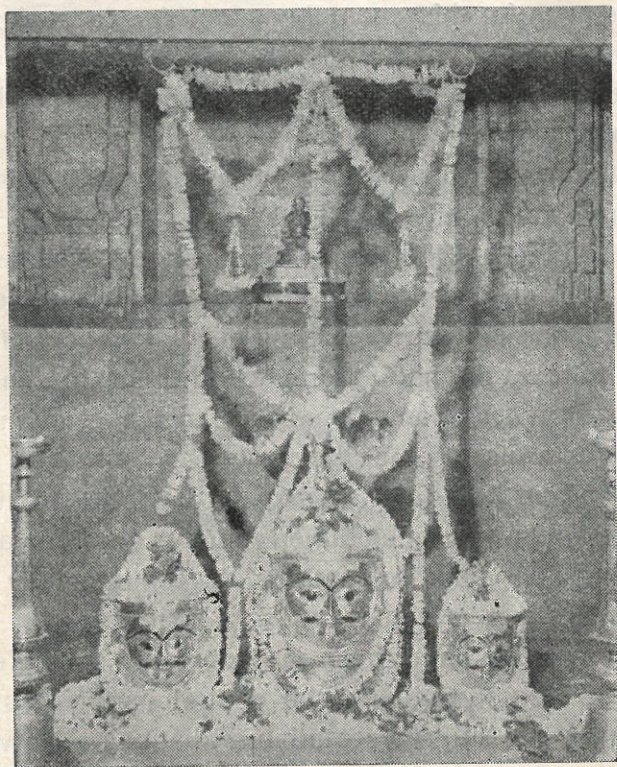
The stone or wooden blocks over which shrines were later constructed came also to be carved in course of time. Early carvings were naturally minimal and suggestive ; they were also symbolic. The form that the sculptor sought to give to the block depended, among other things, upon the shape and size of the

block itself. This is how in many celebrated shrines, while the exterior is most exquisitely fashioned, elaborately planned and delicately carved, the icon in the sanctum is aesthetically crude, often incompletely sculpted and hurriedly finished. It is rarely that a grand temple also houses a fine icon in its sanctum. The reason for this anomaly is not far to seek: the block on which the icon is carved is a tribal left-over, while the temple structures are products of sophistication. The ancient temples grew over the icons. But the modern temple will import an image into its central shrine after the temple is completed; the image in them will also be a sophisticated work of art.

The form that the sculptor gave to the wooden or stone block that survives the disappearance of the tribe follows the natural grains and the shape that it has. The sectarian prejudice plays a part in the sculptor's mission, but the part is a subdued one. More often than not, no image in the sanctum in any of the ancient and celebrated temples answers accurately to Agamic injunctions or fulfils neatly the sectarian expectations. It is a historical fact that many temples have been appropriated by different sects successively, and the central image has had frequently to shift its sectarian affiliations. Notwithstanding the sculptor's attempt to give the stone or wooden block a form that the devotees can under-

stand, appreciate and remember, the fact that the block itself was held sacred gave the sculptor some freedom.

Whatever the original shape or form of the block or icon in the central shrine, the custom of covering



Masks being worshipped

it over by a mask helped the devotee get an image of it that is stylized and familiar. The mask also is a left-over from the tribal background. Masks emerged in the context of dances and sacred dramas that were parts of the ritual conducted within the enclosure.

It may be recalled that drama as an art-form grew out of the primitive religious rituals. This is how drama in India, Greece, Japan and Europe developed. In the Dionysian cult, the main feature of the worship was a procession of dancers, intoxicated by wine and wearing animal masks. In fact, they were called goat-men. Wearing a mask symbolized that the dancer was possessed by the animal or god whose mask he was wearing ; it meant that his physical frame was 'taken over' by the animal or god for the time being. This is what the Greeks called 'inspiration' ('breathed into by the spirit'). It is also interesting that the actor in Greece was called 'the hypocrite' (literally meaning "one who answers") ; he was 'double-faced' because he invariably wore a mask (*persona*) that hid his real face and projected a false one.

Many ancient tribes of Africa, Australia and the Pacific Islands seek the help of mask-wearing shamans during their daily life. The tribals of New Guinea fashion their masks from human skulls. The religious dances in Tibet, Sri Lanka, British Columbia, Western and Central Africa and among the Red



Funeral mask worn by the
Mexico tribes



Funeral mask of the
Ibo-tribal dancers in Nigeria



Funeral masks from West Africa.
It is believed that the spirit lives in the masks

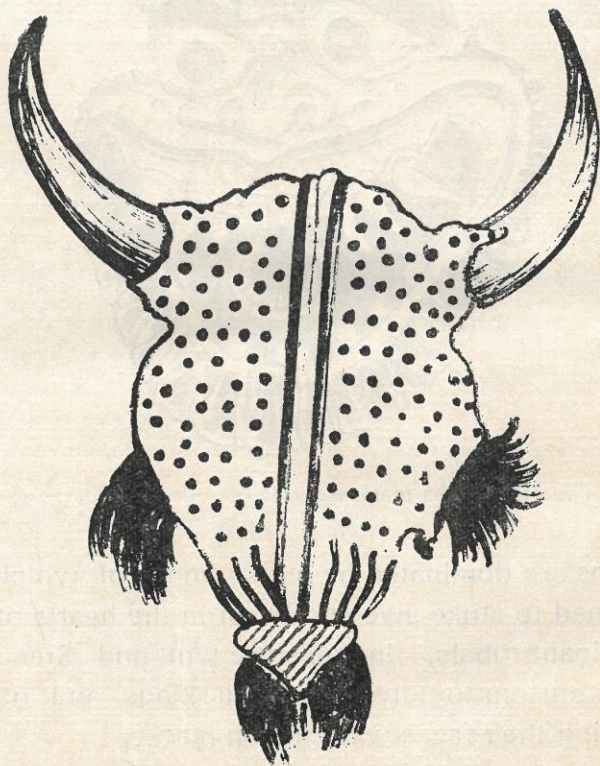


The Narasimha mask worn in folk dance dramas of
Andhra Pradesh

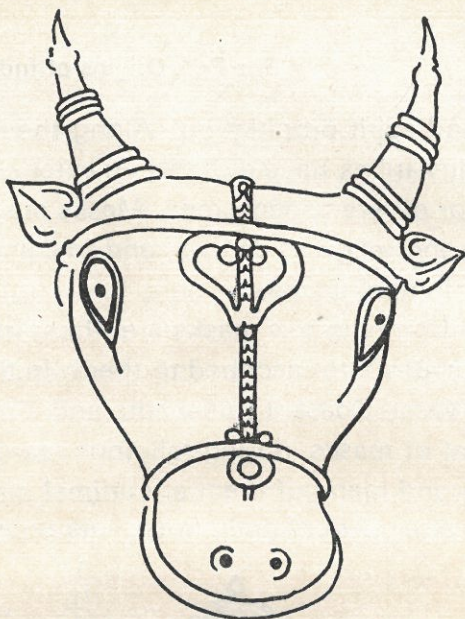
Indians are dominated by masks, most of which are designed to strike awe and terror in the hearts of the participant tribals. In ancient Egypt and Greece, it was a custom to bury their dead kings and queens covering their faces with golden masks.

Indian masks go back to a very distant past and

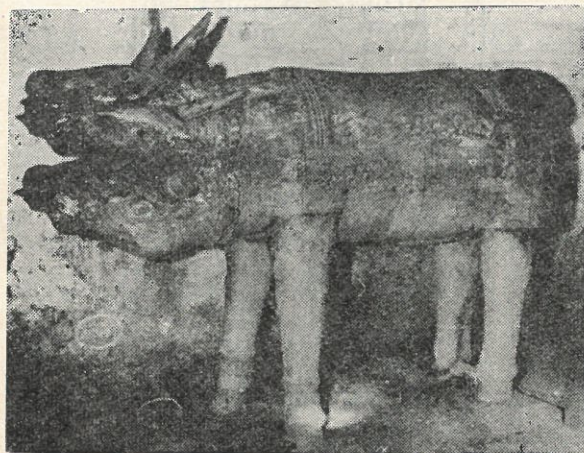
have survived to our own day. The Oungs inhabiting the Andamans conceal their faces in thick paints, as also the Konds of Madhya Pradesh, and in a sophisticated and aesthetically alluring manner the Kathakali dancers of Kerala. The wooden masks of the Bhuiya, Muria and Baiga tribes are worn while hunting or while dancing in certain magical procedures like



The mask worn by tribal dancers of the Bastar region



Mahisandaye mask



The bhuta represented as the Five-headed bull (nandi-gona)

exorcism and spirit propitiation. Along the Himalayan ranges, many tribes have evolved an extensive variety of masks for different occasions. Masks are still worn in India during religious dances, and in dance-dramas with mythological themes.

Most of the religious masks are those of animals, with human attributes ascribed to them. In the regions along the West Coast (Tulu-nadu and Kerala), the employment of masks during religious ceremonies is universal, and many of them are animal masks : pig (*Panjurli*), tiger (*Pili-bhuta*), horse (*Jarandaye*), bull



Jumadi-bhuta (South Kanara)

(*Nandi-gona*), and buffalo (*Mahishandaye*) are well-known in Tulu-nadu. Serpent (*Naga-kanye*), tiger (*Puli-teyyam*) and monkey (*Bali-teyyam*) are common in North Malabar in Kerala. These animals are elevated to the rank of divinities and their masks are worshipped in the shrines.

The important feature to be noticed in such worship is that the masks are often represented as complete animals, effigies of which are made and installed in temples. The background belief was that the spirits, who are formless, employ these animals



Panjurli-bhuta (South Kanara)

as their characteristic vehicles, and wander about the tribal area, guarding the devotees and warning them against misfortune. As the spirits are not visible, the forms of animals which are supposed to carry them around are used as masks to indicate the presence of these spirits. By a natural process of extension, the animals themselves come to possess the attributes of the spirits.

But the actual animals roaming about do not receive any worship ; it is only their iconic representations, effigies or masks that are considered as possessing the power and prestige of the spirits. As in the case of the sacred trees, the sacred animals are those that are involved in the rituals conducted in the sacred enclosure. Any pig that one sees is not Panjurli, and any tiger in the jungle does not become Pili-bhuta. Panjurli's pig is an iconic one and Pili-bhuta resides in the tiger representation, as they are made to function within the enclosure or shrine (*sana*). The pig or tiger that represents the spirit is not an ordinary one, but possesses extraordinary powers that other animals of the species do not.

It is usual, therefore, to represent these extraordinary spirit-representing animals in unusual modes. The Nandi-gona or the Bull-spirit, for instance, may have five heads. Or the animal may be represented as part human : Panjurli has the human body with the



Hanuman as a spirit (Bali dancer)

head of a wild pig ; Hanuman-teyyam is in man's form with the monkey's head. This is the origin of composite figures of divinities like Haya-griva, Varaha, Hanuman, Garuda, Narasimha, and Ganesha, who figure in the Indian pantheon of later days. There can

be little doubt that these were only masks used by the folk dancers once upon a time, for in all these composite forms it is only the head that is animal.

There is an additional circumstance which supports the folk origin of these later and popular divinities. During the special occasions (like Kola, Nema, Ayana and Bandi), when the priest personates the spirit (called 'bhutada mani' in Kannada) and dances around, long legends in the local dialect (Tulu) are recited, extolling the qualities of the spirit and recounting his advent and exploits. These recitations are called 'Pad-danas', the exact meaning of which expression has been forgotten but is frequently explained as songs orally communicated. Each spirit has his own specific *pad-dana*, which is recited during his personation and propitiation. This appears mainly to achieve the audio-visual fixation of the image of the spirit in the minds of the hundreds of tribal participants that would assemble on the occasion. An examination of the content and style of some of these *pad-danas* will clearly bring out the dominant element of folk-lore in them. Such association of folk-lore with religious dances can be found among all the tribals in India.

This seems to be an early strata of what may be described as religious literature or mythology. The *Puranas* as legendary accounts of divinities with a

curious admixture of history and myth have indeed grown out of early traditions contained in the folk-lore such as the *Pad-dana*. Human beings and gods come together and transact business without a sense of the paradoxical or the fear of the improbable. They discuss, argue and conclude transactions. The dialogues that form part of the *Pad-danas* and that are independently instituted as standard verbal exchanges (*nudi-kattu*) between the spirit and the tribal chief remind us strongly of the dialogal hymns in Rig-Veda.

There are about twenty such hymns incorporated in the Rig-Vedic collection. Important ones are those between Yama the god of death and his sister Yami (10, 10), Urvashi the celestial nymph and Pururavas the earthly monarch (10, 95), Visvamitra the sage and the river (3, 33), Agastya the sage and his wife Lopamudra (1, 179), the heavenly hound Sarama and the Pani marauders (10, 108). These dialogues are no doubt odd in the Vedic context, and the reason for their inclusion in this poetical corpus is uncertain. They are obviously remnants of folk-lore, if we trust the great Vedic commentator Sayana, who attempts to recall and provide the legendary frameworks for them. Do they not suggest the existence of an immense oral literature, very much like the Tulu *Pad-danas* in both structure and function, in the days

much anterior to the compilation of Vedic hymns ? Do they not also indicate that the context in which these dialogal and narrative hymns were recited was the religious dance-drama in a tribal assemblage, again like the *bhuta*-festivals in Tulu-nadu or Kerala ?

CHAPTER III

SERPENT AND THE MOUNTAIN

The early shrine was under the tree that stood within the tribal enclosure for religious rites. The celebrity of the tree was derived from its location in the sacred site, and the sanctity of the shrine from its association with the tree. The shrine in its initial phase was just a crude little hut, covering a stone or rock which represented the guardian spirit of the tribe. The rock was a miniature mountain, and the tree symbolized tribal life. The rock under the tree was the static aspect, while the tree itself was dynamic. It is not a coincidence that in the tribal imagination the spirit of the dead passed into mountains and trees. The tribal shrine under the tree was also the material basis for ancestor worship. It was the abode of all the earlier heroes of the tribe.

The occasion of funeral was also part of the religious life of the primitives, as it continues to be with the sophisticated. As the corpse was carried to the tree in an improvised chariot (*ratha* or *bandi*), there

were dances in which masks were worn. There were also songs eulogizing the valour and victories of the dead hero, recalling his tribal loyalty and assuring him



Asvatha tree with serpent-icons under it in
Vidurasvattha, a place of pilgrimage in the
South

of the tribal aid in his journey beyond death. The funeral procession would conduct the dead man to the mountain or to the tree. Later, the custom of erecting a mound over the spot where the dead one is buried, and planting a tree there continued this compulsive association of a tribal with the tree and the rock under it. The *chaitya-vrkshas* and *sthala-vrkshas* that abound in India are to be traced to this custom.

It is an ancient and universal symbolism that the tree and the serpent are twin spirits. It is also so well-known that it hardly needs elaboration here. Big trees and huge ant-hills being together is common sight in India ; the forest tribes are naturally impressed by the serpents that freely move around amidst the branches and foliage of giant trees. There is no doubt that serpents are symbols of fertility ; but the symbolism is by no means erotic. Serpents as religious symbols have been found in India from the days of the Indus Valley civilization. The seals found in Mohenjo-daro and Harappa depict close association of trees with serpents. Vedic hymns contain references to the dragon Vritra or Ahi who is a powerful rival to Indra himself. The serpent-lore in India is not only vast and varied, but very old and persisting.

A life-size stone sculpture of the hooded serpent was found at Chargoan and has been preserved in the Mathura Museum. Belonging to the age of Huvishka,



A Nagini from the Sanchi
remains



A Naga damsel
(Nagini) from Biching
in Orissa

the Scythian monarch, it bears an inscription which tells us that the brothers Senahasti and Bhonuka got this image made as a "propitiation to the worshipful Naga" (*priyatti bhagava Naga*). This suggests the great antiquity of serpent-slabs (*naga-sila*) as objects of worship in the country. Not only are serpent-slabs installed under trees and within temple-enclosures as votive monuments or to discharge vows, but serpent-motifs are involved in decorations, ornaments, dress and embellishments in religious as well as secular contexts.

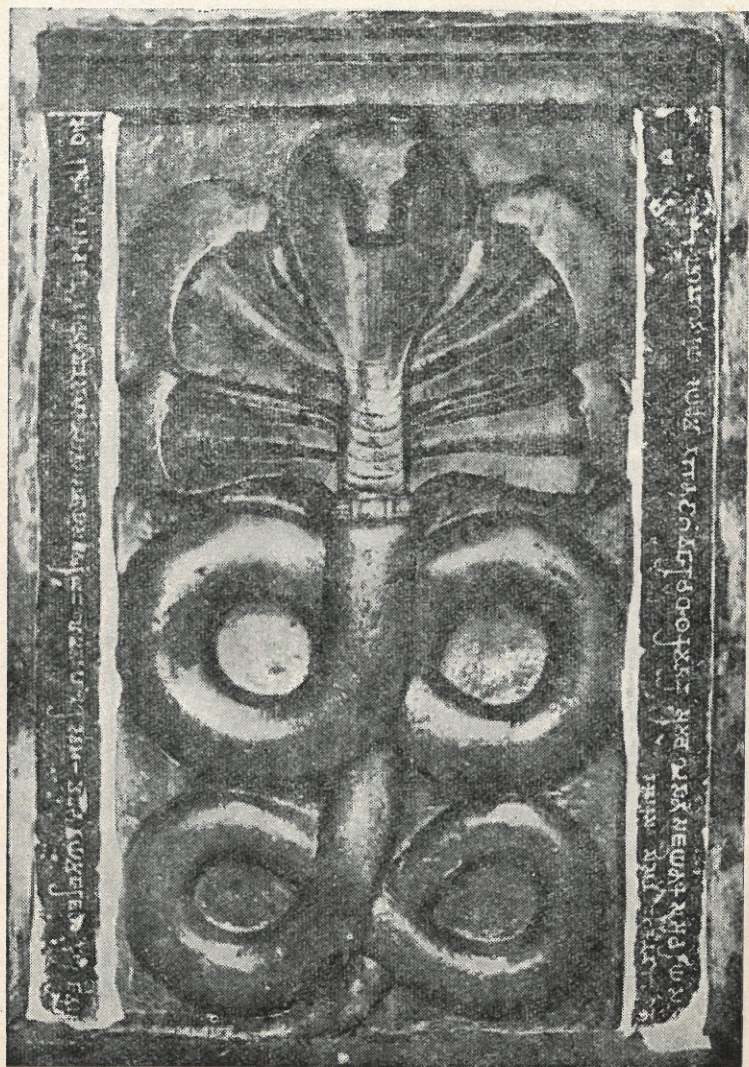
More interestingly, there are shrines in India, especially in the South, containing in the sanctum huge ant-hills, which are worshipped as Valmikesvara ('The Lord of the Ant-hill'). Images of Subrahmanya (*skanda*) are frequently found in serpentine shape, either entirely so or as half-human and half-serpent. Siva shrines encourage installation of serpent-icons within its precincts, because Siva is supposed to wear serpents as his ornaments. The serpent-idea enters the Vishnu temple, as the bed of the Lord (*Ananta-sayana*). Sakti and the serpent are intimately associated in legend and iconography. Ancient wooden images of Durga found in Kerala and Tulu-nadu have the serpent-symbol on their forehead and in their crown.



The image of Durga in Basrur. The crown is intricately fashioned out of the coiling serpents



An ancient Naga-slab from a garden dedicated to
the serpents in Nandalike

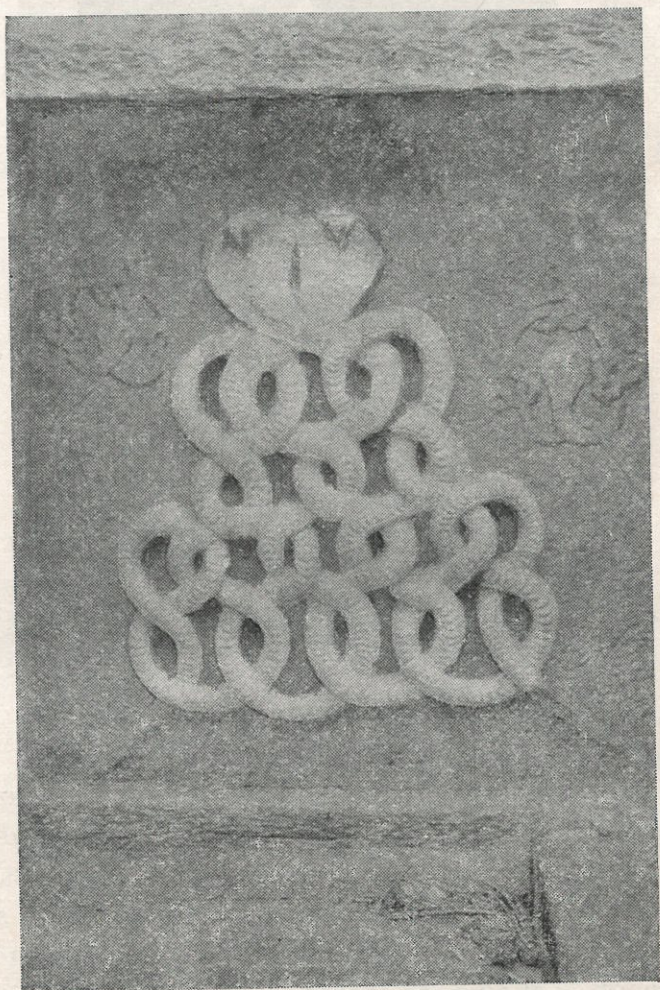


The Naga slab from Banavasi (Karnataka)

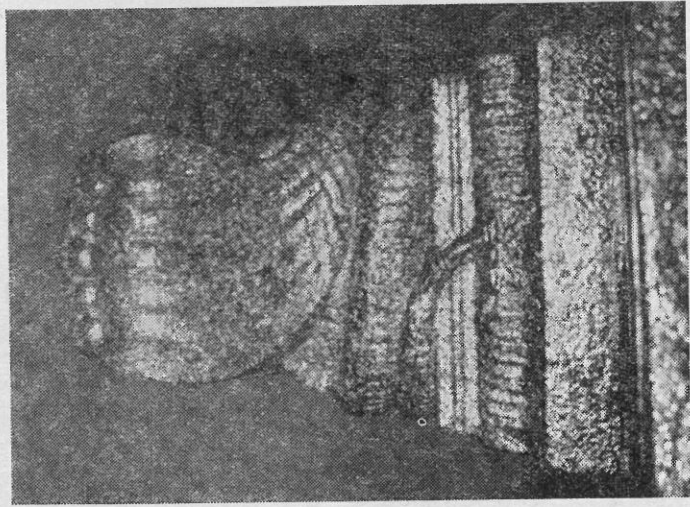
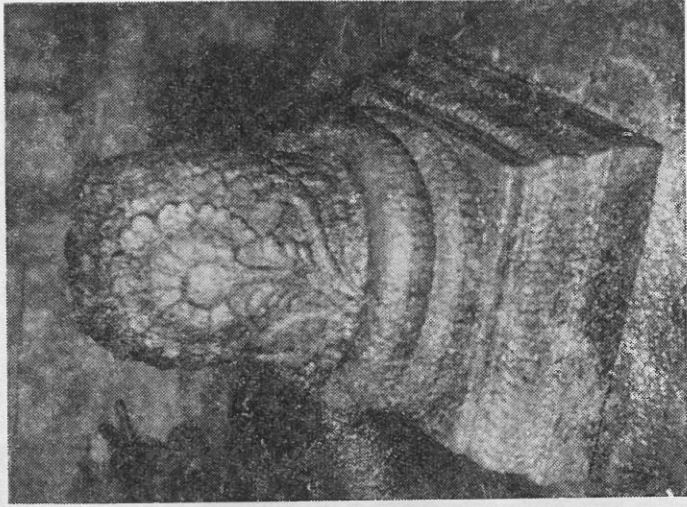


The Naga icon in the Brahmathana
shrine in Posralu (South Kanara)

The serpents are frequently represented in stone-sculptures with five or seven hoods, and in diverse kinds of knots. It is usual to depict two serpents in amorous embrace ; it is also usual to represent serpents with human heads and torsoes. Sometimes the serpent is shown as seated in the form of a *linga*. Infrequently but interestingly, serpents are fancied as having the heads of cocks for their hoods ; in the



The serpent couple in the well of Manchamalakappa in
Bankapura



The front and back views of the serpent sitting in the shape of a linga, the icon worshipped in the Subrahmanya temple in the coastal region of Karnataka



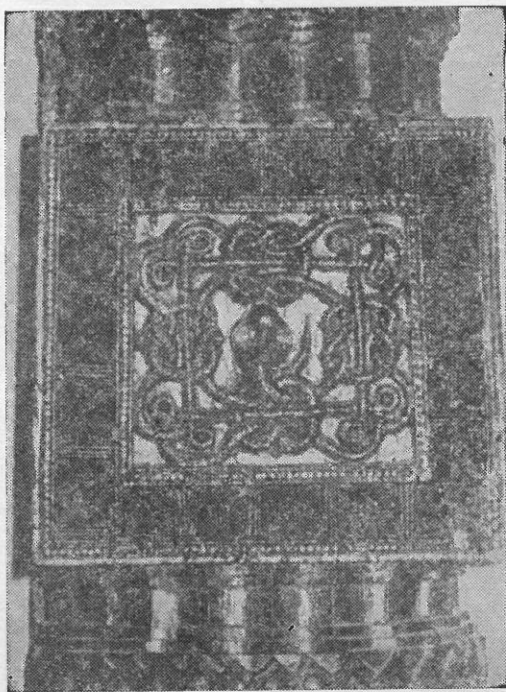
Another Naga image in the form of a
mountain in Posralu

Jaina framework, a cock is pictured as having a serpent's head (*kukkuta-sarpa*). Many are the ways in which the serpent-idea is worked out in Indian art and architecture. Despite its apparently independent representation, the underlying association of the serpent-figure with the mountain-concept cannot be missed. The Sanskrit expression 'Naga' has a dual connotation : serpent and mountain. Numerous are



A stone representation of the quarter-Nagamandala the literary images which involve this association. Serpent-sculptured stone slabs are made to look like mountains installed under trees, thus recalling to our minds the old tribal situation.

In the coastal South, the 'serpent-dance ritual' continues to be a prestigious and compulsive procedure. It has all the old-world charm and tabu, and it is typically tribal. Known as *Naga-mandala*, it is performed not in an enclosed shrine but in the open



Another representation of the quarter-Nagamandala on the pillar in a house in the village Nadumaneguttu (Udipi taluk) yard consecrated for the purpose. The site becomes a shrine as long as the ritual lasts. It is usual to construct an inner pandal measuring $32' \times 14'$ extended on all sides by several feet to accommodate a fairly large gathering: it is a tribal affair and people from neighbouring villages stream in to participate. The pandal is exquisitely decorated, and underneath the pandal the ground is cleaned and prepared for the depiction of an exceedingly intricate, colourful and mystical serpent. The ritual becomes simple or



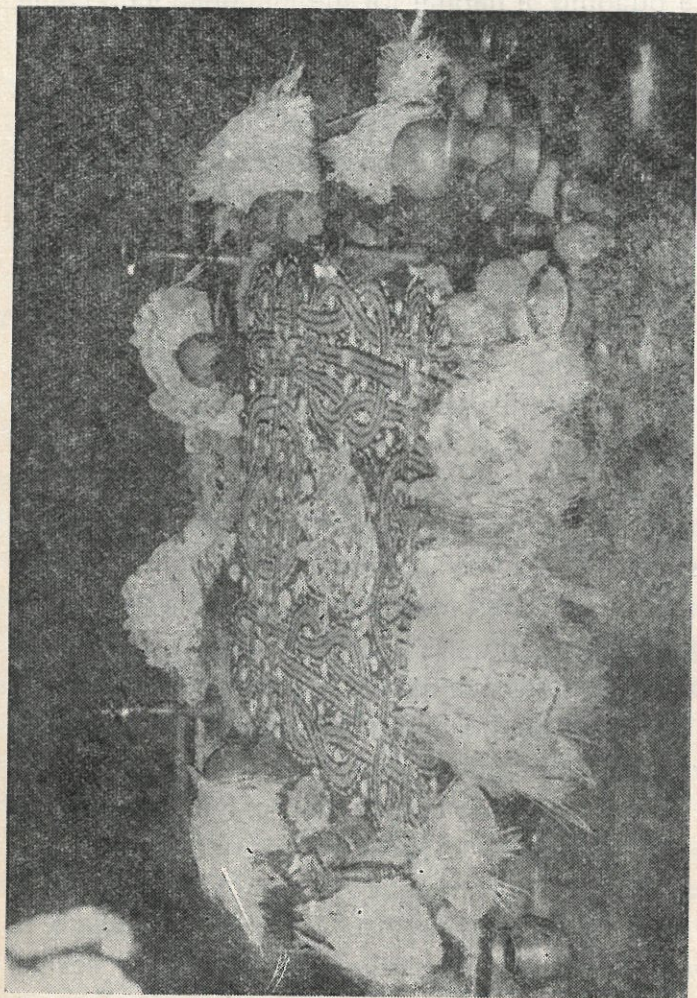
The seven-hooded snake in a mandala (from Bankapur)

complex in accordance with the number of 'knots' (*pavitra*) which are introduced into the coiled body of the serpent. It is simple when there are only four knots in the four quarters: it is styled *quarter-mandala*. It becomes more complicated when the number of knots increases to eight in eight directions: it is then called *half-mandala*. Twelve knots constitute *three-quarters-mandala*, and sixteen the *full-mandala*. The depiction of the mandala covers a large area, usually

about twelve feet on each side. In the central portion, raised on a small mound, the seven-hooded head of the serpent is painted. The entire *mandala* is drawn in outline, filled with powdered colours (white, red, yellow, green and black) and tastefully decorated. The area covered by the *mandala* is enclosed on all sides by heaps of areca-nut flowers (called in the Tulu dialect, *hingara*)

The ritual dance is conducted by a priest who gets possessed by the serpent spirit (*Naga patri*) and two musicians (*Vaidyas*) who encourage and regulate his dance by eulogies, dialogues, tauntings and narrative ballads to the accompaniment of curiously weird sounds from the percussion instrument known as *dakke*. The inspired steps of the dancer are strongly reminiscent of the movements of an excited serpent, and the marvellous sequence terminates in oracular consultations. The ritual is wholly tribal, and we see here the remarkable survival of an age-old practice.

Of interest for us in this connection is the idea of a mobile and make-shift shrine. An open shrine is constituted whenever the ritual has to be gone through, and wherever the large assembly of participants can be accommodated. It is the enclosure that is religiously relevant, and not a permanent and icon-enclosing shrine. Later, the shrine got transformed



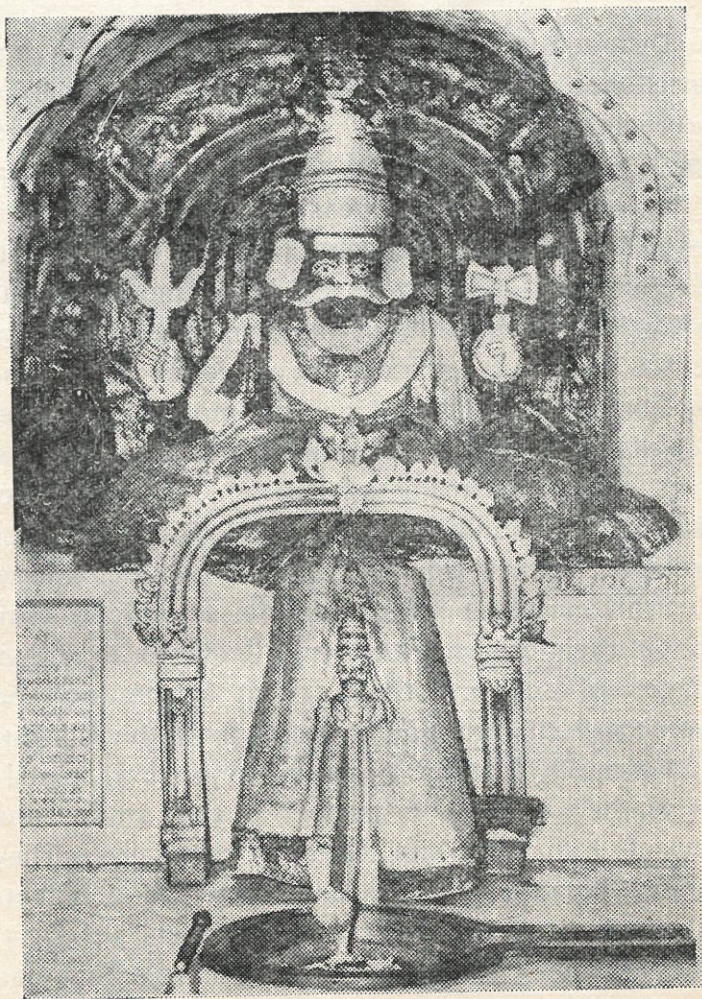
The Nagamandala prepared for the Dakke-bali ritual

into a building, a habitat for the immobile icon ; and the ritual had to be watered down and adapted to suit the limitations of such a structural shrine. The tribal emphasis was on the ritual and not on the shrine, on the function rather than on the structure.

In many a religious ceremony in Indian villages, it is usual for the priest or chieftain to carry on his head a bamboo basket or box in which an image or mask of some divinity, often a goddess, is placed. The bamboo structure is rigged up as a shrine, and the image will often be wooden, roughly carved and rudely decorated. Normally, the image or mask will be kept in the headman's house or in the priest's custody ; and there it receives little attention and less worship. It acquires importance only during festive occasions when it moves out into the streets to preside over the rituals. Sometimes, an image is got ready only on the eve of such celebrations, in wood, clay or cow-dung ; and after the celebrations are over it is promptly discarded. The shrine that houses this image or mask is constructed only for the occasion. The image lodged in this make-shift and portable shrine is carried about in the village to bless the residents ; it may also travel from village to village, if its sphere of influence extends to several villages. In the folk context, the notion of a structural shrine or a permanent icon was a late arrival.

Despite the settled condition of village life and persistence of folk-ways, the idea of a monumental shrine did not take root till after the urban impact was felt. Serpent's mobility was the dominant image in the folk religious attitudes. The spirits that animated the otherwise uneventful life in the villages, hovered round their homes and fields, moving about swiftly like breeze, without a known abode or recognizable form but entering anywhere and assuming any form. The village divinities comprehend classes of spirits called *yakshas*, *bhutas*, *nagas* and *gandharvas*. They could be male or female, benevolent or malevolent, charming or dreadful. They could be heroes who once lived on earth or altogether unknown to earthly existence. But they are all strictly territorial in their interest; they set limits to their own spheres of action. They extract obedience and reverence from, and undertake to guard the interests of, a specific tribe or group. They are intimately acquainted with every member of this group, and transact with him directly and materially. They manifest themselves in a variety of uncanny objects and events, warning the devotees or guiding them.

Paradoxically enough, mountains were regarded not only as divinities but as abodes of spirits. Looking upon hills and mountains as gods is an old faith. It was current among many ancient nations, besides



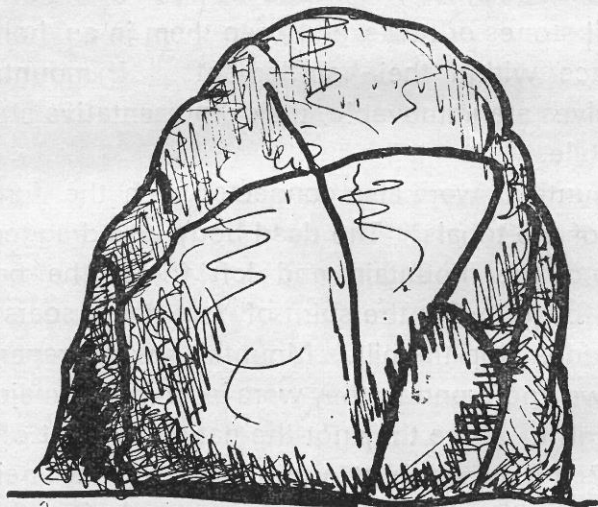
The tribal hero Mailari in the pilgrim-centre Mailara in
Bellary District

India. There were gods which were mountains among the Japanese ('Kami'), Chinese (Shen), Persians (Al-burz), Greeks (Olympus), Celts (Poininus), Babylonians (Enlin), Koreans and Semitics. The belief was not only universal but persistent in India. The Himalaya, Vindhya, Sahya, Malaya, Kumara and Sri-Saila have been sacred from time immemorial. Several tribes (like the Mundas, Santals, Mihilis, Koravas, Kolas, Kurumbas, Malai-panturans and Todas) even today worship hills. It is a custom among some tribes in the South (Todas, Badagas, Soligas and Kurumbas and others) to invoke the spirit of mountains in small stones or rocks and keep them in an honoured place within their settlements. If mountains themselves are immovable, their representative stones are mobile.

Mountains were also connected with the funeral rituals of the tribals. The dead body was dragged to the top of the mountain and left there, the background belief being the spirit of the dead soars up and resides atop the hill. Mountains were regarded with awe and wonder: they were inscrutable, majestic and mighty. Were they not the natural habitat of the spirits? If there was not a mountain in the neighbourhood, the tribe would form a mound of earth, or a heap of pebbles and regard it as the replica of the mountain-spirit. The religious ceremonies as well as

the funeral rites would be performed in its presence. Every dead person would be marked in a pebble that would be added to the heap. Symbolising the deceased ancestors by stones and pebbles is current even among the sophisticated groups in India. There is also the folk practice of throwing a pebble in the direction of the mountain, after the funeral rites are over: it is symbolic of the spirit flying to the mountain, its natural habitat.

This is the obvious origin of *linga* worship in our country. Fanciful theories of its sexual symbolism will be discussed later; but it may be mentioned here



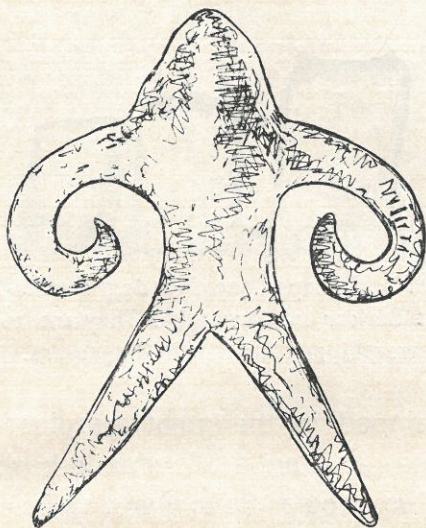
Rock with irregular fissures on them worshipped as Sankaranarayana, half Siva and half Vishnu in the temple at Nandavara

in passing that they are unwarranted so far as the genesis of *linga*-worship is concerned. The *linga* is merely the miniature mountain. A look at the ancient specimens of *linga* would convince anyone of the monumental significance attached to the *linga*-idea. Further, the ant-hill was also regarded as a mountain in miniature. The *linga* tended to assume the form of the ant-hill. We have already mentioned that the worship of ant-hills goes on in many shrines in South India. Consider, in this context, the association of serpents with mountains, and of spirits with serpents. Iconographically, *linga* and the serpent-motif have frequently been integrated.

The shrine in the sacred enclosure is itself a symbol of the mountain. The tree and the mountain represent two directions of extension. The tree flows out and extends around ; the hidden roots are below and the spreading branches are above. The mountain, on the other hand, closes in as it rises up : it is the inverted tree that the later literature speaks of. This dual representation is found even in the Indus-valley seals. The sophisticated temple of later times has its *vimana* in the nature of a mountain peak or a mound, and the *gopura* that soars up ; and it has its own tribal tree. A Saiva *agama* speaks of the ant-hill as the mountain, and the serpent with its hood whipped up as the tree. The *linga* is the mountain, the seven-



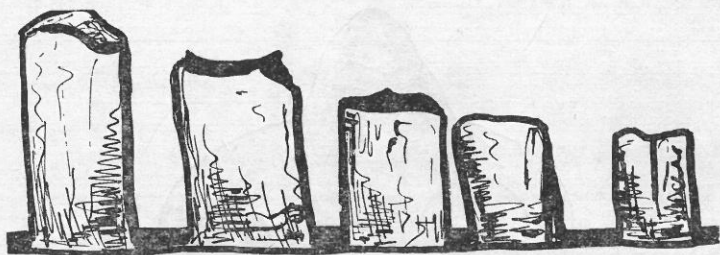
A conical rock on which the rough outline of a human form has been sculpted. It is worshipped as the iconic representation of Siva. But it is in the temple dedicated to the Sun-god in the Belthangadi taluk of South Kanara



An enigmatic figure fashioned in copper found in the Gangetic plain. It is dated about 1000 B.C. The ideas of the mountain and the tree are cleverly incorporated here.

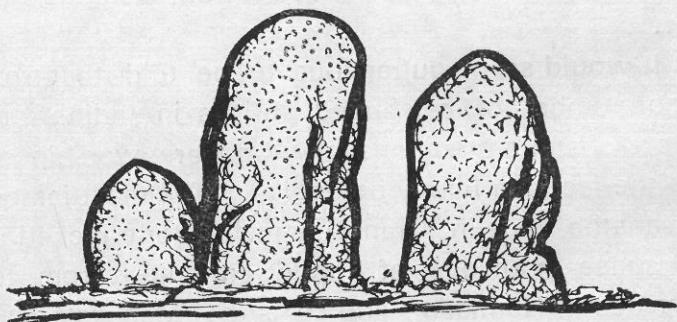
hooded serpent that rises above it from behind is the tree.

It would seem outrageous to be told that in a large number of celebrated shrines in India, only blocks of stone or stumps of wood are worshipped. But the fact can hardly be denied. The most famous Visvanatha-*linga* in Varanasi is just a stone picked up (of course in an age of untold antiquity) from the river-bed of Narmada ; and so is the Mahakala-*linga* in Ujjain, whose glory is sung by Kalidasa. The



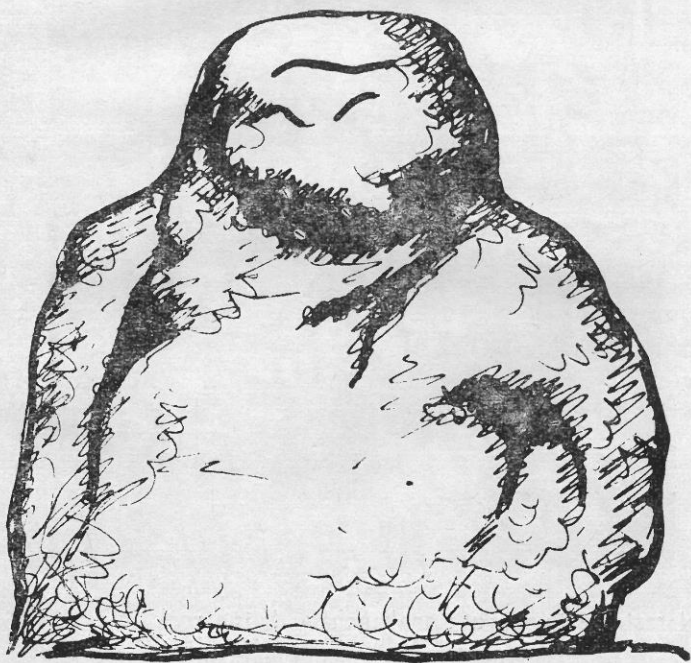
Five stones of odd shapes representing Pancha-lingas in the temples at Barkur in Karnataka. They are collectively worshipped as Pancha-lingesvara.

lingas worshipped in the great temples of Kanchipuram and Ramesvaram are hardened heaps of sand (*saikata*). The popular Baidyanath shrine contains as its main image an uncarved block of granite. The Narasimha images in several well-known hill-temples of the South are mere rocks, sometimes with gaping slits in them, or rude pillars with marks of conch and discus on them. The Jagannatha group of images in

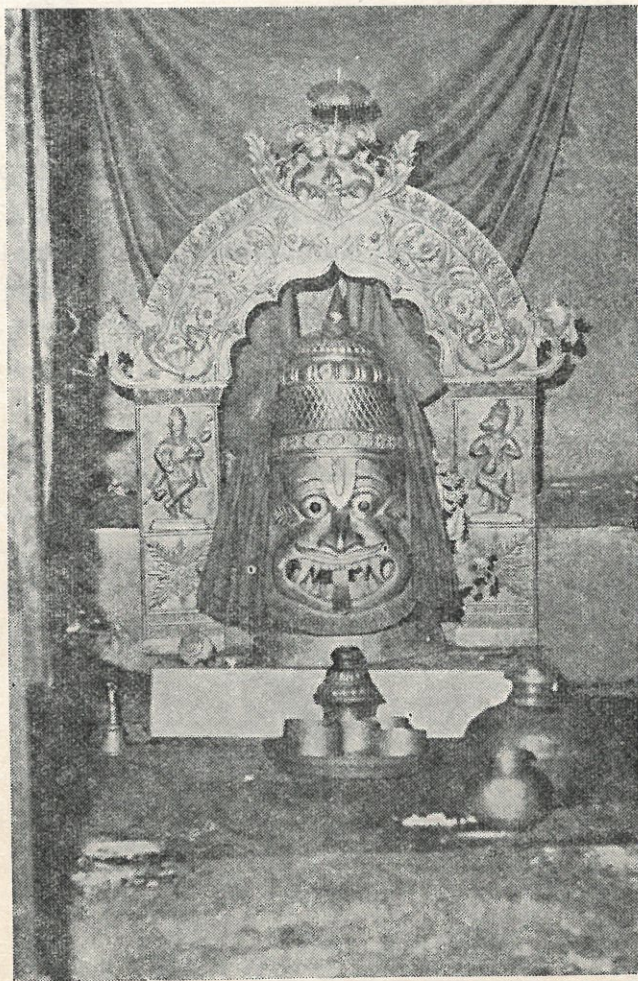


The Sasta stones on the Charmadi mountains of the coastal ghats. They represent the hill-deity Sasta or Ayyappan

the famous Puri temple are wooden blocks, roughly carved. The Devi in the Kamakhya temple is a boulder with a crevice in it. Examples could be multiplied to show that the public relevance of a shrine depends not on its iconographic stylization but on its folk character. It is important to recognize that shrines have existed long before craftsmen learnt to build temples. Images have been worshipped even when texts were not there to prescribe their forms.

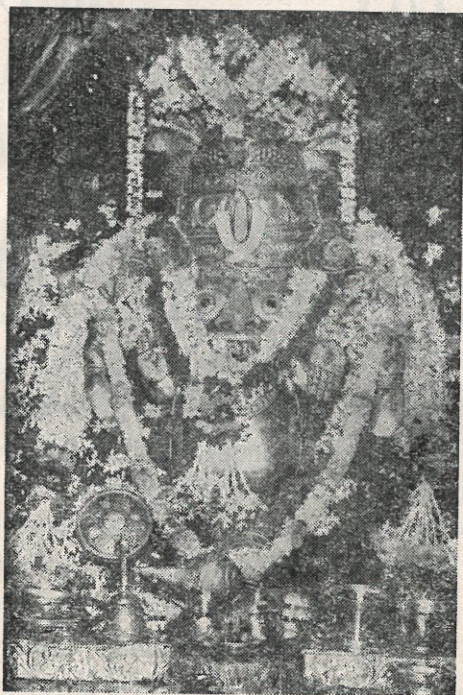


Rock worshipped as Narasimha in Ganganadu



Narasimha image of Kanakanchala. It is a rock covered by the mask representing Narasimha

The mountain idea is also involved in another detail that we find in the present-day temples. The main image, in stone or wood, is described as 'un-moving' (*acala* or *dhruva*): it is likened to a mountain (known in Sanskrit as *acala*), or to the roots of a tree. It does not move out of the sanctum; it is



A rock-shrine of Narasimha in Savanadurga. Psychiatric patients worship in this shrine for forty-eight days to get relieved



A representation of the main deity Jagannatha in the famous temple at Puri (Orissa). It is carved out of a wooden log and left entirely in the folk style. The image is renewed periodically. hidden in the sanctum. For processions and for use on festive occasions, another image, usually a metallic one, is employed. This is called 'moving' (*cala*) or processional (*utsava*) image. This latter icon derives its appeal only from the 'un-moving', mountainous image in the sanctum, whose strength is due to its cultic association.

CHAPTER IV

MOTHER - GODDESSES

Anthropologists (like Ehrenfels) have taken pains to enumerate tribals and 'backwards' in India who are given to the cult of mother-goddesses. They do not know, however, that the cult is not confined to these groups : it is equally prevalent, and is more deep-rooted, among the sophisticated classes also. The appeal of this cult in our country has been universal and has had an unbroken career from the days of Indus Valley civilization to our own day.

There may be some truth in the claim that the cult had its origins in the primitive agricultural matriarchate, for we do find that matriarchal societies in ancient Syria, Asia Minor and Egypt encouraged this cult. It may also be true that pastoral economy tends to denigrate mother-goddesses and emphasize male divinities. But it would be wrong to assume that the cult is entirely determined by such considerations. There may be more fundamental and intensely psychological factors in the individual as

well as the society in India in the background of this cult. For it has had a remarkable survival. We know for certain that numerous relics found in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa suggest strongly the presence of this cult so long ago. The talk about the male-domination of the Vedic pantheon and the pastoral economy of the Vedic people cannot obscure the significant involvement in many hymns of Rig Veda of the cultic ideas relating to the mother-goddess. There can be little doubt that the cult continued vigorously during the days when the major portion of the Vedic hymns were composed.

Evidence is scanty for the distinction that is often drawn between pre-Aryan, Dravidian and Aryan, in order to emphasize that the cult of the mother-goddess was the contribution of the Dravidians. Indian society has always been complex, and there never was a time when the society was so neatly divided into Aryan and Dravidian groups. The distinction is more linguistic than racial or ethnic, more imagined than actual. It is not easy or correct to identify the Indus Valley people as Dravidians; nor is it safe to describe the composers and compilers of Vedic hymns as pure Aryans. It is possible to find among the Indus remains evidence for beliefs and practices that are characteristically Vedic; and the Vedic hymns contain numerous ideas that are involved in

the cult of the mother-goddess that the Indus people were supposed to subscribe to. In fact, it can be shown that the Vedic civilization was a normal continuation of what we know as the Indus civilization.

The cult of the mother-goddess has thus prevailed in India throughout its social and religious history, although its prevalence has been more pronounced in rural regions than in the urban in recent years. The Tantrik complex of folk magical rites and esoteric exercises is what has given shape and life to this cult. The Tantra being folk is largely materialistic in its orientation; its expectations are concrete benefits concerning different aspects of daily life, such as health, wealth, security, safety, eminence and efficiency. However, it should not be imagined that the Tantra was one homogenous or unified system, uniformly applicable to the entire population. The Tantrik approach emphasizes tribal distinctions and group-affiliations. It accommodates within its fold numerous cults and regional practices. The thread that runs through all the cults and practices is the belief in the female principle as the source of energy and affluence. Call it a fertility idea, but there it is, deeply rooted in the individual consciousness as well as in the collective unconscious.

There is no denying that the Tantra involves some

eroticism. All folk practices and beliefs do incorporate the mystery of the sex act. It is not only in India that it is so, for do we not hear about the Greek Bacchanalia, the Roman Saturnalia, the French *Fete des Fous* and the May Day Carnivals? The Tantra is realistic, and seeks not only to translate the mysterious into the factual, but idealizes the actual. The woman in the Tantra is the mother, the matrix, the the embryo, the source of all things, the essence of fertility. It is the productive sex that the Tantras speak of, and not the hedonic sex.

The biological principle of reproduction is elevated into the cosmic concept of Vaginal Source (*yoni*). The earth, the tree, the serpent and the mountain are different expressions of this cosmic urge to reproduce. The male and the female are interchangeable concepts in this context. The mountain could be the male principle ; it is symbolised in the *linga*, in the ant-hill, in the altar, in the stone block or wooden pillar in the sanctum. But it is the abode of the mother-goddess and is identified with her.

Most of the Devi shrines in India are located on mountain-tops ; and even when they are located on the plains their association with the mountains is not forgotten. The word 'Durga' itself means a mountain. Mountain is a fortress : it protects the hamlet and its neighbourhood. We have numerous

mother-goddess shrines which are regarded as essential for the protection of the township: Amba of Amber and Karnimata of Bikaner (Rajasthan), Samalesvari of Sambhalpur (Orissa), Arbud-mata of Mt-Abu, Patandevi of Patna and Gayesvari of Gaya (Bihar), Jwalamukhi in Kangra (Panjab), Kali of Calcutta, and Chamundi of Mysore (Karnataka) are illustrations of this aspect of the mother-goddess. Vindhyavasini and Vanadurga are characteristically mountain-deities.

In the Tantrik symbolism, the isosceles triangle which is the linear representation of the mountain when its apex is upward and of the tree when its apex is downward, stands for the mother-goddess. The triangle as it stands on its base is male, while the triangle that hangs down from its apex is female. The cultic practice is to employ in worship the two triangles as interlocked, thus signifying not so much the sex act as the principle of impregnation, the metaphysical principle of *maya* or creatrix of phenomenal reality. *Maya* is another name of Durga. The two triangles interlocked stand for the union of mountain and tree, the sky and the earth (dyava-prithivi)

The association of the mother-goddess with the tree is likewise widely known. The association stems from the earth-goddess (nude Gauri) becoming the deity filled with plants (Sakambhari), symbolising



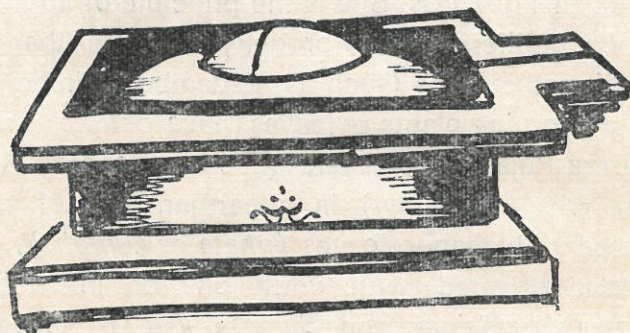
Mother goddess from Indus Valley
found in Harappa

harvest in the agricultural context. She is the germinal, productive principle (Prakrti), and is found represented in the Indus seals and praised in the Vedic hymns. Red is the colour associated with procreation, and the mother-goddess is conceived of as red in complexion all over. Her association with red is again an ancient one. We find among the

Mohenjo-daro relics figurines of the mother-goddess painted red. The association continues even today in many forms: blood, Kumkum, red hibiscus flowers, red berries, red garments and so on are said to be dear to this goddess. She is the principle of abundant growth, proliferation and progeny. She is therefore worshipped in trees (such as Kadamba, Nimba and Asoka), in nine plants or leaves (*nava-patrika*, a ritual in Durga-Puja), in creepers (such as *aparajita*), in grains (rice and barley), in an earthen pot of water covered with mango-leaves (*ghata* or *kumbha*), in a coconut smeared with vermilion, or in a linear diagram (like *Sri-yantra* or *Sarvato-bhadra-mandala*).

In the folk mind, the male and female principles were distinct. The male (Siva) is only an indication or sign (which is the actual meaning of the word *linga*) of the presence and power of the female (Sakti). The male is no doubt likened to the ploughman while the female is the field that produces wealth. But it is also true that the male is inertia whereas the female is energy. Tantra does not make an absolute distinction between them. Its outlook is that the female includes the male. The female is complete in herself, and projects the male whenever needed. Thus the idea of the mother-goddess does not militate against the notion of male divinities, but comprehends it. It is significant that the female

principle is represented by a circle (*chakra*) and the male by the central point (*bindu*) in it. One of the finds from the Harappan excavations depicts the goddess upside side and a tree (male) issuing from her vagina.



The representation of Mukambika in the famous shrine at Kollur on the Western ghats. It is a lingam-like stone with a glistening vein running along it

This is how the ancient representations of the mother-goddess have also been in lingas, rocks, ant-hills and altars. Mukambika in Kollur (Karnataka) is a linga, as many other Devi shrines in India. The Kamakhya shrine in Assam contains a rock which has a crevice in it (resembling the vagina or *yoni*), and which is smeared with red ochre. The Durgamma of Bellary is only an ant-hill. Shashti is worshipped in Bengal by the village folk by installing a stone under a jack-tree; they also carry cowrie-shells as amulets symbolising the mother-goddess. The Khond temple

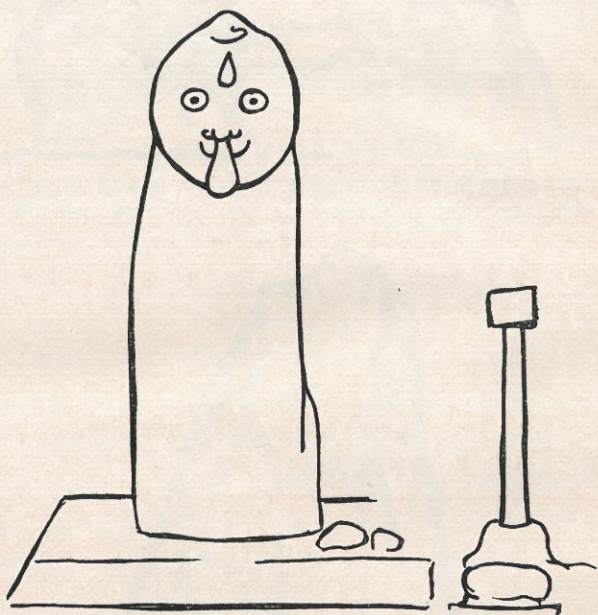


Durga devi image in the temple of Kadri. It is a boulder on which the form of the goddess is carved in rough outline.



The rock resembling an anthill, worshipped as Durga-devi in a temple in Chitrapur

in the Phulbani district (Orissa) has only an wooden post which is worshipped as the goddess. The Khambesvari temple at Aska (also in Orissa) has two short wooden pillars symbolising the deity. There is a Khambesvari post near Gandhardi (Orissa), which is an wooden pillar on which a deity is rudely carved.



The folk deity represented on a wooden post. It is worshipped as Kambhesvari which means 'the lady of the pillar.' It is in a temple in Aska (Orissa)

The village shrines of the mother-goddess are usually small conical stones which would have turned

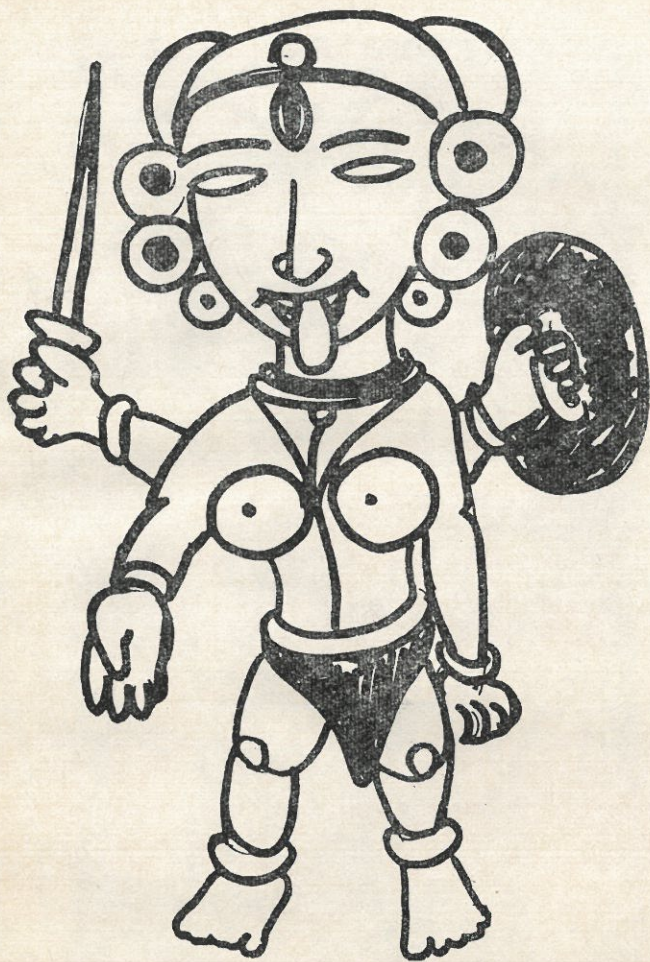
black by a continuous application of oil. Often we find squarish stone-pillars representing mother-goddesses on a raised platform underneath a tree or in the open field ; there may also be narrow enclosures,



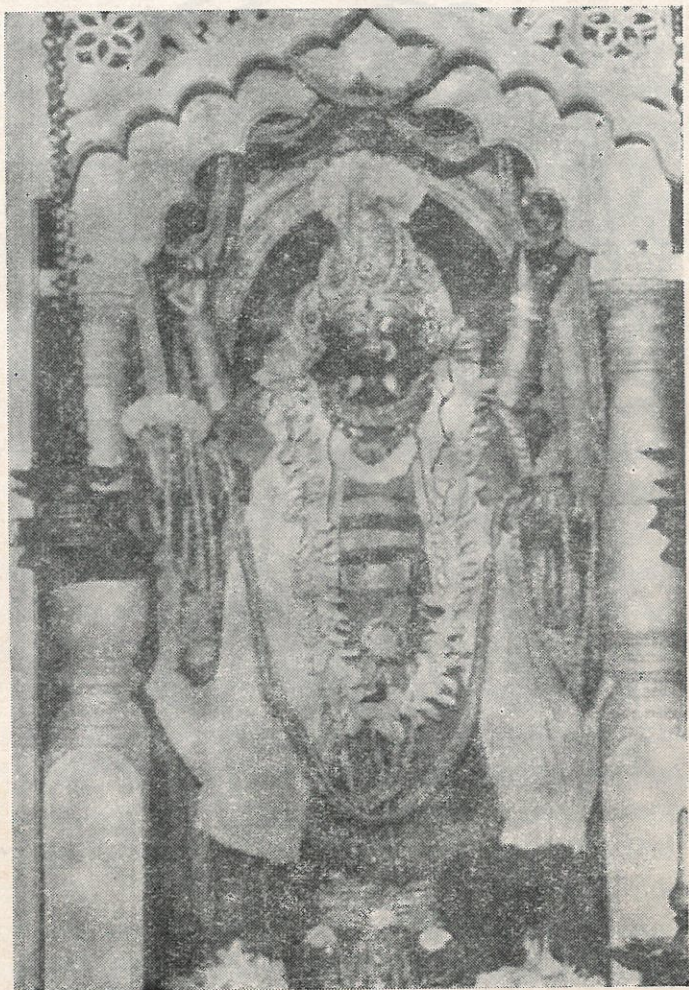
Kambhesvari, the pillar-deity worshipped in a shrine in Gandhardi (Orissa). It is a wooden post of great antiquity on which a folk-goddess has been carved in folk style. Perhaps it represents a sacrificial post

but rarely anything like a temple. If the mother-goddess acquires a little celebrity, the stone pillar may be housed in a thatched shed. The village goddess Maramma, causing and curing epidemics, may be a mere stump of the margosa tree (considered especially sacred to her) ; the village carpenter may attempt to turn the top of the stump into a shape resembling the head. Boundary stones demarcating the village area or the tribal zone would themselves be looked upon as goddesses (Ellamma). Odd-looking stones on the tank-beds, beside the village well, near the entrance to the village or at cross-roads would represent the village goddesses.

More usual, however, is to fashion a clay image once a year or oftener, place it under a pandal constructed for the purpose, worship it as the goddess with folk rites, and dismiss it promptly after the worship. There will be no permanent shrine in the village, but there would be an enclosure reserved for the erection of the pandal whenever occasion demands. Village goddesses in South India like Mutyalamma, Ankamma, Gangamma, Doddamma (Mahesvari), Pujamma and Peddamma are all made in clay, housed in temporary shrines and worshipped. Their presence and relevance are specific to the situation. Here the folk rituals are more important than the icons or the shrines. And the entire community participates in the rituals. Each



A cultic icon from North India made in clay
village would have its own village goddess, called
grama-devata in the South and *Thakurani* in the North.
They would generally be housed under trees in the



Bhadrakali in Gokarna, a coastal shrine

most frequented area of the village. It is usual to call them Uramma (the goddess of the village).

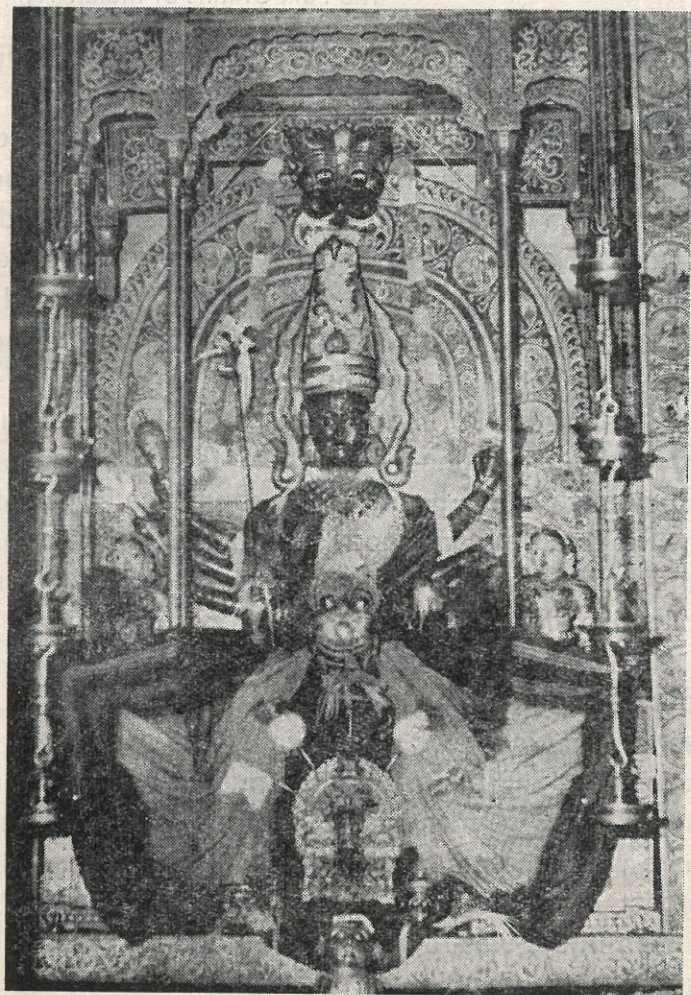


The main deity inside the Vaital temple in Bhubanesvar (Orissa). It is worshipped as Chamunda

Mother-goddesses are generally associated with epidemics like Cholera (Mariamma in the South,



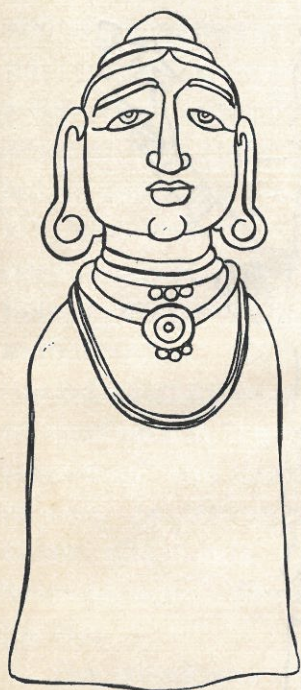
Renuka or Kolaramma, the goddess who cures scorpion bites. Worshippers present the goddess with silver replicas of scorpions



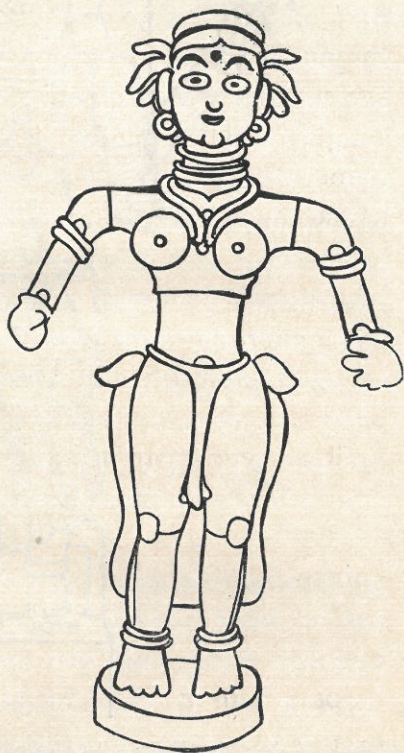
Marikamba of Sirsi

Moti-mata in Central India, and Mari-bhavani), plague (Bombaimayi in the Gaya district, Olai-Chandi in Bengal, Peddamma, Annamma, Nukalamma, Maridiyamma and Kokkalamma in South India), small-pox and measles (Mutyalamma, Sukhajamma and Uddalamma). In their curative capacity they are collectively termed *Pidari* ('enemies of distress'). They may also cause ailments, if not properly propitiated. Their terrible aspect as well as the fierce rituals connected with their worship (like animal sacrifices, hook-swinging and fire-walking) may strike terror and inspire repugnance in the hearts of the sophisticated people, but the rural folk are happy with them, because they fulfil an important function in their individual and collective life.

Early images of the mother-goddess were of course rough and ready. They betray bold turns of rustic imagination. Oftentimes only the head is delineated, and the torso is left merely a stump to be draped with garments and adorned by necklaces; there would be no arms and legs. Later, when the impact of stylized iconography was felt, the full human figure was represented. Wood was the material commonly employed, and the carving was rough. It was usual for arms to be attached later. There was no distinction as yet between the permanent and fixed image in the sanctum (*cala* or *dhruva*) and the

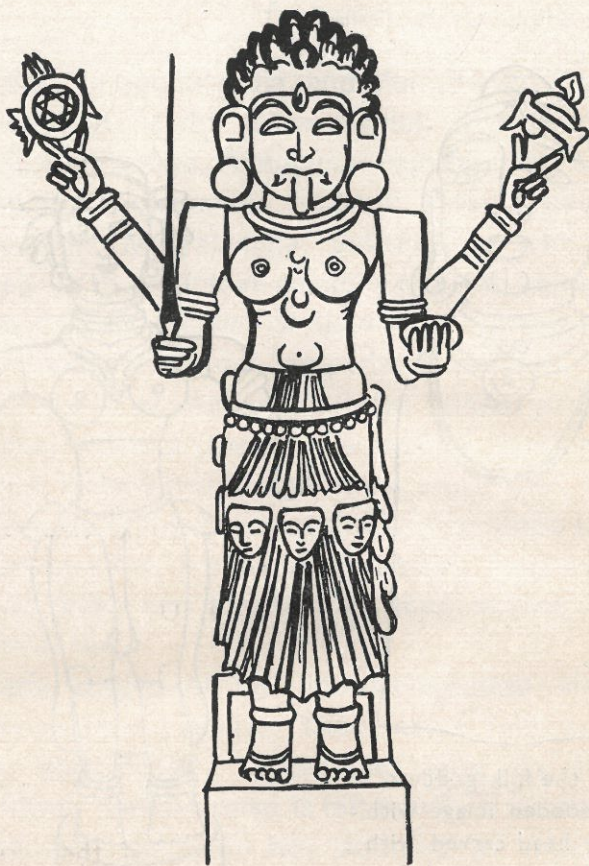


Gauri, the folk-goddess. It is a wooden image with only the head carved with skill. The rest is left a mere stump for covering the image with garments and adorning it with necklaces on festive occasions



A cultic image of the mother-goddess made in wood. It is from Central India

processional image. The same image was in the sanctum and was also carried about. Sometimes huge clay images were also made and richly painted



Mahakali (or Jayadurga) in the popular temple in Ambalpadi near Udipti. It is a wooden image of great antiquity over; they were of course immovable, and small wooden replicas were used for processions.

Whatever the material the image was made of, the aspect was carefully rendered awesome and terrible. The background idea was not that she was cruel, but

that she was looked upon as the protectress from all evil, ailment, danger and death. She should frighten away the hordes of misfortune and disease, the enemies, and spells of the sorcerers. She is represented as trampling over the enemy or the personified evil, and wielding a sword to subjugate the undesirable elements. She was, in the tribal context, the burning fire itself : fire-walking ceremony is a device to placate her. She rides on a lion and vanquishes the wild buffalo imagined as a demon. She brooks no slackness in the observances that the tribal law prescribes, and she can strike the erring devotee as severely as she does the offending enemy. Kali, Karali, Chamunda, Chinna-masta, Ugra-tara are her fierce aspects. She is also featured as peaceful and benign.

Her shrine was indicated by images of crouching lions in front of it or on the roof of it. Even in the later sophisticated temples, the lion motif survived and was stylized. The association of the mother-goddess with the lion is not only ancient but was widespread. We have a Sumerian cylinder-seal, belonging to about 2250 B.C., which depicts a mother-goddess (a version of our Durga) with a lion.

Mother-goddesses begin their career in a cultic fashion. Each village or tribal settlement will have its own mother-goddess, inspired by a local legend and

oftentimes an incarnation of some local woman of exceptional virtue, valour or evil nature. Self-sacrifice or self-immolation to help construction of village tanks and wells, to eliminate pestilence, to repulse an attack or to vindicate the honour of the tribe, would usually elevate an otherwise ordinary woman to a divine status ; and a shrine would be erected to her memory. But soon romantic legends would grow round the simple memorial shrine and push the prosaic historical details to the background and later into oblivion. She would be known in course of time only as a goddess. Minakshi of Madhurai is an illustrious instance, but there are thousands of other shrines in the country with a similar background. Many cultic divinities like Vasavi (Kanya-Kumari), Manasa and Draupadi have a similar origin.

Multiplicity of mother-goddesses is a folk fact. But their names and forms have remarkable similarity ; legends also are in the main the same, barring local touches and finer details. This was capitalized by the later sophisticated religion to formulate the concept of one Mother whose manifestations were innumerable. Thus the mother-goddess had a local relevance as well as a general significance. Originally an earth-goddess, symbolising fertility, she came to be named Ma or Amma. The word is not a Sanskrit one, nor is it entirely Indian. The *Amma* of the Austrians, *Ummu*

of the Sumerians, *Umm* of Accadians, *Ommo* of the Scythians are cognate with the Indian *Amma* or *Uma*. There was a goddess with the same name in Persian gulf, Red Sea area and Asia Minor. She is the mother with the mystic form, the queen of the earth and its vegetation, the lady who befriended and ruled over animals (especially bull and lion), the protectress of fortresses, and inhabiting mountains, glens and forests.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD OF SPIRITS

What happens to the humans when they are dead, and gone from here? Do they disappear altogether into airy nothings? Man's instinct to survive fights against this conclusion. The folk mind naively postulates the survival of all human beings beyond death and independent of the physical body. Especially is this true of human beings who are distinguished by their magical power, social status, valour and victories, or by their very wicked dispositions. They live on to guard over the tribe or clan, or to haunt it. The members of the group have to keep them in good humour, to involve them in tribal affairs, and to placate them by periodical propitiations. They are *pretas* or 'departed' spirits who nevertheless continue to interest themselves in all undertakings of the individual and the group. They are *bhutas* or 'potent' spirits who have acquired power enough to help or haunt those who are living.

Later, a distinction was made between the merely

'departed' spirits who hover round the place of their burial or cremation, unable to tear themselves off their material background (the *pretas*), and the 'potent' spirits who by their accomplishments while living and the manner of their death can come to the aid of the living whenever invoked (the *bhutas*). But the folk mind does not make this fine distinction. *Bhuta* is a more generic term, comprehensive and significant. However, it is distinguished from ghosts which are obviously and completely wicked and mischievous (the *pisachas* in Sanskrit and *kule* in Tulu) ; they are vengeful and the living seek to keep them off. They are the spirits of those who lived and died violently, despised while living and dreaded when dead. They correspond to demons and devils.

The spirits that are worshipped in the folk cults are the *bhutas*, and not *pisachas*. Therefore, to describe the cultic worship prevalent in the Himalayan regions, and in the western coast of Southern India (Tulu-nadu and Kerala) 'devil-worship' or 'demon-worship', as is usually done, is altogether inappropriate. The *bhutas* (also called *daivas*, although a subtle distinction is sometimes made between the two) are actually supernatural agents aiding the clan-members to live harmoniously, peacefully, effectively and meaningfully. They are in fact divinities with a human past and tribal interest. They guide the folk on the



Representation of Siva as Bhairava in the Vaital temple of Bhubanesvar. Bhairava in the terrible form of Siva, frequently met with in the tribal context as a *bhuta*

right path, establish social justice, and preserve the tribal sanctions with scrupulous and strict supervision. They are sought after by the clan-members and even by others who are outside the clan.

The rites in connection with their invocation and worship are not to be regarded as black magic or witchcraft. They are never invoked to do any harm, but always to help normal living. It is true that the masks and the images representing the *bhutas* are terror-striking; the priest when possessed by the *bhuta* conducts himself in a manner that is frightening and bizarre. But the participants of the personating-

ritual (called *darshana* or the 'appearance' of the spirit) find the whole event meaningful and satisfying. The element of dread or violence does not enter into their transaction. It is a part of their normal living.

Life has many aspects : problems, stresses, challenges, dangers, risks and pleasures. If Vedic religion personified and deified natural forces, folk religion personified and deified normal aspects of human life. The spirits represent the manifold aspects of normal life, both domestic and social, in the rural and tribal context. Animals play an important role in such a life, especially if the village or the tribal settlement is in the close vicinity of forests and mountains. The spirits thus come to share both human and animal traits. There are spirits that eliminate the dangers from animals such as wild buffalo (Durga in her aspect of Mahishasura-mardini), tiger (Pili-chamundi), snakes (Manasa, Janguli), and elephant (Vinayaka, Balaji and Ayyappan). Some ride on animals suggesting subjugation, like Durga on lion, Siva on the wild bull, Kutti-chattan on buffalo, and Ayyappan on tiger.

Some spirits incorporate in themselves the form of animals they eliminate or subjugate. Folk deities are mostly of this nature. Ganesa (the elephant-headed god), Hanuman (the monkey-headed demi-god), Varaha (the boar-faced form of Vishnu), Haya-griva (the horse-headed god, corresponding to the

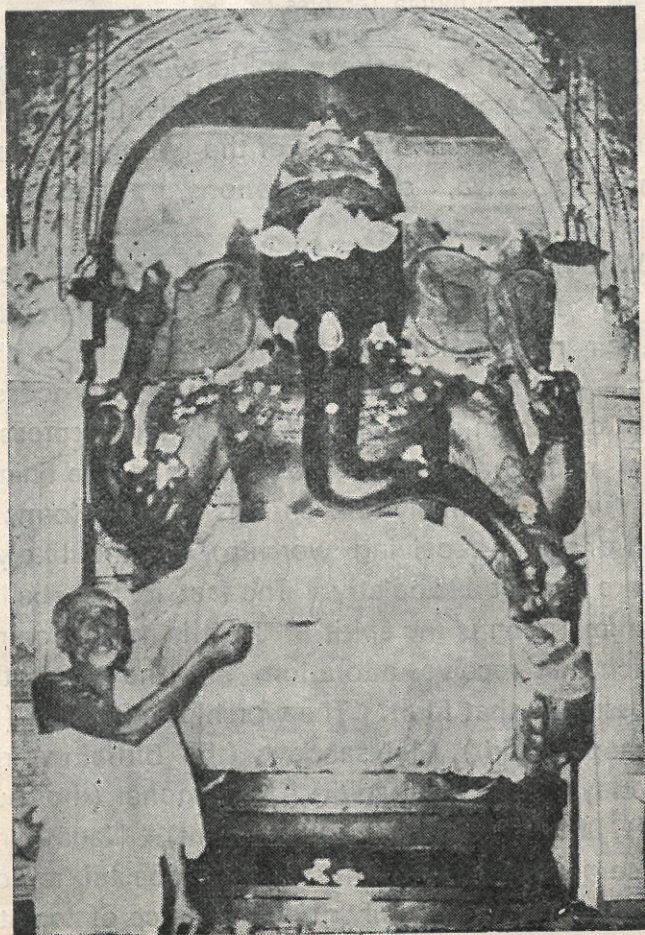


The popular folk-spirit of Kerala, Kutti-chattan, frequently invoked in magical rites and by sorcerers (tribal Jarandaye), Garuda (the hawk-headed demi-god), Naga and Nagini (the god or goddess having human form above with serpentine hoods and serpentine form below), Narasimha (the lion-faced form), and Nandi (the bull-headed demi-god attached to Siva) are illustrations of this folk phenomenon.

Strangely, many of these spirits were accepted by the sophisticated religion either as divinities in their own right or attached to one of the two major Gods, Vishnu or Siva, as incarnations, attendants or offsprings.

When, however, this is done, there is an elevation in their functional status, a reinterpretation of their role and nature, and a stylization of their form. At the folk level, it is a simple process of fusion of human and animal traits, and an expression of the relation between the spirit and the animal. When we see in many folk shrines animal forms in wood or metal receiving worship, we are likely to mistake the act as zoolatry. The fact is that behind the animal-icon is the spirit-idea. It is not the animal as such that receives adoration, but the spirit that has assumed that form. The worship of Panjurli (the pig-shaped spirit), Mahisandaye (the buffalo-spirit), Jarandaye (the horse-spirit), Nandigone (the bull-spirit), Puli-teyyam (the tiger-spirit), Naga-kanye (the serpent-damsel) in the western coastal regions of South India is certainly not an instance of zoolatry, nor is it a totemistic cult. It is full-fledged and mature religion at the folk level.

The worship of mountain-spirits (*yakshas*), sylvan spirits (*nagas*), and spirits of community heroes or saviours (*bhutas*) has been in India continuous from



A ten-foot high image of Ganesha in Kurudumale (Kolar)
the earliest stages of Indian civilization till our own
day. There is a very large number of these spirits that
inspire reverence among the rural and tribal folk.

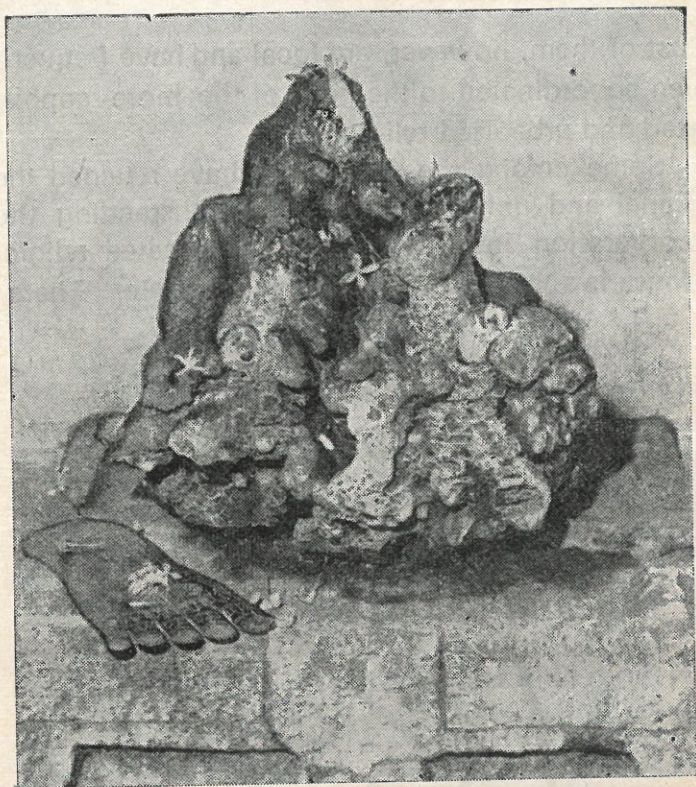
Most of them, however, are local and have frequently been subordinated to the gods of the more sophisticated and urbanized religion.

Some among the folk spirits have retained their original and universal appeal notwithstanding their incorporation into later and sophisticated religion. Ganesa is the most conspicuous example. There is



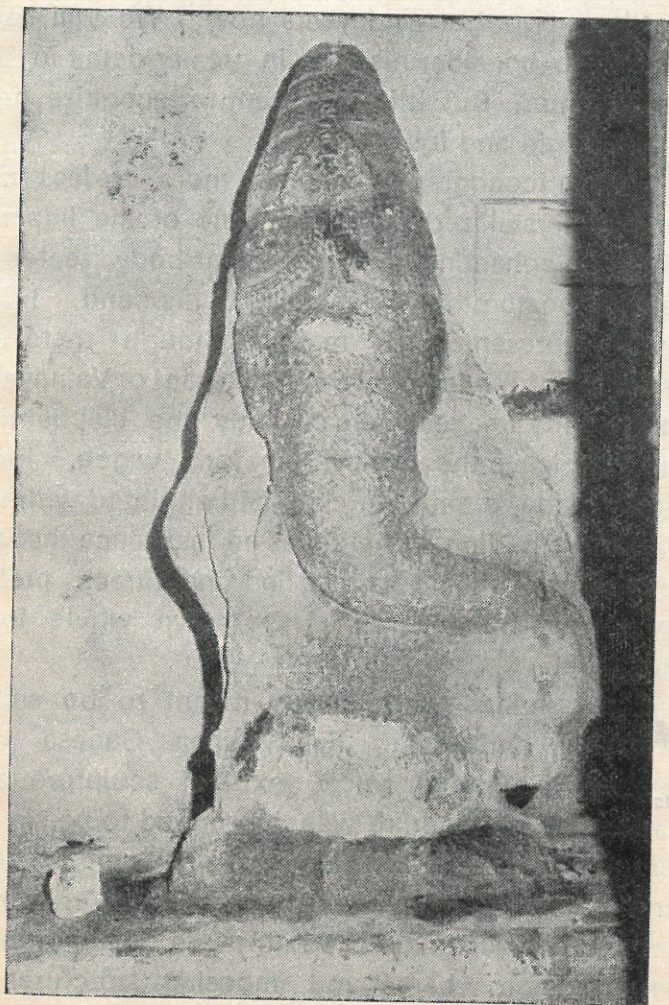
Ganesha stone in a village

hardly any doubt that he began his career as a *yaksha*, and that he is essentially a folk deity, both in his



Ganesha-form assumed by the roots of the Arka-plant (*Calotropis gigantea*) worshipped in Mukambika shrine at Kollur on the Western ghats

form and in his function. He was later brought into the urban fold as a member of Siva's household (as his son), but his importance has persisted without any diminution. It is probable that at one time, his relevance was local, but it has been universal in India



Ganesha in stone with only head carved

for at least two thousand years now. We will have occasion to consider his case in greater detail in the next volume. But it is important to recognize here his folk origin and folk nature.

Ganesa iconography has been more or less unalterably crystallized since the time of the Imperial Guptas: elephantine head, corpulent body, seated in a relaxed posture having eatables in his hand. He is largely represented as male, although there are specimens of his female form (Ganesani or Vainayaki). But the early images indicate only the elephantine head, and leave the rest of the form vague. He is crudely made, often with clay, and anointed with red ochre or vermillion. There was an insistence that the Ganesa-image should be installed under trees, preferably under palm-trees, or in the town where four-roads meet.

Early shrines were clearly meant to be small, flat-roofed and plain. Even when Ganesa was included in the canonical texts of sculpture and architecture, his shrine was prescribed to be simple and unostentatious, his sanctum having neither doors nor a tower. In temples dedicated to Siva or Vishnu he was to be accommodated only in a niche, or in an open pavillion. Large and imposing structures to Ganesa were unknown until very recent years; stylized shrines dedicated solely to Ganesa are also

relatively uncommon. His initial inclusion in the urbanized pantheon was only as an attendant god (*parsva-devata*), and his mention in the Smriti texts is as an uncanny spirit (*yaksha*), causing and curing malevolent influences, especially the diseases of children.

If Ganesa transcended his original folk character and his tribal confinement and carved out an independent status for himself, Hanuman, another obviously



Hanuman as represented
in the folk-painting of
Mewar (Rajasthan)



Hanuman as a hero from
Andhra Pradesh



Rock-cut image of Hanuman in Mulubagilu on the way to the
Tirumalai hills from Karnataka



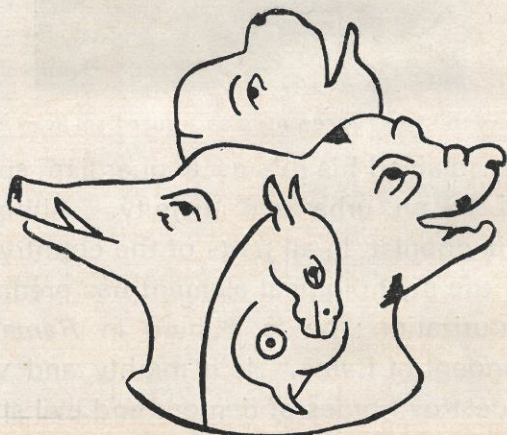
Hanuman represented as a guardian-hero

folk spirit, retained his role as a guardian spirit subordinated to an urbanized divinity. Although his worship is popular in all parts of the country even to this day, the mythological element has predominated in his featurization: he is a hero in *Ramayana*, an able attendant of Rama. He is mighty and valorous, and can destroy hordes of demons and evil spirits.

He guards villages against marauders, violent aggressors and wicked goblins. Every village will have a shrine to him at the very entrance. He is the patron-

deity of professional wrestlers who invariably invoke his aid to win their combats. He is also a favourite of the magicians and sorcerers : his name and image are frequently employed in rituals meant to secure the health and strength of children. He is also worshipped as an antidote to morbid fears and anxiety ; he figures prominently in talismans and amulets worn by those who seek to become brave and confident.

There is no doubt that he was an independent folk spirit before his involvement with Rama began. Early images of Hanuman highlight his grotesque form. The name Hanuman is not a regular Sanskrit word : it is the Sanskritized form of a Dravidian word mean-



The Hanuman mask in metal. It represents five animal heads (Pancha-mukhi) cleverly organized. The animals represented are the boar, horse, parrot, lion and monkey. This is from Rajasthan



Another representation of five-headed Hanuman from Rajasthan



Hanuman as a devotee.
from Kerala

ing 'male-monkey' (an-manti). He is given not only a monkey-face but also the characteristic tail: his general form and posture are those of an anthropoid ape, although his hands and feet are more human. Stylized iconography tended to humanize his image to a greater extent, but could not avoid the evident folk background. He is sometimes depicted as having five heads: those of a monkey (the main one),

horse, boar, tiger (or lion) and eagle (*Garuda* or sometimes parrot, *suka*). Later explanation seeks to synthesize in this strange icon the images of Narasimha, Varaha, Hayagriya and Garuda with that Hanuman. But preoccupation with dangers from wild animals is undoubtedly the undercurrent. It is probably an attempt to arrive at a composite figure representing five different animal-headed spirits.

Like shrines to Ganesa, shrines to Hanuman are also typically small, flat-roofed and plain. It is also common to leave the stone icons uncovered by any structure. Huge boulders rudely carved into the form of Hanuman are commonly to be met with. In the folk context, his shrine is always an independent one. But in later religion he is never regarded as an independent divinity: in the temples in which he figures as the main god, there is always the iconographic presence of his master Rama. It is therefore usual to represent him as a devotee, with palms joined in prayer or supplication.

Alternately, he is shown as running, carrying a mountain on his left hand, and a mace in his right. The situational reference is to an episode in Ramayana. Struck by a powerful weapon on the battle-field. Lakshmana fainted away. The herb to revive him was on a distant mountain. Hanuman was sent to fetch it. But unable to identify the plant, he uprooted the entire mountain and brought it to the battle-field. The physicians took the herb and saved Lakshmana's life.



Hanuman carrying the mountain, in
a painting from Himachala Pradesh

Hanuman is included in North India under the general nomenclature of Balaji. Balaji is a very popular god in the North, inspired directly by the folk idiom. The term does not refer to any particular divinity, either locally or stylistically specified. It is a generic name. It includes several mountain spirits (*yakshas*), local tutelary deities (*devas*), deified but wild heroes (*bhutas*), and abstract divinities. Supernatural power and extraordinary presence are the distinguishing features of Balaji. And it comprehends all aspects of a normal divinity: it protects the village or property, it guards against ailments and attacks, it secures health and happiness, it warns the devotee and guides him. While he is worshipped,



Hanuman as Balaji from the
Himalayan foothills

he is feared also. He is a friend when placated, but he can be fierce when offended. Small shrines, plain and low, are erected in rural surroundings to him. It is interesting that the North Indians regard the famous deity on the Tirumalai Hills in Andhra Pradesh as Balaji, thus emphasizing the tribal background of this shrine.

Later temples, mighty and monumental, evolved from such low beginnings. Sophistication did not wipe out the folk elements: it only provided a context for them, in keeping with the new needs of the urbanized population.

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Although the significance of folk culture in Indian society has been recognized, the actual folk involvement in the temple tradition has not been sufficiently appreciated. The book attempts to focus attention for the first time on the origin of Indian temples in folk cults.

The cultural continuity of the folk foundation and the sophisticated superstructure has been brought out. The source of the Hindu pantheon in the folk mentality has also been traced.

The book is profusely illustrated by line drawings made by the author and by photographs of great significance.

Vidyalankara Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao, who has headed the department of Psychology in the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-sciences, Bangalore, and has taught Indian Culture in the Callison College Study Centre (University of the Pacific, USA) is a scholar in Sanskrit, Pali, Ardhamagadhi and Tibetan. He has written extensively on topics concerning different aspects of Indian culture and also on psychology.

He is an artist (sculpture and painting) and a musicologist. He is member of Lalit Kala Academy and Sangit Nritya Academy of the Karnataka state. He was a member of the Agama Board of the Karnataka Government.