

Nāgas

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The worship of *devas* may be the most visible aspect of religion in the Kathmandu Valley, but it is certainly not the only aspect. In the actual day-to-day practice of religion it is often the lesser *devtas* and supernaturals who demand people's attentions. For it is they who most directly affect such pragmatic concerns as health, wealth and fertility. Among these lesser deities, *nāgas* - or serpent-deities - are of considerable importance. They play a prominent role in mythological accounts of the history of the Valley, are represented in a variety of art forms, and are regularly propitiated in both domestic rituals and larger community festivals.

Yet *nāgas* remain somehow elusive. Opinions as to their precise nature and function vary considerably, and they continue to generate a sense of ambivalence for many Nepalis. Furthermore, only scant attention is given them in the many ethnographies of religion in the Valley.

This paper aims to focus attention onto *nāgas* and their role in the day-to-day practice of religion in the Kathmandu Valley. The paper is divided into 3 sections. The first is a descriptive account - for the ethnographic record - of events surrounding the alleged appearance of *nāgas* at Char Ghare, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, in December - January 1983/84. The second section is an account of people's responses to and interpretations of the significance of these events. The third section is an attempt to come to grips with the significance of *nāgas* more generally, in the context of Nepalese religion.

I. Nagas in Char Ghare¹

In early December 1983 a Tamang farmer of Char Ghare, near Bodnath, had a dream in which he was told that a serpent-deity (*nāga*) was about to appear to the world in material form². Later, the farmer was digging in his field when a spring suddenly gushed from the ground³. According to the farmer, the heads of five snakes appeared from out of this spring⁴. Their necks were intertwined, and on the back of one's head was a shining object⁵. After a few minutes the snakes disappeared together back into the spring, only to reappear again, at regular intervals.



Before long, word spread that these somewhat extraordinary snakes were in fact nāgas. Now the worship of nāgas is an important part of Nepalese religious life but very seldom, if ever, do they reveal themselves to humanity in material form. Consequently, hundreds of people came to the site to witness for themselves these strange beings, and to offer worship. A committee was formed to control the crowds and generally 'manage' the event. A priest (*pujārī*) was appointed to perform rituals of worship, and donations were solicited to enable the construction of a small temple (*mandir*). The road to the site was improved, parking facilities were provided (and fees levied), and various entrepreneurs (sellers of balloons, tea, paddy seeds, etc) soon established themselves. The question of the 'real' identity and significance of these nāgas/snakes came to be a popular subject of discussion throughout the Valley.

When I first visited the site myself, in early January 1984, there were approximately 300 people present, with a steady flow of people coming and going. The area surrounding the field where the nāgas were appearing had been securely fenced off, and volunteer guardians recruited by the committee were successfully controlling the crowds. Above the field itself was a red canopy and an electric light bulb. Underneath, the stubble of the paddy was covered by water (bubbling from a spring) to a depth of approximately 3cm. Near to where the nāgas were appearing was a small altar, on which placed the various ritual implements used by the priest in his rituals. Covering the entire area were coins and flowers thrown by worshippers.

At first, there was no sign of either nāgas or snakes. However after approximately 1 hour the noise of the crowd suddenly increased, and I looked to find the heads of what appeared to be 2 snakes, raised together above the water, with a third approximately 2 metres away. The head of each snake was approximately 4 cm long and stood approximately 15 cm above the water. The snakes remained in that position, apparently motionless, for approximately 10 minutes, then disappeared together. An hour later, the snakes appeared again, for 15 minutes, then disappeared together.

I returned to the site on 3 occasions over the next 10 days. On every occasion at least 2 and sometimes 3 snakes made an appearance. On one occasion I arrived at the site at dawn. There were already some 20 or so worshippers present. The priest arrived at approximately 7.00 A.M. and, after cleaning the area of rubbish and purifying it with holy water and a white paste, began to recite various *mantras*. The heads of 2 snakes then appeared and the priest offered *tikā* to those present.

By 9.00 A.M. the crowd had swelled to over 300 worshippers and entrepreneurs. The crowd represented a fair cross-section of Nepalese society, including senior public servants and their families, businessmen, peasants from 3 days' walk away, Buddhist monks, local villagers and the occasional tourist. The only person that I saw given access to the site itself, apart from the priest, was an ascetic from India.

On the 2nd January 1984, the English language daily, the *Rising Nepal*, published an article about what it called the "Char Ghare phenomenon". The article was accompanied by a photo of the snakes, quoted reactions from various worshippers, and noted the many peculiarities and unresolved questions surrounding the event. A number of letters to the editor appeared, principally concerned with the issue of whether or not these beings really were nāgas or just ordinary snakes. Subsequently the Nepali daily newspaper, the *Gorkhāpatra*, ran an article essentially discrediting the assertion that the snakes were nāgas and suggesting that such 'superstitions' were contrary to 'scientific' evidence and the interests of a developing nation. Interviews with members of the crowd following publication of the article revealed that it had provoked much public discussion but had had little effect on the number of worshippers coming to the site.

In late February 1984 I visited the site again. I found only 50 or so worshippers, an element of cynicism and even suspicion among many of those present, and a general sense of decay. I was told that there was some disagreement within the committee as to how much money had been collected, and that in any case there were sufficient funds only for the construction of a small pond at the site, rather than a temple. Nevertheless, at least one snake was still appearing, and belief in the category of nāgas in general appeared to have remained unaffected by events.

In February 1986, I visited the site again. Water was still bubbling from a small spring, and the area surrounding it had been walled off and had not been sown with paddy. However, there was no evidence of either nāgas or snakes, or temple, or even people. The only evidence of any religious activity whatsoever were 3 small stones marked with red tika powder. Later, in Ghare, I asked whether the nāgas were still appearing. Responses varied from "Never", to "once 4 months ago", to "every Monday and Tuesday mornings". Apparently an (unsuccessful) attempt had been made (by "outsiders") in mid-1984 to revive interest by placing obviously artificial snakes at the site. No sign had been seen of the money collected. On the whole, villagers felt that the events had, if anything, brought them bad luck. Nevertheless, I was assured that all Chār Ghare residents had maintained their belief in the general category of nāgas, and that at least 10 people continued to offer worship at the site each week. (this was due in part to the significance attached to the continued flow of water from the spring.) There had been no reports of appearances of nāgas elsewhere.

II. Responses to the Events

Now the events at Chār Ghare are certainly of interest, if for no other reason than the many puzzling circumstances surrounding the appearance of the snakes/nāgas. Firstly, the snakes appeared in the middle of winter, a time when the great majority of species are in hibernation. Secondly, is the fact that at least 2 (and perhaps more) snakes rose, stayed erect, and disappeared together, from the same spot, at the same time. Thirdly, is the fact that they appeared so often, over such a long period of time, and so regularly that their appearance was almost predictable. Fourthly, is the fact that the snakes remained at the site and continued to exhibit themselves despite the considerable impact of hundreds of onlookers only 3 or 4 metres away, making much noise and throwing coins, flowers etc. Finally, is the fact that the events conform in so many ways with accounts of the appearance of nāgas elsewhere in South Asia. (See Section III).

It was suggested by some, of course, that the events constituted a conscious conspiracy. It would appear, however, that there is little evidence for this claim. The committee set up to manage the event remained very loosely organised, with no obviously powerful or charismatic leader. The owner of the land himself appeared to be rather frightened by the whole affair⁶ and every one I spoke to - 'believers' or otherwise - acknowledged the potential dangers and taboos associated with falsely representing and involving oneself with nāgas. Furthermore, I found relatively little embellishment in accounts of the events themselves. A real question remained therefore as to the explanation of the events, and their significance. For this reason I interviewed over 20 worshippers (representing a variety of castes, occupations and religious persuasions). On the basis of these interviews, and

comments of worshippers quoted in the *Rising Nepal* (2/1/84), the following may be said to have been the most representative of responses to the events at Chār Ghare:

- a. *Full, unqualified belief* in the existential reality and significance of the nāgas, as nāgas. An example of this attitude (probably the most common I encountered) is the statement by Kesar Chalise, an elderly resident of the nearby village of Jorpāti:

"It is lord Vishnu himself who has come to give us humans a glimpse of himself in the form of nāgas so that we humans will not lose our faith in the Lord at this time when the world is going through a period of turmoil"

(quoted in *Rising Nepal* 2/1/84 p. 6)

On two occasions it was suggested to me that Nepalis have no choice in this kind of situation; that belief in nāgas is part and parcel of being Nepalese. Furthermore, nāgas *must* be protected and worshipped since Nepal is their only remaining home. One informant said to me:

"If we don't believe in nāgas we are letting them die. If we don't let the nāgas live they will die out altogether. Then who will make sure that the rains come and go?"

- b. *Initial doubts followed by confirmation of belief* following the witnessing of the nāgas. A high-ranking civil servant, for example, (who claimed to have come only at the insistence of his wife) maintained that nāgas can never be seen. Later, however, he proclaimed his belief (and made a large donation) after his wife had experienced a light shower of rain (i.e., evidence of the presence of nāgas) at the site.
- c. *Disbelief, but worship "just in case"*. This attitude was most prevalent among those from neighbouring villages and among those from professional occupations. It was interesting to note that perhaps the most vociferous sceptic and critic, demanded that I interview him over a kilometre away from the site, where "the nāgas won't hear us"!
- d. *Ambivalent curiosity*. An example of this attitude is the following comment from a Buddhist monk:

"I cannot say for sure that these snakes are nāgas because I have never seen a nāga. And for the same reason I cannot say that they are not nāgas. (quoted in *Rising Nepal* 2/1/84 p.6)

While the debate as to the existential status of the snakes was an important one, it became clear to me that actually *seeing* the snakes was a relatively unimportant factor in the debate; that

the proof was not, as it were, in the pudding. One old resident of Chār Ghare explained to me that while I might be able to see the snakes, I would not be able to see them as nāgas. For if nāgas were to manifest themselves in material form to all and sundry there would be no further necessity for faith (and thus commitment).

Interpretation of the significance of the events were quite diverse. (None of those interviewed suggested that the events were *not* significant and residents still maintain today that it was one of the most important events in the Kathmandu Valley in many years). The most common explanations were those couched in religious terms and included the following:

- a. The events were important because they provided the first ever opportunity for worship (*darsan*) with nāgas in observable material form and on a regular basis.
- b. The events signified a resurgence of traditions and a renewal of faith and devotion in the Hindu deities, particularly Vishnu.
- c. The events signified a reaffirmation of a *pre-Hindu* past, and opportunity for worship of and communion with ancestors.

There can be little doubt that the cause of religion was, at least temporarily, aided by the alleged appearance of the nāgas. What is interesting, however, is that many people I spoke with saw the events as signalling a degree of ecumenism (given the significance of nāgas in both Hinduism and Buddhism) and representing something of a challenge to the orthodox religious elite (who, some say, have tended to ignore nāgas in recent times).

Those who did not profess belief in the nāgas tended to give more weight to social, political or economic explanations of the significance of the events. Such explanations included the following:

- a. The events were essentially a low caste phenomenon. One Brahmin respondent said that it was an attempt by the villagers to confirm their status within Hindu society. Another said that it was an attempt to affirm an independent, pre-Hindu identity. (Neither respondent was particularly critical of such alleged motivations).
- b. The events brought considerable political and economic benefits to the village or, at least; to particular individuals in the village, e.g., the income derived from donations and parking fees; improvements to the road, etc. (Undoubtedly this is true, but it would be interesting to know whether these benefits were planned, or merely accrued as a byproduct of the events).

- c. The events were a rather novel, but nevertheless acceptable means of collecting the funds necessary for the construction of a local temple. Certainly they also provided opportunity of a festive occasion and some social excitement.

Now, as an 'objective researcher', I accepted that it was neither my responsibility nor within my capability to judge the validity of these various responses. However, I found that I could not totally divorce *my own* personal discomfort as to the existential status of these snakes from my professional efforts to record and understand the various explanations offered by others. Therefore, I tended to distinguish those responses which regarded the snakes as nāgas (and thus important at an internal, spiritual level) from those which regarded them as mere snakes (and thus important at a sociopolitical and economic level). However, it soon became obvious that such a separation was not particularly helpful. More in-depth discussion with informants revealed that at least some people simultaneously maintained both religious and socioeconomic interpretations and, when pressed, saw no contradiction in doing so⁷.

Could I not see, one particularly enlightened informant asked, that different interpretations were merely the result of different levels of focus, and that each level of focus was only part of a 'truth' that lay in a greater whole? As a 'scientist' this informant looked at the snakes as snakes and wondered at their socioeconomic ramifications. As a Hindu, however, he looked at the snakes as nāgas and felt awe and reverence. Of course, the informant was *both* scientist and Hindu.

Another informant explained it thus:

"on the outside we can see that the snakes are just snakes. We can all see that. But on the inside they are nāgas. We can all *feel* that. You can't have the inside without the outside".

The conclusion would appear to be that religious and socioeconomic interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive; that *all* of the various attitudes and explanations offered contain elements worth pursuing in developing a better appreciation of the events and their significance. Such a conclusion, of course, has some rather important implications for how we social scientists go about studying and reporting on the phenomena we encounter.

The trouble with this conclusion, however, is that not all of my informants shared this eclectic, multidimensional approach to things. In fact, one of the most interesting (disturbing?) aspects of the events for me personally was the tension I encountered between those who saw the events in terms of a threat to the development of a 'rational', 'scientific' way of thinking, and those who saw them as an opportunity for the reaffirmation of traditional Nepalese religious and cultural identity. (While those who held

to the former view tended to be the Western-educated, urban professionals, there was no necessary correlation here). In a letter to the editor of the *Rising Nepal* (4.1.84), one reader wrote of "dispelling the ignorance and superstitions" surrounding the events. The *Gorkhapatra* in its article in Nepali on the subject, repeatedly stressed that there was "nothing strange" about any of the events, and offered considerable 'scientific' evidence in support of this claim⁸. A senior staff member of the *Rising Nepal* was quite critical of my interest in such things as nāgas, saying that there were more important things that I should be concerned with, and that dwelling on the supernatural would only retard the country's progress. On the other hand, another staff member said to me:

"my colleagues are trained to think in terms of science. They argue about whether they are or are not nāgas. But I think in terms of God. For me, the strength of my belief says they are nāgas. Perhaps it means a new age of darkness? or may be of light? Only God and the nāgas know those things".

A representative of the committee managing the events commented to me simply that:

"we are sad the newspapers say they are not nāgas when we can see that they are".

Now the very intensity of people's responses to the events at Chār Ghare suggests that there is something about nāgas in general that warrants further investigation. For many centuries the people of the Kathmandu Valley (and in fact throughout the world) have placed considerable importance on these deities - with or without confirmation of their existential 'reality'. In the last section of this paper I offer a preliminary exploration of why this might be so, and the implications which such an interpretation might hold for an understanding of religion in Nepal more generally.

III. Nāgas: A preliminary exploration

The worship of nāgas is in no way a peculiarity of the Kathmandu Valley. As early as 1833, Deane spoke of serpent worship as 'universal'. In a lecture delivered to the Society for the Study of Religions in 1938, Yahuda commented that "we must take it as a fact that serpent worship and serpent symbolism belong to the oldest and most primitive manifestations of human thought" (quoted by Joines 1974: VI) In 1969 Eliade wrote that nāgas

"represent the genii of places, the aboriginal sacrality... preserving a timeless 'hidden doctrine'" (1969: 352)

Evidence of serpent worship can indeed be found throughout the world - from Alaska (where there are no snakes) to the Mediterranean; from S.E. Asia to West Africa. There are some important similarities in the ways in which the nature and function of snakes is perceived in these various regions. With the notable exception of the Christian tradition, the snake is seldom portrayed as wholly profane or wholly holy, but rather as a somewhat ambiguous combination of such oppositions - a strange and provocative synthesis of life and death and therefore an object of both intense animosity and reverence. In many parts of the world the snake is associated with water⁹ (which is both productive and potentially destructive), with fertility¹⁰ and with illness and healing¹¹. Often the snake is infused with bird symbolism¹². And often it is used as a symbol of change¹³.

One reason given for the almost universal significance of serpent worship is the intriguing physical characteristics of the snake: its efficient (and somewhat mysterious) gliding motion, its regular sloughing off of its skin, its penetrating eyes, and of course the power of its poison relative to its size.

In South Asia nāgas and their worship are a pervasive (though often background) theme in both pre-Vedic, Vedic and Buddhist mythology, literature, art and ritual activity¹⁴. Zimmer writes:

"between the Buddha and the nāga there is no such antagonism as we are used to in the saviour versus serpent symbolism of the West. According to the Buddhist view, all the genii of nature rejoice, together with the highest Gods, upon the appearance of the incarnate redeemer and the serpent, as the principle manifestation of the waters of terrestrial life, is no exception... in India the serpent and the saviour are two basic manifestations of the one, all-containing divine substance" (quoted by Bajracharya and Smith 1978: 66,89)

Shiva is sometimes called the king of the Serpents, yet Vishnu is perhaps even more closely associated with them. Vishnu is often represented iconographically as the axis of the universe, at the base of which lie the nāgas¹⁵. There is an important structural opposition in South Asian mythology between the snake (representing earth) and the eagle (representing sky). The term for eagle - *garuda* - is from the Sanskrit root 'gri', literally 'to swallow'. The snake and the eagle are often represented iconographically as swallowing each other. Yet this very opposition is often used as a symbol of the interdependence and ultimate union of opposites - of *upaya* and *prajñā*, of the material and spiritual, mortality and immortality.

In Nepal, nāgas are believed to predate existence¹⁶. Prior to the first churning of the primordial waters, prior to the blossoming of the lotus from Vishnu's navel, prior to the first illumination at the hill of Swayambhu, nāgas coursed their way

through the myriad channels of the underworld and provided the structural foundation on which life (and death) in the world above would eventually be built.

Nāgas may predate existence, but they also give it form. The Kathmandu Valley itself was once a lake (called *Nāgadaha*), inhabited by nāgas. At the time of Viswabhu Buddha, Manjusrī came from Tibet and drained the lake in order to make the region suitable for human habitation. The right of the nāgas to remain and retain their legendary underworld palaces was recognised by Manjusrī, on the condition that they continued to bring the rains so necessary for fertility. Sākyamuni Buddha is said to have given the nāgas tantric *dhāranis* to aid them in this function¹⁷.

Today, nāgas can be seen in art and sculpture throughout the Valley¹⁸ and are of considerable importance in such festivals as Haribodhini Ekādasi and Rāto Machhendranāth¹⁹. One festival, *Nāgapanchami* is wholly directed towards the propitiation of nāgas. During this festival, which is held in the Nepalese month of *Srāwana* (July), offerings of milk and sweets are made to the nāgas residing in every household, and portraits are hung over door ways. In this way members of the household are protected from snake-bite and illnesses said to be caused by nāgas. Nāgas are also of importance at times of house-building and the ploughing and planting of fields. The presence of nāgas at domestic ceremonies is symbolised by a twist of rope.

Nāgas are closely associated with jewels since both derive from the underworld. Because of this connection nāgas are said to be fabulously wealthy (e.g., Karkot's palace in Taudha lake) and serve an important function as guardians of wealth. (Most families will endeavour to secure the services of a nāga to reside in and protect the family's strong box). Many nāgas are believed to have jewels embedded in their foreheads (e.g., the nāga at Chār Ghare) which illuminate the murky depths of the underworld through which the nāgas travel. (Occasional flashes of light are often reported at nāga sacred sites, or *tīrthas*.)

Nāgas are often depicted as guardians at the entrance of buildings (e.g., the portraits of nāgas placed above doorways at *Nāgapanchami*), over windows, at road junctions and at other more symbolic points of coming and going (e.g., between more and less sacred areas in temple complexes). This role may be derived partly from their role as guardians of wealth but it also suggests an important structural role as mediator. (It is important to note that nāgas do not stop comings and goings as much as facilitate them.)

Nāgas are often represented supporting pillars (e.g., Sesa Nāga supporting the axis of the universe; domestic nāgas supporting central poles and beams in houses; Vāsukī nāga who was believed to have supported the old pillar at Delhi until disturbed - thereafter the pillar was unstable and Delhi soon fell to the Moghuls).

Nāgas also have an important role as both protector and revealer of wisdom. Buddha is said to have entrusted nāgas with the most developed of his teachings until such time as mankind was ready and able to understand them. Some of these teachings were later revealed to Nāgarjuna (some say at Nāgarjuna, in the west of the Kathmandu Valley) and formed the basis for the development of the mahayana vehicle of Buddhism. The implication of this link between nāgas and wisdom is that if nāgas are neglected, so too is wisdom. Furthermore, if there is no belief in nāgas then this implies that mankind is not ready for the wisdom which they embody and protect.

Nāgas are often said to represent man's animal nature and physicality (while the *devas* represent man's godly nature and spirituality). Nāgas are often believed to adopt human form (and vice versa e.g., King Nahuṣa who was turned into a nāga for 1000 years for insulting the seven sages) and to suffer human afflictions (e.g., Takṣak nāga was once afflicted with leprosy; Karkot nāga's wife endured chronic eyesore). Nāgas, however, also embody healing power (and this duality is also seen as symbolic of man's essential duality).

The ambivalent nature of nāgas is well demonstrated in a popular myth in the Valley. A farmer was digging in his field when he accidentally struck and killed a baby nāga. The nāga's mother retaliated by killing the farmer and his family, except for one daughter who had been away from home at the time. Rather than avenging her family's death, the daughter offered milk to the nāga mother. Impressed by this demonstration of reverence, the nāga brought the daughter's family back to life. Today nāgas are propitiated both to avert their anger, and to secure their kindness and assistance in day-to-day affairs.

Given that nāgas have such an important and pervasive role in religion in the Kathmandu valley, it is interesting to reflect on why they have received such scant attention in the ethnography (the exception here is the study by Slusser 1982). One reason perhaps is that nāgas are often classified as part of an arbitrary 'folk' dimension of religion. This dimension is perhaps less visible to the casual observer than the more 'orthodox' worship of the principal *devas* and, as some informants suggested, is perhaps declining in status in the face of the pressures of rationalisation. Another reason might be that nāgas often occupy a background role in art, sculpture and religious activity i.e., they are portrayed as either vehicles of the 'higher' deities or as providing a somewhat abstract mediatory, structural role. Furthermore, this role is so pervasive that it may well be often overlooked. A third possible reason is that nāgas appear to straddle so easily the rationalist's division between the observable material world (in the form of the snake) and the nonmaterial, supernatural world (in such forms as mediator between earth and underworld, vehicle for Vishnu, symbol of the regeneration of life, etc.). The notion that nāgas mediate

between worlds (and even more symbolic oppositions) is an elusive notion at best. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the worshipper, it is this notion that gives the nāgas such significance, and it is therefore a notion which cannot be ignored.

To sum up, nāgas both accentuate and encompass the opposition between nature and culture, good and evil, material and spiritual, life and death. Through this apparent duality they express much of the vitality, mystery and awe of creation while simultaneously affording a mediation and promising a wholeness. To whatever extent humanity has forgotten the nāgas, then, it has also forgotten its origins, and to whatever extent humanity betrays the nāgas it also betrays its own structural foundations. For the nāgas represent in a very real sense that essential underlying unity of perceived opposites from which life first arose and to which it must eventually return.

Before concluding it is worth exploring in further detail the close relationship that nāgas enjoy with water. This relationship is of vital importance for understanding the pragmatic, day-to-day significance of nāgas, since water is, of course, the key to life on earth. It is produced in the skies above, falls on the earth and drains away to the seas and subterranean reservoirs, eventually to evaporate and return to the skies to repeat its cycle anew. (The suggestion here, of course, is that water, like nāgas, functions as something of a mediator between earth and sky). The earth's surface is heavily influenced by the effects of water. Both plant and animal kingdoms depend on it. The human body largely comprise it and requires a regular intake for its survival. Agricultural productivity, pastoral activities and even industry depend on it. Yet water can also bring death and destruction in the form of storms and floods.

It is not surprising then that water and its management is often the object of spiritual activity. In Nepal it is venerated as the earthly counterpart of *amrit* (i.e., the immortalising elixir of the gods). It is considered an agent of purification and healing, a vehicle for the gods, and the home of nāgas and other earthly spirits. In fact, nāgas are believed to be present wherever there is water, particularly at springs, lakes, streams, ponds, confluences of rivers²⁰ etc. *Nāgakāsthas* (literally 'serpent timbers') are often erected in the middle of newly constructed ponds to ensure a regular supply of water²¹. Nāgas are regularly propitiated to ensure the timely advent and success of the monsoon (e.g., the *Nāgapancami* festival) and to avert impending droughts²². Many myths and legends in the Kathmandu Valley recount the close historical relationship between nāgas, water and agricultural productivity and prosperity²³. Temples (*mandir*) often house sacred pools inhabited by nāgas and these are often the site of nāga-related rituals and festivals²⁴. The presence of nāgas at festivals is believed to be indicated by a light shower of rain²⁵. Pilgrimages to sacred sites (*tirtha*) near water - such as that at Char Ghare -

are of considerable importance and the establishment of such *tīrthas* is an important means of acquiring merit.

Now it is important to remember that all water *tīrthas* in the Kathmandu Valley are believed to be interconnected, at a number of different levels simultaneously: by actual underground water courses, by thermal/telluric currents, and by more symbolic channels of esoteric power. These complex, multidimensional interconnections serve to create an integrated - and integrating - water system in the Valley (which some say resembles a *mandala*²⁶). This system, in turn, is connected with the major river-systems of Tibet and India. (Some say it is a microcosm of this larger system). By virtue of these connections the Kathmandu Valley is vitally linked up with the weather, the ecology and ultimately (given the spiritual significance of water) with the entire geospiritual cosmography of the South Asia subcontinent²⁷. Furthermore, this system is sometimes said to be reflected in other more micro-level systems of interconnection such as the pathways of psychic energy within the human body.

Nāgas of course are believed to inhabit, to move through and thus to provide the dynamic catalysing spark to this subterranean matrix, or grid, on which the world as we humans experience it is founded. Their influence is felt at all levels of the grid: snakes are to be found near water, nāgas are believed to inhabit sources of telluric energy, the axis of the universe rests on *Seṣa Nāga*, the moving of psychic energy within the body is symbolised in the form of an uncoiling serpent in *Kundalini*, etc. By virtue of the nāgas' role of structural interconnection, mind and body remain vitally linked within man and man remains vitally linked with other men, with his earthly environment, with the energies surging through the underworld and with the influences of the gods in the heavens. Just as the rains cycle from the clouds to the seas and back again, and as snakes and nāgas slither between earth and underworld according to the seasons, so man continues his eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth.

In conclusion, nāgas may, I suggest, be said to represent that view of the world which holds that the spiritual and the material realms are at least interconnected and interdependent (if not in fact one and the same thing). Nāgas provide this interconnection. In doing so, they afford a very pragmatic, this-worldly dimension to religious belief and activity. Yet, simultaneously, they serve a more transcendental purpose. They both suggest an original unity, and hold promise of an eventual synthesis, a resolution of the duality which we perceive and perpetuate in our universe (and which lies at the base of our ignorance and suffering.)

This approach to nāgas suggests some interesting interpretations of the events at Chār Ghare. Could it be that these events are a response to the tensions implicit in a time of change, when the unity of the spiritual and material worlds is increasingly

being threatened in the name of 'science' and 'development'? Could it be that renewed faith in nāgas reflects a need to reaffirm one's origins and structural interconnections, while disavowal of nāgas reflects a desire to establish a new identity within the orbit of a 'modern', 'rationalised' world-view?

Such musing is perhaps extrapolating too far on the events at Chār Ghare. However, it would appear that an indepth study of nāgas and the beliefs and practices associated with them might offer some interesting insights into the nature of sociocultural change in Nepal more generally, as well as being of interest for its own sake. Certainly the future of the nāgas themselves will be influenced by the way in which the Nepalese community responds to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

NOTES

1. The following description is based on my own observations and interviews with informants over a 10 day period in January 1984.
2. At approximately the same time, a pilgrim at the temple of Budhanilkantha (a few kilometres north west of Char Ghare) was rumored to have also had a dream in which he was told that Śeṣa Nāga (on whom the image of the Sleeping Vishnu rests) was about to leave Budhanilkantha for some other undisclosed site. It was also rumored at the time that the water level surrounding the image of the Sleeping Vishnu was falling (a possible indication that the Nāga was leaving).
3. The theme of a farmer discovering a nāga while digging in his field is common in the accounts of appearances of nāgas in South Asia. See for example Fergusson (1866) on the appearance of a nāga at Sumbulpore. A popular legend concerning the discovery of the Sleeping Vishnu image itself at Budhanilkantha contains this theme as well.
4. There is a close association between nāgas and water throughout South Asia (and elsewhere). See Section III.
5. This object was said by some to have resembled Viṣṇu's weapon (Cakra) and led some to identify the nāga as *Saṅkamaṇi Nāga*. Others said this object was a jewel. (One of the many functions of nāgas is to protect jewels in their underworld palaces).
6. The farmer told me that he would not be donating the land (valued at approx. Rs. 35,000) to be used for a temple if it turned out that the snakes were not nāgas.
7. The notion that subjective, spiritual, multi-dimensional approaches to reality are necessarily in conflict with so-called objective, 'rational', 'scientific' approaches is true, of course, only within the confines of that same 'rationalising' paradigm. And,

of course, even within this paradigm there is today a considerable degree of disagreement on this subject.

8. Quoting an expert on snakes from the University's Natural Science Museum, the article said that the snakes had been identified as a common species of water snake. The temperature of the water was sufficient to allow these snakes to survive. Rather than laying eggs these snakes give birth to live young, thus 'explaining' the number of snakes present at the site. Furthermore the snakes were known for their inactivity, thus 'explaining' why they didn't run away from the crowds. The shining object on the back of the snake's head was not a jewel but rather the snakes' eyes. The mist in the air which many worshippers commented on was holy water thrown by the priest. The article went on to warn the 'older generation' not to spend money on such false rumors, and to refrain from touching the water at the site because of its polluted state.
9. For example, rituals associated with the Australian Aboriginal rainbow serpent, and North American Hopi Indian rain dances.
10. For example rituals of the field in Borneo. In South India *nāgā-kals* are placed on the outskirts of villages to promote fertility among barren women. The serpent-deity Da of Dachomey is worshipped to induce fertility and productivity.
11. For example Aesculapius (the serpent-shaped Greek God of healing and symbol of the Western medical profession), and the snake handling cults in southern USA. In Nepal, *nāgas* are one of the many possible supernatural causes of illness and their propitiation is an important source of healing in both Hindu and Buddhist communities. (The author is currently doing research on this subject among the Sherpas of Khumbu, Nepal).
12. For example the Greek God Hermes and the Toltec deity Quetzacoatl.
13. For example, the confrontation in Greek mythology between the chthonic maternal earthly Python and the Hellenic sky God Apollo. In Thailand the *Nāga* King Kala is believed to awaken only when a new Buddha is about to enlighten the earth. Similar links between serpent deities and the future Maitreya Buddha can be found in Tibetan Buddhist texts.
14. See for example the studies of serpent-worship in India by Ferguson (1866) and Vogel (1926). A popular myth in Hinduism dealing with *nāgas* relates how Krishna fought, subdued and finally evicted the troublesome Kaliya *Nāga* from the Yamuna pool, thereby making the area fit for human habitation. The well-known image of the baby Krishna dancing on the head of Kaliya *Nāga* comes from this myth. *Nāgas* are mentioned throughout the Upanishads, the Mahabharata and the Jatakas (see for example Sinha 1979). The Tibetan Bön text, the 'Klu bum' deals with the more than 100,000 *Klu* (the Tibetan term for serpent deities) whose responsibilities

include the protection and revelation of secret texts (see Tucci 1980). *Lu* (the Sherpa term for serpent deities) are of fundamental importance in the day-to-day affairs of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, Nepal. The art of the Gupta period, exemplified in the temples at Ajanta, contains many examples of *nāgas* and *nāga* worship.

Early Greek travellers to India returned with tales of enormous snakes worshipped as Gods. The diaries of the early 5th century Chinese traveller Fa Hien contain many references to *nāgas*. Fergusson (1866) tells of a sighting of a *nāga* at Sumbulpore in 1766 by Mr. Motte. Vogel (1926) tells of a *nāga* cult at Khas in 1875 which has a striking resemblance to the events at Char Ghare. Evidence still remains today of flourishing *nāga* cults in South India and Sri Lanka.

15. At Budhanilkantha in the Kathmandu Valley, Vishnu is represented sleeping on a bed of *nāgas* (Sesha *Nāga*). Earthquakes are sometimes explained in terms of the occasional restlessness of *nāgas*.
16. Perhaps the most famous of Buddhist creation myths is the *Swayambhū Purāna* (see Bajracharya and Smith 1978) which describes the role played by *nāgas* in creation. Hindu accounts of the origins of the valley also stress the significance of the role played by the *nāgas*. The earliest references to *nāgas* in the sacred literature (e.g., in the opening book *Adiparva* of the *Mahābhārata*) suggest that the origin of *nāgas* is in the Himalayas. (See Sinha 1979; Fergusson 1886).
17. Lists of *nāgas* vary considerably. Fergusson (1886) claims to have come across over 5,000 different *nāgas* in the literature. In the *Swayambhū Purāna* alone over 200 are mentioned. According to Slusser (1982) there are 9 main *nāgas* in the Kathmandu Valley, each with its own particular personality, colour association, recognised dwelling places, etc. Karkot *Nāga* is recognised as the *Nāgaraja* or King of *Nāgas* in the Valley. Other important *nāgas* include *Seṣha*, *Vāsukī* and *Saṅkha Nāga*. While there was no definite consensus on this matter, the *nāgas* at Chār Ghare were thought to be manifestations of *Saṅkha Nāga*. In the *Divyāvadāna*, *Saṅkha* is said to be the name of the future king whose family priest, *Brahmāyu*, will become the father of *Maitreya Buddha*. *Nāgas* overlap with another classification of *devta - yakṣa* - also important to the earth's fertility. Very little has been written about *Yakṣa* however in the ethnography of religion in the Kathmandu Valley.
18. Perhaps the best known of these are the pond at Naxal, the temple at *Dakshinkali* where sacrifices are made, the shrine at *Nāgasthan* and, of course the Sleeping Vishnu at Budhanilkantha. *Taudaha* lake, in the south of the Valley, is said to be the home of *Karkot nāga*.

19. Haribodhini Ekadasi is celebrated in November, at the end of the monsoon, at Budhanilkantha. Rato Machhendranath involves the procession of a huge chariot to which offerings are made to ensure rains and agricultural productivity. This festival is linked with a 12-year drought caused by the imprisonment of nāgas by Gorakhnāth, a disciple of Machhendranath. To end the drought the king of the day sought the aid of Machhendranāth and Karkot Nāga who evicted Gorakhnāth, thus setting the nāgas free and causing it to rain. At the climax of the festival a vest is displayed to the public - this vest is said to be a gift from Karkot nāga to a *baidya* (healer) who agreed to cure Karkot's wife of a chronic eyesore.
20. This association is common throughout South Asia (e.g., in Kashmir and the Kulu Valley in India; See Vogel (1926).
21. A fine example can be seen at the pond in Naxal, N.E. of Kathmandu town.
22. Slusser (1982) discusses how the '12 year well' opposite the shrine of Musun-bahal Maitreya is still opened at times of impending drought in order to set the nāgas free and therefore causing it to rain.
23. See for example the myth dealing with Gorakhnāth and Machhendranāth, (discussed briefly above in footnote 19). See also the legend of King Divodāsa.
24. The pool at Kumbeswor in Patan is an important example. Each year at the *Janai Purnima* festival thousands of pilgrims come to this pool to pay homage to a Siva lingam sheathed in a golden nāga. This nāga dates from at least the Lichhavi period.
25. At the conclusion of the Rato Machhendranāth festival the display of the vest (given by Karkot nāga to a *baidya* in return for curing his wife of an eyesore) must be accompanied by a light shower of rain to indicate the presence of nāgas. Many worshippers at Chār Ghare commented on experiencing such a shower (see above).
26. See Slusser (1982). There is some fascinating research to be done in the area of mapping the various dimensions of underworld cosmography (e.g., the relation between Gosainkuṇḍa, Budhanilkantha and Kumbeswor; or even between Budhanilkantha and Chār Ghare). Such research could be aided by discussions with water diviners in the Valley and perhaps by measurements of ionisation. Further fascinating areas for exploration might be the link with Chinese geomancy (see Bajracharya and Smith 1978) and with the geography of pilgrimage in the Valley.
27. A fascinating area for future research lies in the relation between the nāga (more prevalent in the flatter, lowerlying areas of Nepal and India) and the dragon or *duk* (more prevalent in the higher

mountain areas of Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet). The dragon is often associated with the male, yang aspect in Tibetan Buddhist symbolism while the nāga is associated more with the female, yin aspect. The dragon might be said to represent vertical connections while the nāga represents more horizontal connections. While on this subject, there is much research yet to be done on the Tibetan form of nāga i.e., *Klu* and such variants as the Sherpa *Lu* (which so profoundly influence day-to-day village and domestic life and well-being).

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