

AQUATIC MYTHOLOGIES:

Divine, liminal and fantastic creatures in the Indian tradition

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ABSTRACT: This article offers an overview of some of the most peculiar mythological creatures of the Hindu pantheon related to the watery element. Starting from the analysis of the concept of liminality, which is fundamental to Monster Theory, the symbolism and functions of water in ritualism, folklore and the traditions of South Asia will be explored. Indeed, destruction, metamorphosis, transition, purification and rebirth are all concepts that in Indian traditions are frequently sublimated into the dynamics of the circulation of waters. The monsoon phenomenon, the rushing rivers flowing down from the Himalayas and the depths of the Indian Ocean abysses therefore rise here to metaphysical and existential metaphors. Their hidden meaning has been represented in an allegorical key over the centuries by monstrous, bizarre and emblematic figures that have animated art, iconography and literature and popular legends. This essay tries to explore the issue through a religious and anthropological investigative approach, but with particular reference to Sanskrit literature and the sacred texts of Hinduism.

KEYWORDS: Hindu mythology, monster theory, *nāga*, *mahānāgas*, *apsarās*, *makara*, ocean, Capricorn, Yuga theory, liminality.

...they¹ devote themselves to catching fish and sea-monsters. For they assert that the sea which surrounds the circuit of their island breeds a multitude past numbering of fishes and monsters, and moreover that they have the heads of lions and leopards and wolves and rams, and, still more wonderful to relate, that there are some which have the forms of satyrs with the faces of women, and these have spines attached in place of hair. They tell of others too which have strange forms whose appearance not even men skilled in painting and in combining bodies of diverse shapes to make one marvel at the sight, could portray with accuracy or represent for all their artistic skill; for these creatures have immense and coiling tails, while for feet they have claws or fins. I learn too that they are amphibious and that at night they graze the fields, for they eat the grass as cattle and rooks do; they enjoy the ripe fruit of the date-palm and therefore shake the trees with their coils, which being supple and capable of embracing, they fling round them... And then as the night wanes and before it is clear daylight these creatures plunge into the ocean and disappear as the dawn begins to glow. (Aelian, Περὶ ζῴων ἰδιότητος, 16.18, in Scholfield, 1959: 283-284)

Reliability of water supply is a fundamental element for the survival and development of

¹ The subject of the sentence is the Indians of Taprobane, perhaps modern-day Sri Lanka.

every civilisation, so much so that it could be said that, in many cases, the way individuals relate to the environment and watery element is the determining measure of their own culture. If this is true, India is undoubtedly a special place: thanks to its geomorphological structure, the importance of water over the millennia has shaped the very perception of the cosmos and how a sentient being exists in it, as reflected in the religions and cultures that have historically flourished. Indeed, the most important rivers of Asia flow from the sources of the 'roof of the world': the Himalayas, the largest and highest mountain range on Earth. The southern cusp of the isosceles triangle formed by the South Asian territory, (which due to its breadth is defined as the 'Subcontinent'), extends into the vastness of the Indian Ocean. Finally, the monsoon, that periodic wind characteristic of tropical climates, caused by the seasonal thermal contrast between land and ocean areas, has always marked the cyclical alternation of the seasons with its rains, almost as if it were the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

The contemplation of unique and complex environmental systems and the phenomena developing there has meant that these manifestations, far beyond geographical and meteorological speculation, have risen to existential metaphors of a philosophical or metaphysical order. In particular this has happened in Hinduism, which is not the only culture of the Subcontinent but displays the most abundant trove of wisdom related to the annual water cycles. Just to give a few examples, the flow of river waters, in Hindu myths, becomes the sublimation of the idea of the passage of time and therefore has both a cosmological and a cosmogonic function. The depth of the waters of a lake, or more often of an ocean, become the metaphor of the vastness of a culture or of the unfathomable divine greatness. This can be found in Hindu or even Islamic literature, see, for example, the famous classics the *Rāmacaritamānasa* (the 'Lake of Ram's deeds') and the *Majma ul Bahrain* ("The confluence of the two seas")². Finally, the monsoon, which with the power of its rains is able to transmute, in a few days, an arid, still, and dry territory into a luxuriant landscape, vivid in its colours and pulsating with life, was interpreted as the allegory of a process of death and rebirth of human and non-human beings passing through this manifestation. Studied since ancient times, the phenomenon is the basis of every productive and economic activity (Fisher, 2019: 19ff). In fact, the exploitation of the rainy season is not only fundamental to agricultural techniques in India, but has been used, in accordance with the alternation of the flow of the trade and counter-trade winds, to experiment with the first techniques and routes of ocean navigation in ancient past³. But if these activities required a certain timing in exploiting the right moment, it is also true that during the rainy season, due to many factors – such as frequent floods, roads transformed into mud, a nature that becomes impracticable – many work activities (and war) had to be suspended. Here, then, the monsoon becomes a poignant moment of contemplative stasis of nature and of the true essence of humanity in it: a moment of spiritual research, celebrated by ancient and modern poets, in search of a meaning of existence, therefore of achieving a liberation, a *mokṣa* in Hindu terms, or an exit from space-time (Jindal, 1993).

² The former is the famous reinterpretation of the *Rāmāyana*, the work of the poet Tulsīdās (c.1511–1623): here the depth of the lake is a metaphor for the extent of the deeds of the god Rāma. The latter is a comparative work between Sufism and Advaita philosophies written by the Mughal prince Dārā Śikoh (1615–1659): here the two seas symbolize the vastness of Hindu and Muslim cultures.

³ Among the most ancient documents exposing the navigation techniques between East and West, there is the famous *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, probably dating back to the 1st century, which describes the navigation routes on the Red Sea and, in part, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The original, now lost, was written in Greek, probably by an Egyptian merchant of the Roman era (Liu, 2010: 35-40).

In this game of metaphors and allegories, which I have just roughly sketched, it is important to note that water is understood as something alive, fervent and dynamic. As we will see shortly, water is a harbinger of vital energies, the engine of the cycle of rebirths, in the so-called doctrine of water circulation. It is also inhabited by an infinite series of subtle creatures, fantastic and admirably sublime beings, monsters and leviathans that dwell in the abyss. All these extraordinary forms of manifestation embody the peculiar functions of the water element. In this way, in this article I will try to demonstrate that the analysis of 'aquatic mythologies and monstrosities', as well as the decoding of the intrinsic symbolism in these figures, can be a fundamental key to interpreting Hindu culture and religiosity.

Before embarking upon our adventurous Indian journey, it is necessary to spend a few words on the application of the so-called 'Monster Studies'. In the awareness that this is an increasingly captivating academic perspective involving notions of anthropology, religious studies and approaches to social studies, it is possible to say that it renews an established trend towards the study of the fantastic and the prodigious. Some of my own earlier work reflects this trend. Especially, two projects starting again from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's famous *Monster Theory* (1996), but also taking into account the following developments from different schools (Gilmore, 2003; Miyake, 2014; Asma, 2009), I conducted two study groups that worked on 'the beliefs' about monsters, ghosts and demons of the Himalayas (Beggiora, 2016) and on the concept of fear in the cultures of South Asia (Beggiora, 2018). The common thread in that case was not water, even if this element recurs very frequently. In both investigations, however, it emerged that the figure of the monster, understood as a terrifying manifestation of the unknown, but also in its Latin sense of the term⁴, or as a prodigy, are always intrinsically linked to the dimension of liminality, to a moment of transition, to the rites of passage, to the transformation of a society or an individual and to the crisis that this entails. From a ritual perspective, we will see how water is fundamental in each of these moments, even in the Indian tradition, for its destructive capacity (see the deluge for example), as well as for its purifying and germinating qualities.

Sea dragons and chthonian snakes: cosmogony and eschatology across the waters

*When the Infinite God assumed the Boar-form
which was completely composed of sacrifices (yajña),
he determined to lift up the earth (which was sinking in the ocean).
He, like Indra breaking down the mountains,
tore down by his tusk the first demon (daitya Hiranyākṣa)
who came upon him at the bottom of the sea.
(Bhāgavata Purāna, II, 7.1)*

It is known that time in the Indian tradition is understood as cyclical, or rather spiral: here an alternation of cosmic eras is conceived, degrading from a golden age to an iron age according to an idea of gradual decay of the spiritual talent of beings. In this essay it is not my intention to analyse the meaning of this deterioration of the virtues: human in *primis*, and on the other hand also of the physical and moral faculties of all beings in general. But it seems interesting to me to note the passage or transition between a cycle and the next. The theory of the *chaturyugas*, or the four cosmic eras (also called *mahāyuga*), culminates

⁴ The term monster derives etymologically from the Latin *monstrum*: a divine sign, a prodigy; from the verb *monēre*, or to warn, to admonish about something extraordinary, that could manifest itself in order to warn or instruct the humans on the will of the gods.

with the lowest point of the *kali yuga*, the dark age, or the last one before the End of Times. Here a cataclysmic event occurs which is known as *pralaya* (literally 'dissolution'). For reasons of space, it is also necessary to overlook the prophecy of Kalkin, or the last descent (*avatāra*) of the god Viṣṇu, leading to the final cosmic battle. However, in whatever way the end of time is represented in Indian sacred writings, what is interesting is that the event is marked by the coming of diluvial waters which will mark the end of the current cycle, but which will also carry within themselves the germinative elements of the subsequent cycle of the cosmic manifestation. Almost through a metaphorical principle of communicating vessels, this phenomenon is repeated several times within the same cosmic cycle: that is, between each of the four *yugas* making up the whole cycle there is a moment of stasis and dissolution that ends the previous epoch and gives rise to the following. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in Hindu cosmology, there are major time measures such as the *manvantaras*, each of which includes 71 *mahāyugas*, and the *kalpas*. A *kalpa* is one aeon, or one day of the supreme Brahmā, which contains fourteen cycles of *manvantara*⁵. Now the cadence of the water element returns preponderant even in the order of major cycles so much so that it is said that in each *manvantara-sandhyā*, literally union, juncture, or twilight, the terrestrial surface (*bhū-lōka*) is submerged in water. It is therefore clear that in the Hindu tradition the cyclical and cadenced advance of the waters, the deluge, the rising and consequent withdrawal of the oceans, symbolise both the passing of time, and liminality and change from one era to another, and/or from one world to another, from one cycle of manifestation to another.

In this scenario, a Vedic myth of origins fits perfectly, describing the demon Vṛtra, who with his terrible action afflicts the manifestation. Sometimes the monster is completely amorphous, an expression of primordial chaos; more often it is seen as a huge dragon or snake. The myth is attested in the *Ṛgveda*⁶, to which I mainly refer, but there are Purāṇic and later versions. Vṛtra is the demon of drought, making the soil arid, holding back rivers and preventing monsoon rains from spilling. The fact that he is a snake is important because he is a constrictor: he holds the waters of manifestation between his coils, but it is as if he contained time, therefore he incorporate into himself every potential of the cosmos. The decisive act of the myth, which is a central topic in the *Ṛgveda*, is his killing by the hand of Indra, the Lord of the gods (*devas*). Indra is also the lord of war, winds, and storms accompanying the monsoon; his weapons are lightning and bolts, exploited to destroy his nemesis, which, all in all, completes him. To accomplish this feat, he must be strengthened with *soma*, the mythical ambrosia of the gods, the nectar of immortality (Wasson, 1971), but the various levels of interpretation of this motif would risk taking us away from the theme of this essay. The etymological question seems more interesting to me. The root *vr-* in Sanskrit has many meanings, such as covering, hiding, shielding, enveloping, incorporating, but in this context it translates precisely as an enveloping, ophidian, movement, typical of the snakes. It is interesting to note that in the most ancient hymns this same root indicated more precisely the act of 'covering': understood both in a positive sense – as the primordial divinity covered all things – and in a negative sense – since darkness covered everything (Hale, 1999; Watkins, 1995). There is also a lexical connection with the archaic root *arb-*, from which derives the Sanskrit term Arbuda, another name of Vṛtra. Here too we are faced with different meanings, the most frequent are: go, move, go

⁵ The calculation of epochs and cycles is very complex and concerns *vyōtiṣa*, the traditional system of Hindu astronomy and astrology. For the moment it suffices to say that the prevailing basic measure for calculating time was the hemicycle of the precession of the equinoxes. This was (approximately) known to the ancient civilizations as discussed by many scholars (Thapar, 2013: 299-306).

⁶ Mandala 10, Hymn LXXXIX.1-7; Mandala 4, Hymn XIIX.1-13 (Griffith, 1889).

around, fill, pervade and swell. The term therefore indicates an expansive and centrifugal, all-pervading movement that, on the one hand, boasts an archaic link with the figure of the dragon or serpent and in subsequent texts will be absorbed by the functions of the deities in general or of Brahmā, the Supreme deity or the 'Absolute' (Gonda, 1969). Returning to the myth of Indra, his mission is on the one hand connected to the monsoon and the water cycle: the god of storms hurls his lightning and kills the serpent that held the waters enclosed, releasing them. In doing so he ends up subsuming in himself elements and attributes of the counterpart. There is also a certain relationship of the image of Vṛtra with that of the cloud swollen with rain but also with the mountain holding the flow of rivers within their springs, by virtue of its constricting capacity (Griswold, 1999: 188-189). But it is Indra's hand anyway that allows the water to gush, flow, swell and reach the vastness of the oceans. There is a certain historical-mythical perspective in this: Indra is also the god of war and is invoked to defeat the non-Vedic *dasyus*, or the indigenous peoples referred to in the Vedas. These important factors – the abundance of rains, the control of agriculture, the war success related to the conquest of the territory – were probably central to the first Aryan populations, finding their fulcrum in the founding myth of the ancient king of the gods. But the fight with Vṛtra must be seen as a cosmic battle, the release of the waters is the very origin of time: this transforms the tale in question into a cosmogonic myth. For this reason, in a comparative view in the study of mythology, the story is considered an archetypal form of the cosmic battle against the dragon, and by affinity the Indian Vṛtra is compared to the *Jörmungandr*, *Veles*, or *Typhon*, respectively of the Norse, Slavic and Greek literatures.

Another important aspect about Vṛtra is that, precisely as an ophidic creature, he falls into the category of *nāgas*, or particular beings of Hindu mythology that are generally represented with half-human features, but with a snake's tail. Like Vṛtra, which has a clear cosmogonic function, there are other 'great snakes' (*mahānāgas*) performing central functions in the major narrative motifs of the Indian myth. Śeṣa for example, floating on the waters, cradles the sleeping of the god Viṣṇu among its coils: it is a special sleep since the divinity dreams of the universe and, in doing so, preserves it for the cosmic ages. Vāsuki is the king of the *nāgas* and plays a fundamental role in another cosmogonic myth in which the struggle between gods (*devas*) and anti-gods (*asuras*) is resolved with the endeavour of the ocean churning, of which the great snake acts as the intermediary⁷. In both cases, these creatures are related to a mythical sea, the ocean of milk (*Kṣīra Sāgara*). Going back to our discourse on *nāgas*, in general, it is interesting to note that these creatures inhabit the *pātālas*. These are subterranean wastes, often translated as the netherworld. Sometimes mistakenly interpreted as hells, these are by no means dimensions with negative connotations; rather, they are a sort of paradise to which the souls of those deceased who, due to their karmic merits, have the right to stay in temporarily, are destined. In Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, they are the lower level (usually the seventh) of the underground realms: the *pātāla* is a bright place, encrusted with every quality of precious stones and where the waters – which are at the origin of the underground currents in turn in connection with the surface and sky waters – flow abundantly. In an esoteric

⁷ *Samudra manthana*, literally churning of the ocean, is the famous myth telling of the victory of the gods over the *asuras* thanks to the retrieving of the *amṛta*, or *soma*, the nectar of immortality. Since this treasure lay on the bottom of the ocean of milk, the two contending parties agree to a truce, in order to organise the blending of the sea. Mount Mandāra was uprooted and used as a gigantic churning rod and Vāsuki became the churning rope, pulled on one side and the other alternately by *devas* and *asuras*. The condensation of the milk allowed the emergence of all kinds of wonders: treasures, animals and prodigious creatures and finally the sacred nectar.

language it is reported that here, the union between a human and a non-human being, therefore a subtle being, a *nāga* or a *nāginī* (Figure 1), is the keystone for an alchemical, magical, spiritual or fundamentally soteriological knowledge (Cozad, 2015). It is interesting to note that these monstrous and prodigious serpent-like creatures do not really have pre-established positive or negative connotations. But sexual union with one of these beings can open up superhuman or divine faculties to the individual who meets them. And it is essential that these creatures are always in close connection with water: in general in the cultures of South Asia, reptiles and snakes are always related to this element. Moreover even their liminal function is emphasised by the fact that they come from the netherworld, but also that through them the individual can make a qualitative leap, transforming himself. On the other hand, the theme of transformation is in some way specular between the parties, in the sense that some myths of the *nāgas* seem almost to re-propose the theme of the siren – or mermaid-like creatures well known in other cultures – which loses its tail after joining a mortal, in a context, however, of intimate sacrifice and spiritual transformation (Doniger, 2000: 117-118; Hayward, 2018: 21-49).



Figure 1 - Nagini (9th century), Bodhgaya, at the Indian Museum, Kolkata (Wikimedia Commons).

The myth of the ‘woman of water’ as a universal metaphysics

*Uniform, with the passing days, this water mounts and fails again.
The tempest-clouds give life to earth, and fires re-animate the heaven.
(R̥gveda, Mandala I, Hymn CLXIV.51)*

Remaining in the context of subtle creatures and shape-shifters, it seems to me appropriate to analyse here the myth of Urvaśī, a sort of Indian Melusine whose origin is much older. There is mention of her deeds since *R̥gveda*, but the myth is then expanded in later literature: both in the epic *itihāsa* literature (the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* sagas) and in the *Purāṇas* (Gaur, 1974; Vemsani, 2021). Urvaśī is a nymph, or rather a woman of water, she belongs to the category of *apsarās*, or female spirits in strong correlation with clouds

and rain (Figure 2). In fact, etymologically the word *apsarā* is a compound of *ap-*, ‘water’, and *sar*, to move – thus indicating the one who moves with (or in) the waters. The story, in its most accredited version, tells of King Purūravas, who during a hunt ran into a flock of swans (*hamsa*) that, descending from the sky, landed on the surface of a lake. Stripped of their bird feathers, the swans revealed their true nature of *apsarās*, who paused, diving, to play in the waters. Fascinated by the charm of the beautiful nymphs, Purūravas came forward, but all except one, named Urvaśī, were frightened and resuming their original form they flew away. Urvaśī, who was, in turn, struck by the king's prowess, fell in love with him. Purūravas therefore asked her to marry him and she accepted on the condition that the king make and keep a few special promises. He maintained these for a while, but when the *gandharvas* (other celestial beings often considered the male counterpart or companions of the *apsarās*) cheated on him⁸, the king broke his promise and this caused the departure of Urvaśī. With a broken heart, Purūravas searched for her for a long time through the seas and lands, without success. Finally he found her again, as had happened the first time, while she rested with other swans on the bank of the Yamunā River. He begged her to return, she unfortunately could not indulge him, but by virtue of the fruit of their love⁹, she could at least allow him to meet one night a year. Although he felt these conditions were unfair and unjust he accepted them and abided by them until, eventually, the gods were moved with pity for his fidelity. They therefore taught him the sacrifice of fire, which allowed him to become a *gandharva* himself. By doing so, the king was finally able to reunite forever with Urvaśī in the uranic dimension ruled by Indra on top of Mount Meru.



Figure 2 - Apsara, Borobudur temple, Java (Wikimedia Commons).

⁸ He was supposed to mate with her three times a day, but outside of this was not to show himself naked, or without the royal vestments. Furthermore, he was expected to protect the lambs of Urvaśī, tied to the nuptial bed. When the *gandharvas* tried to take the beasts away overnight he reacted prevent this, but they flashed a bolt of lightning that revealed his nakedness to his wife.

⁹ Their son Āyus, who was born from their union.

In a comparison with Greek mythology, the philologist Max-Muller (1823-1900), who advanced the first German Indology, compared the motif of Urvaśī to the theme of love between Eros and Psyche or between Orpheus and Eurydice. The poignant theme of an impossible passion is embodied in the fleeting vision of a dawn, personified by the nymph, which dissolves when the sun, or the king, arrives (Lang, 1884: 66-68; Gaur, 1974: 142). This interpretation has greatly influenced subsequent studies, where the almost meteorological symbolism of the rain and the monsoon has prevailed from time to time, evoking – for the reasons indicated above – sensuality, eroticism, devotion between lovers, also interpreted in a spiritual and transcendental manner (Kantawala, 1976; Jarow, 2003: 83). However, I rather think that the myth of Urvaśī clearly alludes to what in the Hindu tradition is the doctrine of circulation of waters, better known as the doctrine of the five fires (*pañcāgni vidyā*).

There is considerable literature on this subject¹⁰, so I propose to make here a brief summary. The liquid offerings poured on the fire in the Vedic altar during the sacrifice (*agnihotra*) evaporate, reaching the lunar abode in the form of *soma*. This is the first oblation, that of ascent, which is then followed by the second oblation, with which the descent begins. This second oblation is that of *soma* in the sphere of Parjanya, god of the clouds: here the offering turns into rain (*varṣam*). The fall of rain on the surface of the Earth is considered as the third oblation. The rain, absorbed by the plants, is transformed into nourishment (*anna*), which is offered as a fourth oblation to the man who assimilates it. In this way the water is transmuted in the bodily elements of the individual who has assimilated it, and in particular in his semen (*retah*). The fifth oblation, which ends the cycle, consists in the emission of the paternal seed into the maternal womb. From this generative offering, water is reborn as a new human being. The cycle of rebirths would therefore be regulated by sacrificial action, but it is interesting to note that even in ancient India there was a concept that beings were largely made up of water. From an eschatological perspective we can say that according to Indian doctrines the deceased, or rather that part (*ātman*) or spark of the Absolute that has penetrated into their body giving life and consciousness to the aggregate of elements, rise to heaven from the flame of the pyre. Only some of them reach the world of lightning, and along the way of the gods they arrive at the world of Brahman from which they never return. Others, by contrast, having reached the moon, after having lived here and having consumed the fruit of their actions, through the ether, the wind, the rain, the earth or the food arrive, by the way of the fathers, in the male and the female matrix, which is chosen on the basis of their previous deeds.

Strength is given to the cycle of death and rebirth of beings - seen as a vertical movement of water rotation - through the framework of the funeral rituals (*śrāddha*) and, in particular, the extreme last sacrifice, that is the cremation on the pyre (*antyeṣṭi*). This seems, in a certain sense, to run parallel to the ancient Vedic sacrifice: the ascending cycle, of evaporation, clearly symbolises the dominion over death, while the descending cycle is related to the phase of rebirth (Payne & Witzel, 2016: 69; Filippi, 1996: 179ff). As if moved by a gigantic noria, which here is a clear metaphor of the law of universal becoming, the waters evaporated from the ocean rise to the sky and then descend again through rain, or through streams and rivers flowing right from the sky through the earth, finally returning again to the ocean that contains them all. Returning thus to the myth of Urvaśī, she is clearly an *apsarā*, a soul vapour flying from heaven to Earth. She takes human form, receiving the seed from an individual who is in turn part of this cycle and finally she puts

¹⁰ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6, 2, 9-16; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5, 3-10. See in particular the episode related to Pravāhana, king of Pāñcāladeśa (Jurewicz, 2004: 54ff).

this union to good use (see note 9) but, concluding her existence, she goes back to heaven by repeating the cycle several times. King Purūravas on the other hand learns the secret fire sacrifice in order to reach her (Filippi, 2009: 239-244). Only by decoding the functions and meanings of the myth, it becomes clear how the natural cycle of the monsoon in turn evokes the conceptual cornerstones of this metaphysics. Urvaśī, the subtle, shape-shifting being, is a pivot in the pantheon of human and non-human creatures, moving here with and through the waters.

From the Ocean depths to the Zodiac

*Like a lamp by an intense flame
like the sky by the Heavenly Ganges
like a wise man whose speech is crystalline
through her he was purified and adorned
(Kālidāsa, Kumārasambhava, 1.28)¹¹*

The importance of rivers clearly emerges in the general sacredness of the waters of the Indian tradition. Among these rivers, the most important is the Gaṅgā (Ganges). Simultaneously flowing water and a goddess, she is the mother of humanity, capable of raising the souls of individuals towards liberation and transcendence (*mokṣa*). The story of her birth, however, provides us with the prerequisites both to clarify the connection between the concepts of river and sea in South Asian tradition, and to investigate the symbolism of one of the most famous, sublime and terrifying creatures of the ocean of Indian myth: the *makara* (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – *Makara*, Bharhut Stupa at the Indian Museum, Kolkata – India (Wikimedia Commons).

¹¹ The goddess Umā, consort of Śiva, is here compared to the brilliance of the Ganges (Heifetz, 1990: 25)

It is assumed that all pure waters that enter the universe are the fruit of Gaṅgā, drawn directly from the primordial cosmic waters, as mentioned above (better known as *Kāraṇa Sāgara*, literally Causal Ocean). However, the story of her descent to Earth is interesting. Having to make a brief summary here too, I will simply say that the virtuous Sagara, king of the city of Ayodhya, was about to celebrate the sumptuous Vedic sacrifice of the horse (*aśvamedha*) to emphasise his sovereignty when, once again Indra, envious, stole the animal in order to make the rite fruitless. The king therefore sent his sixty thousand sons, who shook the whole Earth and eventually found the horse at the end of the world, on the edge of the *pātālas*, at the home of the wise Kapila¹². They vented their anger on the ascetic mistakenly believing him to be guilty of the rustling, but he, distracted from his profound contemplation (*samādhi*), punished them by incinerating all sixty thousand of them with a mere glance. The king's nephew, descended from a second wife, went to the place and wanted to celebrate the funeral rituals (*śrāddha*) to at least bring deliverance to their souls, but he could not do it for lack of water. Kapila suggested that only after a very hard trial of asceticism and deep devotion could the sacred waters of Gaṅgā eventually be brought down to fulfill his purpose.

After several other events, Bhagīratha, a descendant of the king, was able to demonstrate sufficient virtue and obtain the pity of the gods and fulfill Kapila's wish. The water of the river Gaṅgā came to wash over and sanctify the bones and ashes of his ancestors. I do not dwell here on the fact that Gaṅgā took on different courses and forms, a clear allegory of her multiple tributaries, or of the well-known motif that she descended through the flowing mane of the god Śiva, a sort of stratagem to cushion her otherwise overwhelming and destructive power. However, from an alchemical point of view it is interesting to note that the ashes are mainly composed of mineral salts, sometimes with caustic characteristics. The idea that water, pure, sweet, crystalline, is able to wash the Earth of all its impurities is the basis of a concept of cyclical transformation. This also explains, at a mythical level, why the water of rivers is substantially the same as the oceans, but while the former is sweet, the latter is salty due to the presence of the ashes of the sixty thousand. It is also intriguing to note that, in Sanskrit, the word for ocean, *samudra*, the place of water collection (*sam-* "together" and *-udra* "water"), changes – perhaps following this myth – with the patronymic *sāgara*, which etymologically seems to allude, in parallel, to the poison and toxicity. In fact, in a myth preceding this, it is said that the mother of king Sagara was secretly poisoned by her jealous co-wives, in order to make her have an abortion but, despite this, he was born anyway. There is therefore a sort of overlap between the toxicity evoked by the name of the father of the sixty thousand, and the toxicity of the sea as it is objectively salty and not potable. To be precise: Sagara (king) and *sāgara* (ocean) are clearly two different words, but their assonance and their confluence in the same myth deserve a more in-depth analysis, because a certain semantic relationship is suggested. In fact, in ancient India there is a strong relationship between water and salt from an alchemical and metamorphic point of view: salt is, in fact, like ice and hail, a sort of water in a crystallised state (Bronkhorst, 2002: 45). As to its sweetness or toxicity, the question relates to its attributes. Of course, there is fresh/sweet water (*madhura*), which is the

¹² Kapila is one of the great saints of the ancient Indian tradition. Mentioned as a sage (*rṣi*) in the Vedas, his figure is that of the virtuous ascetic, who took the vow of silence (*muni*) to pursue self-realisation. In the Purāṇas he is even counted as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. Nothing is known for certain historically of his existence and since the references appear in so many texts, that it is likely that the name Kapila may perhaps refer to different people. However, he is considered to be one of the first masters of the Sāṃkhya school of Hinduism, therefore preceding the Buddha, it is customary to place him around the 6th or 7th century BCE (Olivelle, 1993: 90-99).

bearer of life, it is itself life (*jīva*), while salty (*lavaṇa*) water is drying/withering/absorbing (*śoṣaṇa*), one of the attributes of death. On the other hand, in the aforementioned myth of the churning of the ocean of milk (see note 7), among the various 'jewels' (*ratna*) emerging from its surface, the thirteenth is indeed a deadly poison (*halāhala*). This testifies to how the ocean is the home of hidden things, the receptacle of incredible treasures, but its dark waters and its abysses also contain an obvious counterpart¹³.

Coming to the second element of significant interest for the purposes of this study, the mother Gaṅgā has come to pour her waters into the 'three worlds' (*tribhuvana*) carried by the *makara*, or a creature that is her vehicle (*vāhana*) from her source in the Himalaya at Gaumukh (literally the face/snout of the cow) to the depths of the sea. This creature is one of the most ancient and emblematic in the Indian culture, since in addition to other literary and mythical sources, it has been widely represented in iconography since ancient times. From the bas-reliefs on the entrance lintel of the stupas (*torāṇa*), to the entrance door of the temples, but also on the jewels, the pottery and much more, the motif of the *makara* has spread through the centuries, almost seamlessly, from the South Asia to Indonesia, from Nepal and Tibet to Southeast Asia.

The most ancient representations of the *makara* correspond to a sort of fish, which over time merges with the prevailing form of the crocodile, or crocodile-gharyal (Figure 4) according to the taxonomy (*Gavialis gangeticus*) that some scholars have wanted to identify in order to contextualise it geographically. But it would be appropriate to say that the *makara*, undoubtedly an aquatic being, is a sort of chimera-like creature as the parts of different animals are recomposed here, such as the dolphin, the elephant, the snake, the antelope, the lion (Viennot, 1958; Bosch, 1960). Moreover perhaps the most recurrent representation of the creature is that of a fish-crocodile whose anterior section of the snout is represented by the trunk of an elephant. Often this is curled upwards, but in most of the representations this takes on ophidian connotations, almost representing a snake.

The association of *nāgas* with the *makaras* (also with regard to their iconographic function and mythical symbolism) is quite evident. In relation to the mother Gaṅgā, as an aquatic creature, the *makara* has an affirmative role since it produces life in its increasingly complex and recursive forms: this is functionally represented in iconography by the floral motifs and lush creepers often arising from its mouth or twisting on its tail and adorning it. But it should also be considered that the *makara* is the vehicle of several other divinities. Prominent among them for his Vedic origin, Varuṇa is the god of water, rain and celestial phenomena, but even the lord of the principle of natural order (*ṛta*) and of the underground world. It is no coincidence that he is considered the king of the *nāgas* (Vogel, 1995: 144). In a sort of equivalence-correspondence relationship between the deities and their vehicles (*vāhanas*), we will observe that if Varuṇa is the lord of water and darkness, the *makara* is a creature characterised by mystery, unknowable, coming from the most unfathomable depths of the ocean (Darian, 1976: 32-33). In this sense, in fact, the Indian Ocean is also called *Makarāvāsa* or *Makarālaya*, literally the abode of *makara*. And perhaps this is its dark side counterbalancing a more luminous, numinous, function in relation to the goddess Gaṅgā, almost in a game of coalescence of signifiers and meanings. But precisely for this reason the creature still preserves its creative-destructive faculties and its fundamental liminal characteristic.

¹³ On the relationship between water, salt and its possible toxicity, see Slaje (2002: 25-57).



Figure 4 - Gaṅgā on makara, Watercolour, Company School (early 19th century), Patna - India (Wikimedia Commons).

From a semiotic and comparative perspective, it is interesting to note that the figure of the *makara* clearly seems to have a dialogue with fantastic creatures and leviathans of the Eastern and Western traditions. In fact, already in the mid-1940s Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp (1895-1970) in his famous work on fairy tales observed that the figure of the dragon often leads us back to the composite chimera of at least two, three or four animals (Propp, 1946). It would seem that the *makara*-dragon identification has been the predominant, according at least to the perspective with which the classical Western world looked at the *monstra* and the wonders of India (see quotation *in incipit*). Moreover, the motif keeps repeating itself, as reported by medieval travelers and observers at the dawn of the colonial period, just as today the fantastic imagery of Western literature tends to include *makaras* in the category of cryptids (Eberhart, 2002: 163, 309). Parallel to the suggestion used by some scholars to connect this Indian creature to Indo-European mythological traditions, it would be equally legitimate to talk about its possible relationship with the dragon cult in ancient China. Here, perhaps even more, art and iconography support this hypothesis in the great breadth of hybridisations of religious symbols and representations (Semeka-Pankratov, 1984: 195ff).

The reason why Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries, and especially their entrances, are surrounded and guarded by *nāga/makara*-like figures will therefore become clear. On the one hand, the monstrous creature has an apotropaic function, in that it dissolves any negativity or demonic representation potentially coming close to the sacred place. But its

esoteric meaning clearly has to do with water, as a passage or initiation. Passing through the water clearly symbolises a death and a potential rebirth; or a 'dying to self' - a recurring concept in the various Indian religious traditions - to be spiritually reborn. Much has been written about the symbolism of the temple (or monastery) as a mountain: it is interesting to remember that the *sanctum sanctorum*, that is the innermost chamber of the Hindu sanctuary, is known as the *garbhagrha*, a term that clearly alludes to the intimacy of a mother's womb in which the embryo takes shape and is born to new life. In this death-rebirth process, the passage through the water, which is emphasised by ablutions in a sacred river if available, or in a nearby temple tank, is always guaranteed by the images of the most important rivers/goddesses of the Hinduism: Gaṅgā and Yamunā respectively to the left and right of the entrance door. Their extensions are ophidic aquatic beings or representations of their vehicles, such as the *makara*¹⁴.

Anyone who is somewhat familiar with the doctrines of yoga will certainly have grasped the affinity of these metaphors with the mystical physiology of the practitioner and/or of the human being in general (White, 1998: 225-226). Imagining the human body as a sort of temple, or rather a representation of the universe, the main subtle channels (*nāḍī*) through which the practitioner's energies are channeled are metaphorically represented by the three most important rivers/goddesses of Hinduism: Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and Sarasvatī (whose names are *īdā*, *piṅgala* and *suṣumnā*). Here, then, is how the hypostases of the deities emphasise the fluid flow of energies and the potential for transcendence of the yoga practitioner. It is no coincidence that the passage through the *makara*'s jaws, for those who know how to interpret it, clearly indicates in Hindu iconography the realisation of the self and the overcoming of the manifest world, or rather the exit from space and time (Coomaraswamy, 2020: 28¹⁵).

This last element requires an astronomical and astrological clarification. It is interesting to note that in the *jyotiṣa*, the traditional Hindu astrological system, the *makara* is also the tenth sign (*rāśi*) of the zodiac, which in the West is represented by Capricorn. The *makara* sign is therefore important since it indicates a crucial moment of transition during the year. This, in summary, in the Hindu calendar is divided into two halves: *uttarāyaṇa* and *dakṣiṇāyaṇa*, which roughly coincide with the period from the winter solstice to the summer solstice and vice versa, and correspond to the position of the sun in relation to the tropic of Capricorn and that of Cancer. When the sun, having reached the constellation of Makara, turns north, then one of the most heartfelt holidays (and probably the only solar festivity) in the Hindu calendar is celebrated: the *makar saṅkrānti*. The festival falls astronomically in mid-January (*uttarāyaṇa*, with a minimal approximation), and is observed differently throughout India, with joyful celebrations, ritual sacrifices culminating not surprisingly with ablutions in sacred rivers. It is a celebration of a moment representing the passage through the cyclicity and renewal of time, but also the detachment from it (*saṅkrānti*, literally passage, transition). It goes without saying that it is intrinsically connected with the agricultural techniques of the monsoon area: here it is in close correlation with the *rabi* crops, or the so-called winter harvest, which is immediately followed by the complementary *kharif*, or spring sowing. In this broad perspective in which traditional India loves to discover the correspondence between what is above and what is below, reciprocity between macrocosm and microcosm, between the universe and the human dimension, here the *makara* is once again an emblematic figure, linked at the same

¹⁴ For Yamunā there is the turtle, another aquatic/marine reptile.

¹⁵ See first edition; 'Svayamātrna, Janua Coeli', *Zalmoxis*, ii, 1939: 3-51.

time to the monsoon, to the circulation of waters, to the cosmos, and to universal transformation.

A new beginning, rather than a conclusion

The extraordinary sequence of Indian landscapes includes mountains, rivers, forests and urban realities that are richly linked to traditional heroic stories and local culture. Each place in the Subcontinent has its own history and, vice versa, each story and legend of Hindu mythology has its own specific place. This is the result of a millennial process of mapping the body of the country, which over the centuries has functioned to strengthen local identities, legitimise ruling lineages and royal dynasties, intensify ancestral ties with the territory and reinforce alliances and kinships as in a sort of sacred geographical chessboard (Ludden, 2002: 52ff). Likewise, places are inextricably linked to each other through local, regional and trans-regional pilgrimage practices - in the past, as well as in the present. I am aware that in my general overview, only for reasons of space, it was necessary to overlook a characterisation of specific areas of India as places where the aquatic element is functionally and/or symbolically strong. The only exception to this is the aforementioned discussion about the Ganges, which with its course, sometimes impetuous then placid, connects the Himalayan heights to the Bay of Bengal. But in conclusion, it is also possible to state that all the rivers, lakes and seas of India are to be considered sacred due to their participation in the sacredness of the waters and their cycle. So each of them has, at least, its own regional relevance. Each geographical-landscape peculiarity - such as the natural pools, pits or water basins (*kund/kuñña*), the fords (*tīrtha*), the junctions of watercourses (*saṅgama*) - emphasise the power and sanctity of the places around which over the centuries human activities have coagulated. Just to give a well-known example, the saga of the churning of the ocean is connected to the geographical junction of the aforementioned three sacred rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and the mythical Sarasvatī. The reason for this is due to the fact that, during the dispute between gods and demons over the ampoule containing the nectar of immortality, some drops would have fallen at the junction of the rivers. Although from a literary point of view the matter is questionable, and there are many detractors who consider the episode a late interpolation, popular tradition sees in this place, the seat of the ancient city of Prayag, now absorbed into the urban fabric of today's Allahabad, as the heart of Indian sacredness. And it is one of the most famous pilgrimage sites in the world, attracting huge crowds of devotees every twelve years (*Mahā Kumbh Melā*).

The dynamism of the myth of Urvaśī lends itself to a more flexible and rarefied localisation. There are several regions of India that consider their most important rivers or bodies of water as the location of the descent of the woman-swan (Handique, 2001: 41, 118ff). These are recurrently known as *Urvaśī tīrtha* or *kuñña*: see e.g. in the Himalayas the *kaśīkī tīrtha*, near the Koshi river flowing between Tibet, Nepal and India, the *aruṇā tīrtha* near the homonymous river, or Urvasi Island near Guwahati in Assam along the course of the Brahmaputra (Singha & Singh, 2022: 196-200). Again for reasons of space, I could not discuss some marine waterscapes, in which the folklore and popular devotion of fishing villages is intertwined with ancestral founding myths of coastal cities and the historical presence of great temples and religious centres. Kolkata, Puri, Kanchipuram, Kanyakumari, Diu, Dwarka are just some of these to which I could add the brackish complexity of lagoon areas such as Chilika on the eastern coast of Odisha and the backwaters on the western

coast of Kerala. It is therefore possible to speak of a true kaleidoscope of aquapelagic zones¹⁶, as in useful case studies such as Chatterjee (2022).

Those fabulous creatures mentioned in this essay are just some of the mythical and prodigious creatures that Hindu mythology relates to water and seas. Even if some of these are perhaps commonly known, I wanted here to examine their religious, initiatory and folklore aspects that lead us to a better understanding of them. But as in a game of mirrors, there would be many others. Just to give a final example, since we talked about yoga above (whose origins are very ancient), it is important to remember that a large part of Indology traces the practices of *haṭha yoga* back to the teacher and reformer Gorakhnāth, who lived around the beginning of the 11th century. But the birth of the discipline is intrinsically linked to tantric teaching, that is, according to a Hindu religious perspective, the set of the only viable ways of salvation in the age of darkness and ignorance of the *kali yuga*. The sage Gorakhnāth would have learned the precepts from the master Matsyendranāth, who in turn would have heard them directly from the mouth of the god Śiva. Tradition has it that the god was teaching his consort in a floating boat on the floodwaters separating the previous *yuga* from the current one, and Matsyendranāth, swallowed by a gigantic fish, would have heard it from underwater, becoming thus destined to transmit the secret knowledge in the new world. It is interesting to note that if on the one hand practically nothing is known about the real life of this master (unlike the disciple) - so much so that his actual historical existence is debatable for some scholars - on the other hand, the lack hagiographic data is small matter, when compared to the diachronic importance of a being who, for the salvation of humanity, would have crossed the waters of time (White, 1996: 222ff). Similar to the biblical episode of Jonah and the whale, he can fulfill his mission only by virtue of having been swallowed by a sort of oceanic leviathan, which will then return him to the beaches of the new manifestation, as a kind of a new episode of Creation¹⁷.

This is another example, among many possible, which leads us to think about the function of the monster in myth and literature. If it is true that the myth aims at action, it is the founder of the social and moral life of the group, connecting it to its origins, the figure of the monster therefore acts in history, precedes it and evolves according to the society and culture in which it expresses itself. Furthermore, the relationship with water is once again crucial. With this essay I hope I have shed some light on what many in the academy still consider bizarre. The investigation on monsters, sea monsters in this case – leviathans, sirens, and all creatures of water – can be a preferential key to begin the study of a culture,

¹⁶ Again in a mythical context we observe that in the ancient Indian texts the territory of South Asia is known as Jambudvīpa, literally "the land of jambu trees". Passing over the symbolism of *jambu* (*Syzygium cumini*), or Malabar plum, indicating abundance, but also boasting a wide range of allegorical meanings, the term *dvīpa* seems interesting to me. The word is often translated as 'continent', but etymologically it indicates a land between two waters (*dvi + āpah*). It is possible to provide a triple key to this. On the one hand, the primordial continent was imagined as a succession of lands surrounded by the concentric rings of the surrounding seas, but on the other hand the meaning can also be interpreted diachronically, as a manifestation enclosed between two waters, or between two different time cycles. Finally, even on an empirical level, the Subcontinent appears geographically as an emerged cusp wedged into the ocean that surrounds it from the east and west.

¹⁷ There are several versions of the legend. The hero being swallowed by and then vomited up by the dragon or monster is a recurring *topos* in the process of metamorphosis. In some versions the master manages to control the fish from the inside by virtue of the acquired doctrine. In others he rides the fish, in others he himself is the shape-shifting fish (Briggs 1998). Matsyendranāth incidentally is translatable as the 'lord of the fishes'.

but also to approach the deep understanding of an ancient and complex civilisation such as the Indian one. Now all that remains is to dive into the richness of this sea.

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