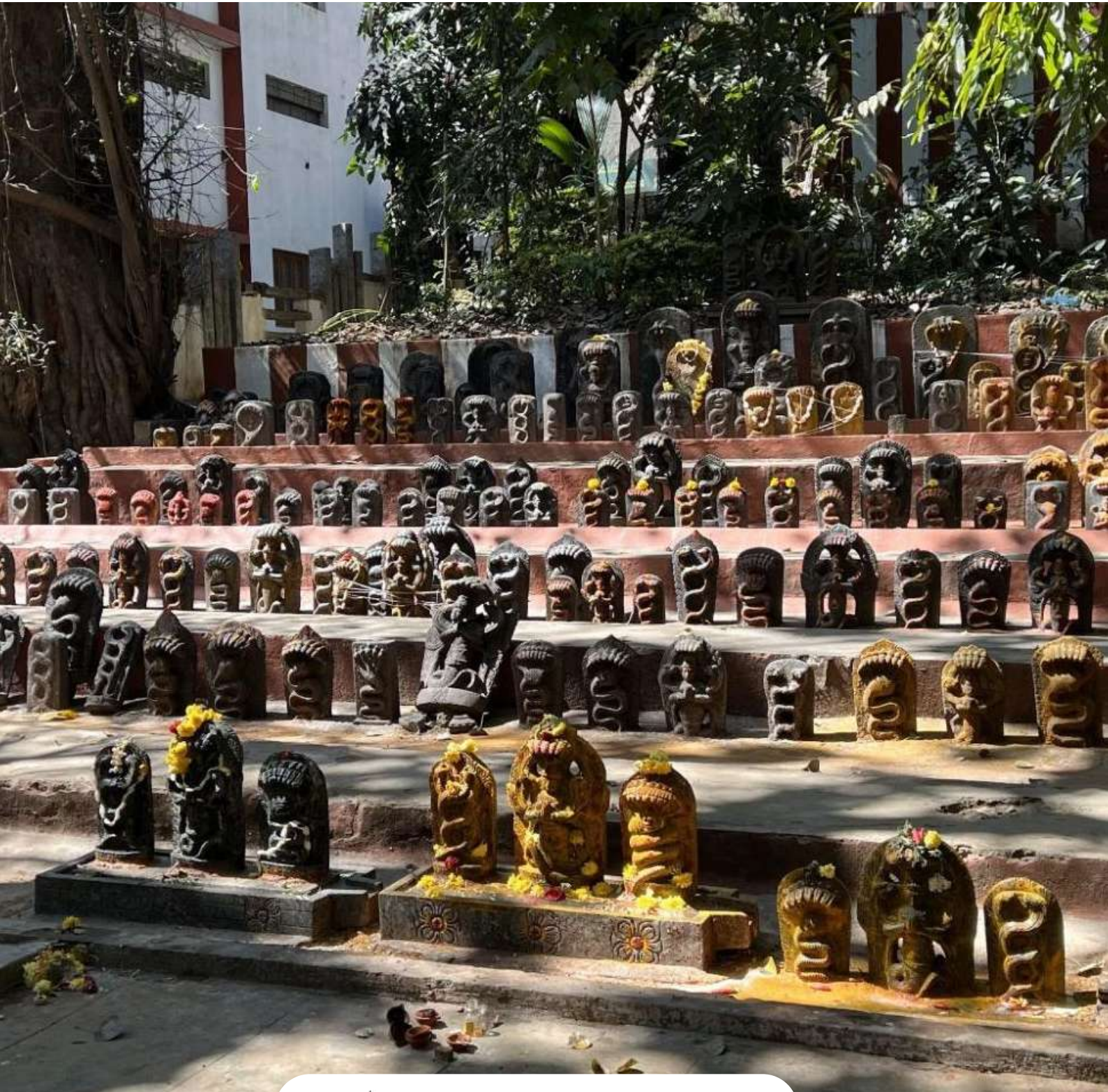


CELEBRATING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIPS

ARALIKATTE

Submitted by Navya R, Abeer Gupta, Dhee, and Rujan Sarkar



ROHINI
NILEKANI
philanthropies



WCS-India

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	01
Introduction	02
<i>Aralikattes</i> in Bengaluru	05
Snakes in Indian Mythology	10
History and Origin of Snake Worship	11
Festivals and Rituals	13
Renowned Places for Snake Worship	15
Ancient Snake Sculptures	16
Conclusion	27
References	28
Photo Credits	29

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are immensely grateful to all the people who have been invaluable in providing the necessary materials and information. Without their knowledge and resources, this work would have been far more challenging. In particular, we would like to thank Kiran Kesvani, Dr. Harini Nagendra, Arun Prasad, Dr. Sarada Natarajan, Prof. Rangaraju, Dr. Prabhakar, Dr. Satya Narayan Bhat, Dr. Rohita Eswar, Dr. S. Nataraju, Dr. Rekha Rao, and Dr. Chethana Rao.

Finally, we would like to thank Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies for the financial support that has enabled the completion of this project

INTRODUCTION

“The trees encountered on a country stroll reveal a lot about that country’s soul. A culture is no better than its woods.”

– W.H. Auden

Trees and forests hold deep cultural significance to people around the globe. There is clear evidence that ancient people respected nature in many ways. Among many trees considered sacred, the Peepal/Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is considered sacred in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The practice of worshipping the peepal tree can be dated back to 3000 BCE. Indus Valley civilisation, a seal excavated from the Mohenjo-daro site is identified to be a peepal tree, Sanskrit texts dated to around 600 CE, known as *vratas*, contains a hymn that describes the peepal tree as a symbol of the trinity of Hindu gods (Nature in the City, Harini Nagendra). In Indian culture, it is believed that the tree houses the gods Trimurthi- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and hence considered sacred and worshipped, it is known as the ‘Tree of Life’. The tree also has a mention in the Bhagavad Gita.

“Among all trees, I am the Ashwatha tree, among Divine rishis, Narada; among Gandharvas, Chitraratha; among perfected ones, the Muni Kapila”



Figure 1: An Indus valley civilisation seal from Mohenjo-daro depicting peepal tree and unicorns

The tree is also known as the Bodhi tree or *Bo* tree in Buddhism. Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under this tree in Bodh Gaya, which is currently located in the Indian state of Bihar, an important pilgrimage site for Buddhism.

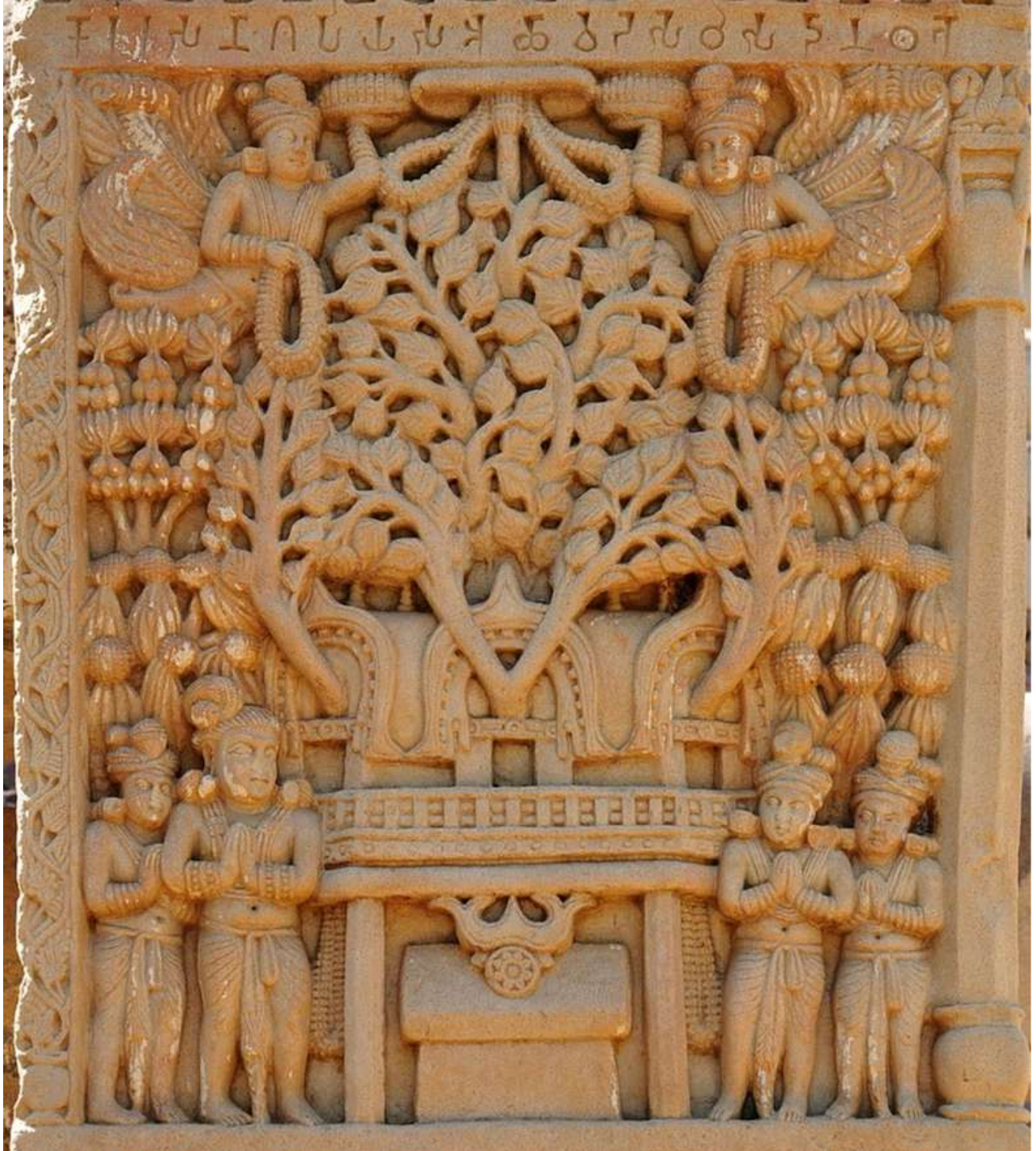


Figure 2: Peepal tree temple at Sanchi Stupa, Bodh Gaya, Bihar

Because of the tree's cultural significance, it is also represented in India's highest civilian award the '*Bharat Ratna*' which has a replica of a peepal tree leaf. The tree is scientifically important as different parts of the tree are used for treating various human and animal ailments. The longevity of the tree is high and hosts a rich biodiversity of birds, animals, insects etc.

It is called *Ashwatha* tree in India and *Arali mara* in Kannada. Due to its religious associations, the peepal tree is well preserved all over India. Even today, in rural, semi-urban, and some urban areas, it is common to see *Aralikattes* or *Ashwatha kattes*. It is an elevated platform constructed around the trunk of the peepal tree. Some *kattes* have a peepal tree and a neem tree, while others only have a peepal tree. In earlier times, the *kattes* were used by people to rest or sleep while passing through villages, a place to socialise, hold village meetings, councils, etc., thus playing an important role in the community. In most of the *aralikattes*, it is common to see *Naga kallu* or snake-stone at the base of the tree. *Naga kallu* is a stone slab with a figure of a cobra carved on it. It is depicted in a variety of patterns and designs depending on where it is found. While *aralikattes* are common in the plains of villages and cities, in other places it is called *Nagabana*, *Devi bana* or *Devarakadu* (a patch of preserved forest) where peepal or neem trees could be present along with a snake deity.

Women regularly visit and worship the snake stone, as the intertwined snake on the stone is considered a symbol of fertility. Childless couples vow to install a snake stone (*Naga pratishtapane*) if they are blessed with a child. The stone is immersed in water for six months and then installed under a peepal tree or neem tree by performing *pujas* and ceremonies. Snakes are both revered and feared, and hence given high status in many cultures.

ARALIKATTES IN BENGALURU

Bengaluru is the capital city of Karnataka, located in the southeast of the state at an altitude of 900 metres. It is one of the most populous cities in India and is known for its numerous parks, lakes, and green spaces, earning it the name "Garden City." As Bengaluru grew and expanded, it incorporated surrounding villages, including several *aralikattes* into the city. Many of these sacred spaces have been preserved and maintained to this day and it is common to see people worshipping by circumambulating an *aralikatte*. These spaces serve not only as places of worship but also as community hubs. *Aralikattes* located next to roads often offer shelter to people waiting for buses, selling fruits and flowers, or even individuals taking a nap. In contrast, *aralikattes* inside temples are primarily used for worship.

A selection of *aralikattes* in and around Bengaluru were visited during the study, and their locations were selected based on daily observations and previous documentation studies. At each site, photo documentation was conducted and if a temple and priest were present, casual interviews were conducted to gather information on the age of the *kattes* and trees, the purpose and significance of the practice, the cultural activities associated with the site, and the history of the place. Additionally, various resource persons, including historians, art historians, and archaeologists were interviewed to provide further insights on their history.

Aralikattes visited were both inside temple premises and those found next to roads. Some of the *aralikattes* were over 100 years old. Most had only a peepal tree, while some had both peepal and neem trees. It is believed that the peepal tree is lord Shiva and the neem tree is the goddess Parvati, a ceremonial marriage is conducted to marry both the trees. All the *aralikattes* had snake stones at their base. It is common to see threads and pieces of cloth tied around the trunk of the tree by people seeking blessings to rid themselves of *naga dosha/sarpa dosha* (serpent curse), to have children, or to get married. Old and new snake stones were found and were carved in different styles, but usually consisted of three stones: one with a seven-hooded snake, the centre stone with a half-human, half-snake *Naga devathe*, a third stone with two intertwined snakes (symbolising union and fertility), and sometimes a fourth stone with a single-hooded snake. More people visit *aralikattes* during the occasion of festivals like *Shashti*, *Naga Panchami*, and *Navaratri*.



Figure 3: Aralikatte as a place of social hub at Sanjaynagar, Bengaluru

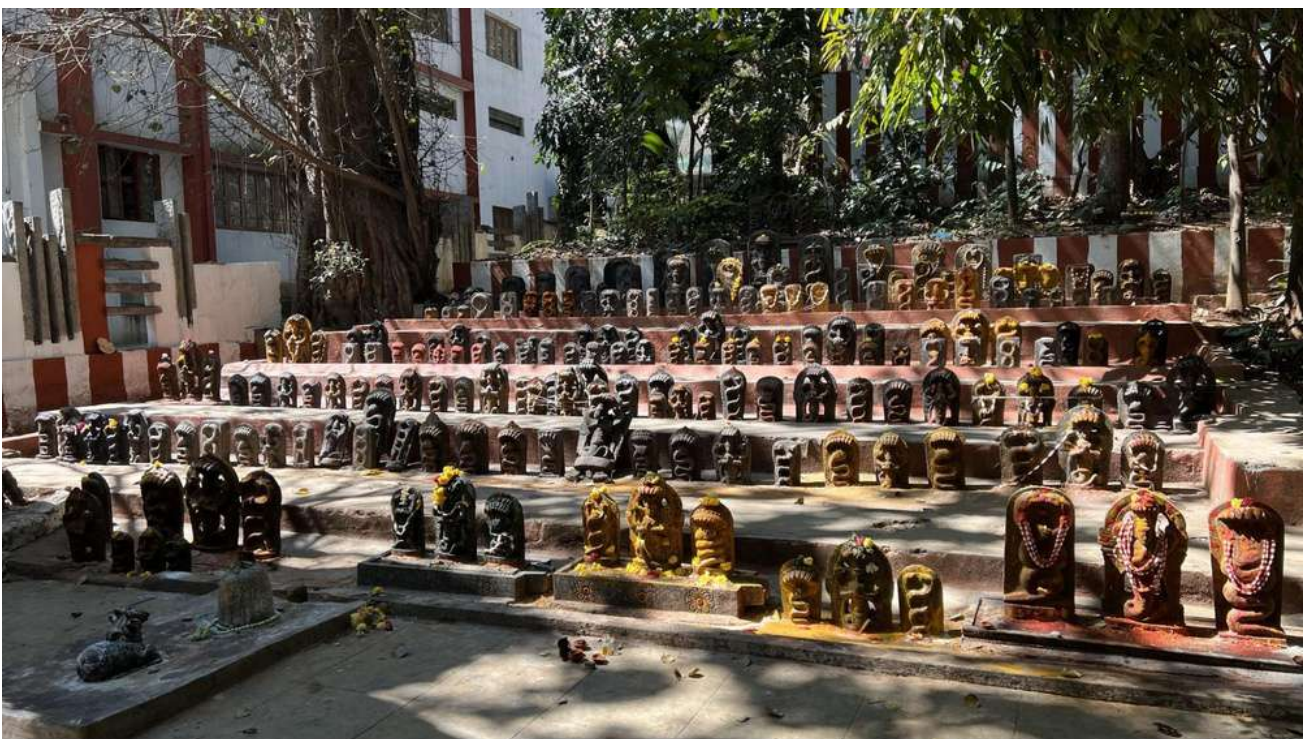


Figure 4: Snake idols at Kaadu Malleshwara temple, Malleswaram, Bengaluru



Figure 5: Aralikatte with snake idols at Cubbon park, Bengaluru



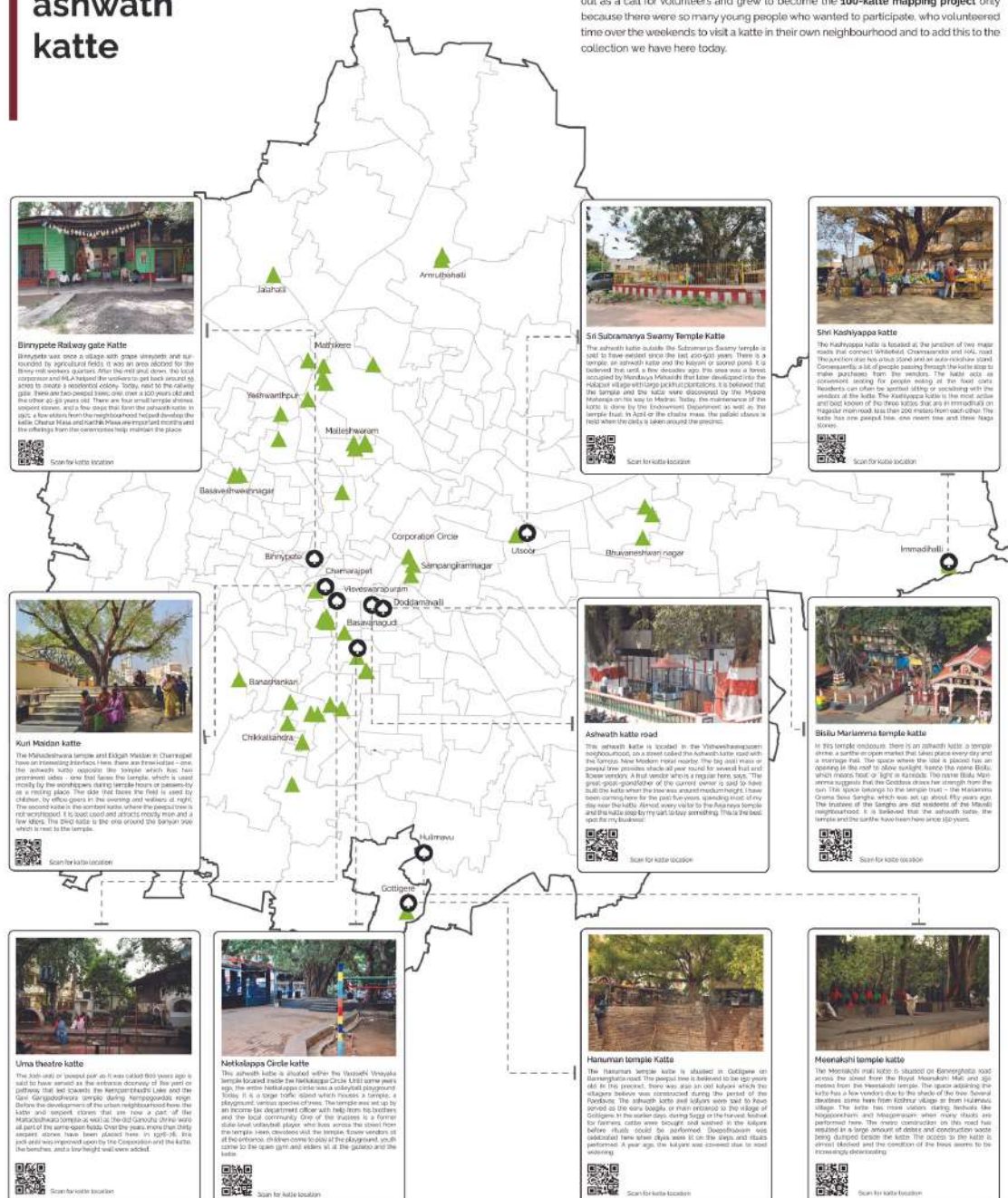
Figure 6: Snake idols at Someshwara temple, Ulsoor, Bengaluru



Figure 7: Huge peepal trees are preserved as part of an *aralikatte* near Bhoganadishvara temple, Chikkaballapura

Find an ashwath katte

In 2018-19, a detailed study was started at 20 ashwath kattes in Bengaluru. However, as we began to identify the first kattes, we thought that it might be useful to document, to record more kattes across the city that could become another project in itself. It started out as a call for volunteers and grew to become the **100-katte mapping project** only because there were so many young people who wanted to participate, who volunteered time over the weekends to visit a katte in their own neighbourhood and to add this to the collection we have here today.



Check out the ASHWATH KATTE section on the **Decoding Everyday** citizen science portal

Contributors: Maria, Monica S, Siddharth Easli, Rudra Sharma, Bhargavi Pandya, Kashish Umashankar, Sabina Khan, Sumathi Makola, Aradhana Pandey, Manasa Vinodkumar, Pratik Desai, Rohit Ramesh, Gargi Mishra, Shikha Patel, Anand Shah, Bhargavathi Rukmani, Anu Korrapati, Sudhima Shreekar, Anshika Desai, Pooja Murthy, Rana Roy, Sneha Sathian, Vishal Rao, Treelyn Mark Fernandes, Sonali Priya, Soniya Gupta, Hriday Hurali, Aveline Thomas, Vaishnavi Pelli, Rakshanda Singh, Mohitani Pathania, Shrey Rana, Siddhantreddy Nalini, Anjali Kattman, Anuj Naiktyal, Copernicus P, Jeevanjay, Hitesh Patel, Prashant Shukla, Shivam Mahendran, Hritvik Hegde

The Sacred and The Public

Map 1: 100-katte mapping project by Everyday City Lab that documented *arallikkattes* around Bengaluru

SNAKES IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

Snakes are represented in many Indian mythological stories and are considered powerful and revered. It is believed that harming or killing a snake is a sin and people who do so will suffer from bad luck and misfortune. Snakes are associated with many gods and goddesses. According to the *Puranas*, Vasuki is the king of snakes who is coiled around the neck of lord Shiva; Ganesha's stomach is tied with a snake; Vishnu is depicted sleeping on a coiled snake who is called Adishesha; the demon Mahishasura is holding a snake in his hand; Nagas and Naginis are half-human, half-snakes who live in an underground kingdom called *Naga loka* or *Paataala loka*; and Nagaraja is the king of Nagas. There are many names for snake gods like Adishesha, Shesha, Vasuki, Manasa, Takshaka, Ananta etc. Several places are named after nagas like Nagercoil, Nagapattinam, and Nagarahole. It is also common to name people as Nagaraja, Nagappa, Nagaveni, Nagadevi, etc.

HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF SNAKE WORSHIP

Snake worship is well-known in Indian religious practices. The origin of snake worship can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilisation. The Indus snake seal depicts a seated figure being worshipped by two devotees, which can be interpreted from their posture, who were sitting under two snakes. The image of the seal provides some ideas about snakes that were treated as some sort of sub-guardian deity. (Nayan Jyoti Pathak, 2022). The snake is considered immortal because of its ability to shed its skin.



Figure 8: A seal from Indus Valley civilisation that depicts snakes

The Naga also appears in various old texts, such as Vedic literature, the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, Buddhist texts, and Jain cannons. These texts show that the Naga cult goes back to the pre-Vedic period, as shown by the Harappan seals and potteries that have snake motifs (Chand, 1999; Callewart, 1995; Hertel, 1979; Panda, 1986; Kaul, 2008).

Snakes have been feared and worshipped universally across religions, civilisations and mythologies of ancient cultures, preceding the birth of modern religions and even till the present day. The veneration of snakes as serpent deities and their devotion proves that snakes were revered as holders of wisdom, protection, healing, sexual virility, and strength. This is further strengthened by the uncovering of serpent cult objects by archaeologists from ancient Mesopotamians and the periods of Bronze and Iron Age excavations in multiple geographical regions. Snakes have played a role in influencing religion either as a strong force of good or evil, like found in the Bible's Garden of Eden, but no other significant case can be made for snake worship like that we find in the regions of south and southeast Asia, especially in the cultures of Hinduism and Buddhism. From the worshipping of specific species like the Cobra (*Naga*), festivals like the *Naga Panchami* and snake-like beings, the *nagas* play a significant role in Hindu mythology.

FESTIVALS AND RITUALS

Naga Panchami is a festival celebrated across India to pay respect to the serpent gods. Serpents are made out of wood, stone, or silver and are worshipped. Some people also worship live snakes (mainly cobras) and give offerings of milk. Termite mounds are worshipped on the day and milk, flowers, and fruits are offered in front of the termite mounds. People also worship snake stones to get rid of the *naga dosha* (curse of the cobra). Snake gods are considered fertility gods, and couples who do not have children or people who want to get married install snake stones under the peepal tree.

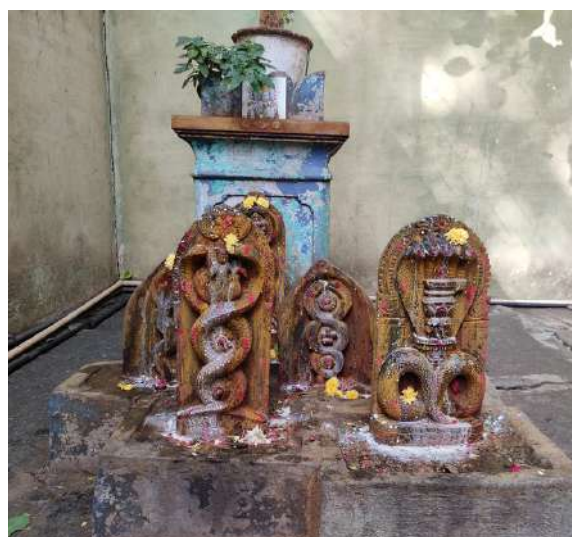


Figure 9: *Naga panchami* celebrations in Mysuru

Nagaradhane or *Nagamandala* is an ancient ritual which is highly prevalent in coastal Karnataka where snake gods are invoked. *Nagamandala* ritual is often centred around *Nagabana*, snake homes. *Nagamandala* ritual celebrates the union of male and female snakes, where two priests enact male and female snakes. The ritual involves rigorous dance moves and goes on for several days. Areas around *Nagabana* are extensively decorated with natural colours and designs.



Figure 10: *Nagamandala* performance

RENOWNED PLACES FOR SNAKE WORSHIP

Vidurashwatha is a village in Chikkaballapur district of Karnataka. The temple here is believed to have a peepal tree that was planted by Vidura during Mahabharata times. It is also a place which has hundreds of snake stones installed every year by people who visit the temple and conduct *naga pratishtapana* for seeking a child or marriage.



Figure 11: Snake idols at Vidurashwatha temple, Chikkaballapura

Kukke Subramanya Swamy temple is located in Subramanya in Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka. In this temple, Kartikeya is worshipped as Subramanya, lord of all serpents. It is a famous temple where people come to get rid of the *naga dosha* or curse by performing *pujas* like *sarpa samskara* and *ashlesha bali*.

Sri Anantha Padmanabhaswamy temple in Kudupu near Mangaluru city, Karnataka is a prominent *nagabana* in that region for snake worship. The main deities in the temple are Ananthapadmanabha, Subramanya, and Vasuki Nagaraja. The *nagabana* is adjacent to the temple and has several snake idols.

ANCIENT SNAKE SCULPTURES

Mahabalipuram, nestled along the coast of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, boasts numerous ancient monuments that were built during the Pallava dynasty dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries, earning it the prestigious designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Among them is a mid-seventh-century magnificent rock-cut sculptural relief (sculpture carved on solid rock such as a cliff) 'Descent of the Ganges' also known as 'Arjuna's penance' which depicts the descent of the sacred river Ganges from the heavens. It is carved on two monolithic rock boulders and is considered to be one of the best rock-cut sculptures in India. The art has more than 100 figurines of gods, goddesses, animals, spirits, and rishis. When rain falls, water gets collected on top of the rock and flows down the natural fissure in the middle of the rock depicting the Ganga descending, where a seven-hooded *Naga*, a three-hooded *Nagini* and a one-hooded cobra are carved depicting the association of *nagas* with water and its protection.

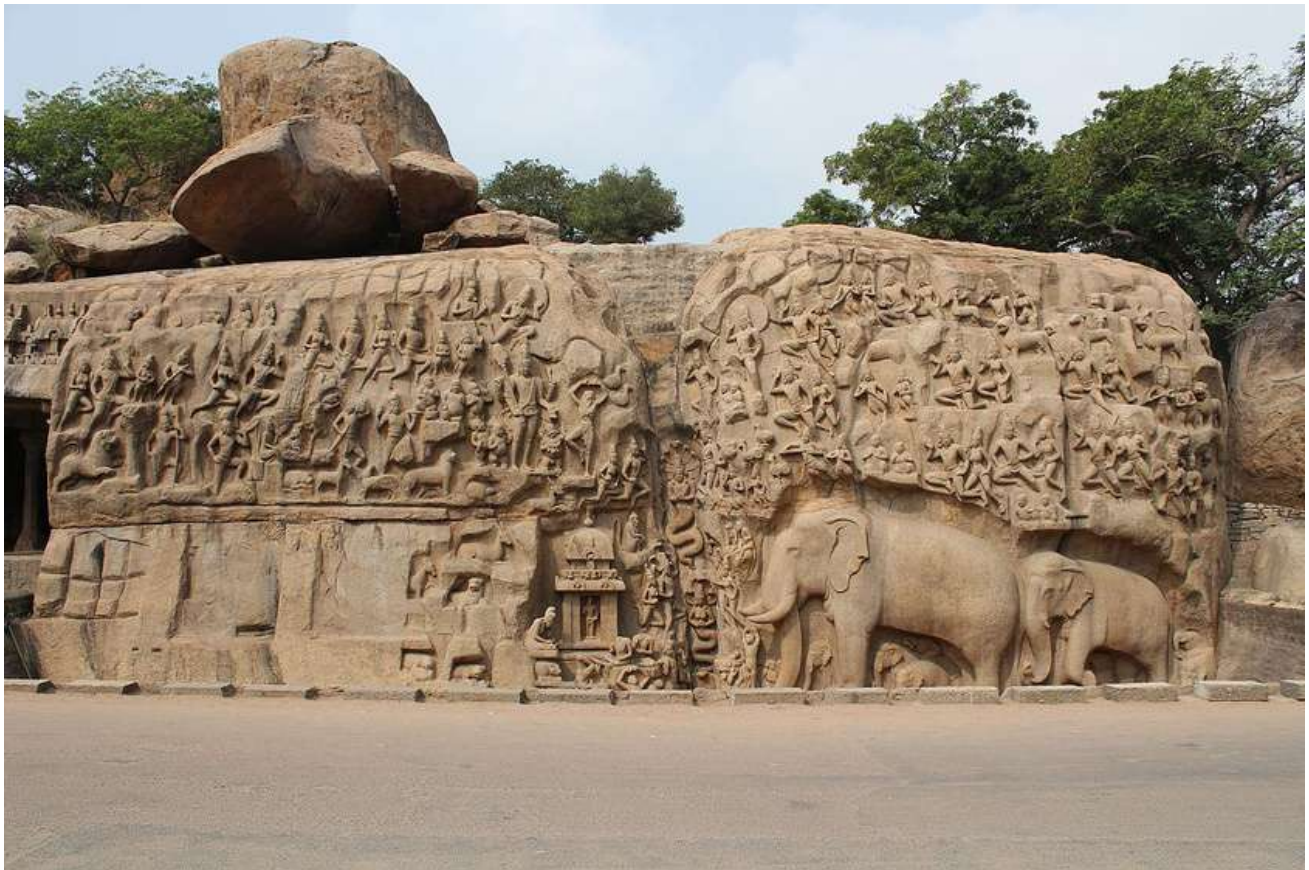


Figure 12: Descent of the Ganges carving on the rock-cut relief, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu.



Figure 13: Nagas (snake deities), Descent of the Ganges at Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu

Banavasi was the first capital city of Karnataka during the rule of the Kadamba dynasty. It is currently located in Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka state. The town boasts several ancient temples and historical sites that reflect its rich cultural heritage. The Madhukeshwara temple built during the 9th century is one of the oldest temples in Banavasi, dedicated to Lord Shiva, known for its architectural beauty and historical significance. Within its sacred precincts, among the myriad sculptures and carvings is a unique Naga stone carved on a rectangular slab during the Satavahana period (2nd century AD). The stone has a five-hooded serpent coiled in a figure of eight shape, a ring around its neck, and an inscription on either side of the stone in nail-headed Brahmi script. It is considered one of the finest artistic pieces and its inscription is analysed and praised by most epigraphists. Written in the Prakrit language, Brahmi script refers that the stone was installed in the twelfth year of Chutukulananda's rule, Sivakhandanagasiri, daughter of Vinhukada Chutukulananda Satakarni gave a *Naga* stone, a pond, and a *vihaara* as gifts. The person who carved this is an artist from Banavasi named Nataka, who was a disciple of Damoraka. This is also one of the oldest inscriptions where the artist's name is mentioned.



Figure 14: Snake sculpture at Madhukeshwara temple, Satavahana period, Banavasi, Karnataka

Kanaganahalli, which is situated on the banks of river Bhima near Sannati village in the Kalaburagi district of Northern Karnataka, is one of the prominent sites of Buddhist monastic remains. Extensive excavations undertaken between 1994 and 2002 have revealed several artistic sculptures and an ancient Buddhist *mahastupa*. The remains of the excavations can be dated between the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD during the Satavahana period. It also has the oldest inscription of Satavahana.



Figure 15: A nine-headed serpent at Kanaganahalli, Karnataka



Figure 16: *Ayaka* panel depicting a *stupa* protected by a *naga* at Kanaganahalli, Karnataka, early 2nd century CE



Figure 17: Nagas protecting the Ramagrama stupa, worshipped by a royal devotee at Kanaganahalli, Karnataka, 1st century BCE



Figure 18: Ramagrama stupa guarded by nagas at Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, 3rd century CE



Figure 19: A railing post at Pauni, Maharashtra, 2nd-1st century BCE



Figure 20: Railing pillar with *Naga mucalinda* protecting the *buddhapada* at Satna, Madhya Pradesh, 150-100 BCE



Figure 21: *Nagaraja mucalinda* protecting the Buddha at Karimnagar, Telangana, 1st century BCE



Figure 22: Drum panel with protective serpent at Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, 1st century CE

CONCLUSION

Cultural associations with nature since ancient times have directly or indirectly helped play significant roles in preserving nature till today. The enduring presence of *aralikattes*, animal deities, and sacred groves even today is strong evidence of these deep-rooted connections. These spaces and symbols are not only relics of the past but active components of contemporary cultural and religious life. They demonstrate the intricate ways in which communities have historically integrated nature into their spiritual and social practices, fostering an enduring respect for the natural world.

The *aralikattes*, in particular, are a testament to this enduring bond. Often centred around ancient trees, these spaces serve as sites for worship, community gatherings, and various social activities. The reverence for the trees and the rituals associated with them have helped ensure their preservation over centuries. It is crucial to understand how these practices and spaces are perceived in contemporary society. While modernisation and urbanisation pose challenges, the continued relevance and adaptation of these traditions can offer powerful models for sustainable living. Investigating how communities today engage with *aralikattes* and other sacred natural sites will shed light on their potential to inspire future generations.

REFERENCES

- Animesh Manna, Mythological Aspects of Snake Worship and its Ecological Sustainability through Historical Outline, International Journal of Research in Engineering, Science and Management, 2023
- Harini Nagendra, Book: Nature in the City- Bengaluru in the past, present and future
- KV Raju, S. Manasi, Sunil Nautiyal, K.P. Rashmi, Book: People and the Peepal- Cultural attitudes to sacred trees and their conservation in urban areas, 2015.
- Nayan Jyoti Patha, Snake cult in India: A literary history, International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, 2022 [IJCRT2212265.pdf](#)
- [Tree & Serpent Early Buddhist art in India- Google Books](#) by John Guy
- People and the Peepal: Cultural attitudes to sacred trees and its conservation

PHOTO CREDITS

Rujan Sarkar/ WCS-India: Cover page; p.6 Fig.4; p.7 Fig. 5; p.7 Fig.6; p.8 Fig.7

Pinterest: p.2 Fig.1; p.3 Fig.2

Manish Machaiah/ WCS-India: p.6 Fig. 3

tamilandvedas.com: p.11 Fig.8

Navya R: p.13 Fig.9

organiser.org: p.14 Fig.10

weekendtrips.com: p.15 Fig.11

mapacademy.io: p.16 Fig.12

Mahesh Balasubramanian: p.17 Fig.13

puratattva.in: p.18 Fig.14

karnatakatravel.blogpost: p.19 Fig.15

Tree and serpent: Early Buddhist art in India: p.20 Fig.16; p.21 Fig.17; p.23 Fig.19; p.24 Fig.20; p.25 Fig. 21; p.26 Fig.22

alamy.com: p.22 Fig.18

Everyday City Labs: p.9 Map 1



ROHINI
NILEKANI
philanthropies



WCS-India