

## Nature Worship in India

For centuries, since the time of the Indus Valley civilization and even during the Vedic period/advent of the Aryans, the elements, trees and animals have been worshipped and even deified. The reason perhaps is that the culture and economy of the subcontinent of India, was and still is, primarily agrarian. Therefore, early settlers and latter-day invaders (who became settlers) recognized the importance of the sun in aiding the growth of crops for food, of rain and rivers for water and the wind for navigation.

As culture expanded, animals were deemed an important part of the process of civilization, and were regarded as significant religious or totemic symbols. Hymns were composed in their honour, that the gods that governed them would always be propitiated. In many traditions such as Jainism, even insects were accorded importance; Jain monks sweep their seating places so as not to injure the tiny creatures that may be there. Certain animals came to represent certain covetable characteristics while others served as indicators of natural cycles. The ecological importance of these creatures was also acknowledged. This worship would be institutionalized in religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism as well as Kautilya's Arthashastra (an ancient treatise on administration) and Emperor Ashoka's edicts. Given below are some of the animals that are significant, both from a cultural and ecological standpoint.

### *Elephant-headed God: Ganesha*

In Hinduism, the beginning is marked with an ode to the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Elephants have been an important symbol in the religious and cultural traditions of the subcontinent. Easily among the most popular of the Hindu pantheon, Ganesha, was originally believed to be a boy created from the dust of his mother Parvati's body. Asked to guard her while she bathed, he refused entry even to her husband Shiva. For this loyalty, he paid with his head and an enraged Parvati was inconsolable. A penitent Shiva ordered his army to bring him the head of the first creature they saw and this is how, the elephant-headed darling of the masses came to be.



While this is the most popular myth associated with the God, ancient texts speak of elephants in various other ways. Elephants were seen as harbingers of rain as their large slow moving grey forms seemed to allude to pewter storm clouds. The god of rain, Indra's famed elephant Airavata was one of the nine gems that emerged during the churning of the ocean. It was also believed that eight elephants who represent the eight points on a compass, hold up the earth. For these reasons and many more, elephants are worshipped in India. Apart from their place in the cultural and mythological traditions of the subcontinent, elephants have a very important environmental role to play. A single elephant feeds daily on huge quantities of plant material, a lot of which is excreted over a distance of 10-20 km in a single day. This dung acts as manure as well as a conduit for the dispersal of seeds. Moreover, researchers in Africa found that landscapes ravaged by elephants saw a greater diversity in the bird and amphibious species. This was

because broken wood and plant material attracted more insects, which in turn lured predators. Elephants are now being given the epithet of "ecological engineers"; however they are in grave danger. Elephants are poached for their tusks, which contributes to the illegal trade in ivory. Habitat loss is another vastly dangerous factor. Elephants follow ancient migratory paths over large swathes of land, which are now being fragmented thus limiting their supplies of food and water. As they move in search of these resources, they come into conflict with humans with considerable loss of life and limb to both sides.

## Tiger

Another animal that is something of an icon on the subcontinent is the tiger. Known as India's national animal, it is often identified with the Goddess Durga or Shakti, as her 'vahana' or vehicle. This association lends it the qualities of strength and courage. Waghdeo in Maharashtra, Huliveerappa in Karnataka, Dokhin Rai in West Bengal - villages across India are dotted with shrines dedicated to the tiger, soliciting protection of humans and animals alike. The influence of the tiger in popular culture extends far and wide. In Kerala, during Onam, dancers dress up like tigers and mimic its ways in a dance titled 'Pulli Kalli.'



(L): *Painting of Durga riding the tiger. Image courtesy: [www.exoticindiart.com](http://www.exoticindiart.com). Tiger Temple in Central India. Image courtesy: Bhavna Menon*

Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh during the month of Muharram, villagers dress up as tigers and perform a dance, which is believed to fulfill one's wishes. There are temples/shrines in Central India where the tiger is worshipped as a protector. In Nagaland too, the tiger is believed to be the protector of the forests. Legend states that the forests and all the life they hold, originated from the bones of a dead tiger. Hence, it is believed to be a sin to hunt or kill tigers here. The Warlis of Maharashtra consider the tiger a guest; to them, its presence ensures prosperity. Among the Kols of Central India, there is a belief that they share their fate with the tiger. Should it be deprived of food, the villagers will starve too. Uncannily, what may seem like remnants of myth and superstition is actually true. The tiger is an apex predator and hence is an indicator of the health of the ecosystem. By feeding on herbivores, it keeps a check on their population, which in turn ensures that the forest cover is not too quickly eroded. Dense forests bind the soil preventing erosion and in turn, floods. Also, forests facilitate the evaporation of water into the atmosphere and thus, ensure rainfall.

In some cases, the lion is associated with the Goddess Durga and thus, occupies a similar place of reverence. Like the tiger, the lion too is an apex predator and hence, hold similar importance from an ecological standpoint. The lion also figures in the iconography of Vishnu, in his incarnation as Narsimha.

## Snake

Likewise, snakes are also revered in India. In ancient India, they were thought to be divine creatures that ruled over the underworld realms over great treasures. Their appearance heralded the arrival of the monsoon and hence they were worshipped. Their propensity for cool dark places led to their association with water as well subterranean abodes.



*Vishnu lying on the serpent, Ananta in the cosmic ocean. Image courtesy: [esotericonline.net](http://esotericonline.net)*

Vishnu, the preserver in Hindu mythology is depicted as reclining on Ananta, the seven-headed serpent who represents time. Shiva, the destroyer in Hinduism, has snakes coiled around his neck and limbs while a snake forms the belt of Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. The festival of 'Nag Panchami' is celebrated to propitiate the snake goddess Manasa who is believed to protect against snakebites. They are also worshipped as a symbol of fertility in the South. In Kerala and Karnataka, groves and shrines respectively are found in all homes, dedicated to snakes. According to Indian thought, the first creature to learn the secrets of yoga from Shiva and bring it to man was the snake Patanjali or Karkotaka who lies coiled around the great ascetic's neck. The ability to 'hear' despite the lack of external ears led people to associate the quality of prescience with this graceful reptile. Along the Konkan coast, snakes are worshipped during the harvest festival. The importance of the connection may be linked to the fact that huge quantities of food grain are consumed by pests such rodents and other insects, many of which are preyed upon by snakes. By checking the spread of rodents, they help prevent diseases like plague.



#### **Eagle**

In Hindu mythology, the eternal enemies of snakes are raptors or birds of prey. Just as snakes are divine guardians of the subterranean, these large magnificent birds are the guardians of the sky. Perhaps, the most famous of them is Garuda, thought to be the eagle or Brahminy Kite, who is recognized as the vehicle of Vishnu. The story goes that Garuda was a slave of the Nagas and he earned his freedom by ferrying a pot of the prized nectar, Amrita, to the Nagas without allowing them to have it. Because he resisted the temptation of nectar, he was given the honour of being Vishnu's mount. While the former points out to courage, an attribute that is often associated with the eagle in many cultures, the latter points to a keen sense of discernment. Although mortal enemies of snakes, they also help in keeping the rodent population in check.

*(L): Vishnu riding Garuda. [silkpaintings.wordpress.com](http://silkpaintings.wordpress.com)*

Like eagles, vultures also have a special place in Indian lore and culture. In the epic Ramayana, the vultures Jatayu and Sampati were instrumental in finding Sita. While Jatayu died trying to rescue her from being carried off by Ravana, Sampati revealed her location to the search party. A rock formation in Madhya Pradesh, which is believed to be the birthplace of Sampati is a popular pilgrimage spot among Buddhists and Hindus.





*Vultures at the Vedagiriswarar Temple. Image courtesy: Wikipedia*

At the Vedagiriswar temple in Tamil Nadu, a pair of Egyptian Vultures was believed to have visited the temple everyday at noon for offerings of flour mixed with ghee and sugar. Legend has it that eight sages were cursed to appear at the temple everyday as a pair of vultures in every epoch. Their absence indicated the presence of sinners in the temple. They were last seen in 1998. This however doesn't point to the absence of the pure-hearted but perhaps stems from the fact that the vulture population in India has plummeted to 0.1% of its original figure, due to the use of the veterinary drug Diclofenac- a cheap analgesic used to treat cattle. However, this drug, when ingested by vultures through the carcasses they feed on, causes renal failure, which is fatal. In India, since a large number of cattle are disposed out in the open, large numbers of vultures were exposed to the drug, which resulted in their death. Owing to the illicit use of the drug, which has been banned in India, vultures continue to remain gravely endangered. Vultures are nature's janitors; they have evolved to digest putrid meat, which makes them effective scavengers. Owing to their absence, carcasses are left out in the open to rot, which hastens the spread of diseases. Moreover, it was seen that the absence of competitors like vultures resulted in the increase of the feral dog population thus increasing the spread of diseases like rabies.

Like vultures, jackals too play the role of scavengers in an ecosystem. Perhaps, realizing their importance, ancient Indians venerated these canids as companions to the Goddess Kali/Chamunda, both of whom represent dissolution of the ego, destruction and death. Jackals here, are a worthy symbol given that destruction must follow death, in order for life to thrive.

#### *Crocodile*

Among other companions and vehicles of the divine are two very interesting creatures: the turtle and the crocodile. The turtle is believed to be the carrier of the river goddess Yamuna. The river Yamuna, is home to terrapins and turtles like Three-striped Roof Turtle and Soft Shell turtle which are endangered due to overfishing which depletes their food sources, destruction of their environment. Sometimes they get trapped in fishermen's nets too, thus leading to their death. Turtles and terrapins control insect and snail populations by feeding on them; they also scavenge dead/decaying organisms thus keeping the water clean. They also help in the dispersal of vegetative matter.

The crocodile is believed to ferry the River Ganga on her journey to the Bay of Bengal and is associated with Varuna, god of the sea as well as Kama, the god of love. The river Ganga forms the habitat of the Mugger crocodile as well as the endemic Gharial. There exists a third species of crocodile in India called the Estuarine crocodile which is found in salt-water habitats. Crocodiles, being the apex predators in an ecosystem act as an indicator of the overall health of the surroundings. They keep the population of other animals in check while also scavenging on carcasses



The crocodile is revered as Makara in Hindu and Buddhist mythology where it represents tenacity and will; while it is the vehicle of the sea god Varuna in the former. The main threats to crocodilian species in India are changes in and loss of habitat due to changes in river course, construction of dams, embankments etc, illegal sand mining along riverbeds etc. as well as mortality due to fishing nets. Decline in the numbers of crocodiles has been linked to increased pollution of the waters, which obviously has deleterious impacts on humans, given that these rivers are a lifeline for a huge swathe of North India. The absence of these reptiles will cause a serious imbalance in our water bodies causing severe environmental as well as health hazards to both animals and people alike.

*Left: Ganga depicted as a goddess riding a crocodile. Image courtesy:*

### ***Parakeet***

Another bird associated with Kama is the parakeet. The subcontinent has 4 species of parakeets, which are mistakenly identified as parrots. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik explains that the red on the bird is synonymous with the parched earth that is desirous of rain while the green signifies the lush greenery that follows the fulfillment of that desire. In South Indian iconography, the parrot is associated with that aspect of Devi which transforms Shiva from ascetic to husband. Today, parakeets are caught, sometimes as nestlings and are sold as pets or to complete the fortuneteller's insignia. This fact of the matter is parakeets are remarkably intelligent birds capable of mimicking human speech and language. This ability to 'speak' was attributed to psychic faculties. Parakeets are also notorious for raiding fruit trees but in doing so, they help in the vital task of seed dispersal. If they have any talent, it is in helping safeguard the future, not in predicting it!

### ***Saras Crane***

In Indian lore, no discussion on the symbolism of romance is complete without the Saras crane. The largest bird in India, it is a non-migratory species that is found in wetlands and in areas of human habitation such as agricultural fields. Saras cranes are believed to mate for life and this bond is believed to go beyond death. Indian poetry is replete with the imagery of the grief of a Saras crane that has lost its mate as well as the elaborate mating display of the male when trying to impress a female. Commonly identified with the Krauncha Paksha of Indian literature, these cranes have been longstanding symbols of fidelity and marital harmony. Threats to the Saras crane include loss and degradation of wetland habitat, pollution, overuse of pesticides, electrocution. Since they tend to destroy crops during the harvest season, farmers destroy their eggs.



*A pair of Saras cranes. Image courtesy: Nikhil Nagle*

Another commonly featured bird in Indian mythology is the Chataka bird, which is identified as the Pied-crested Cuckoo. It was believed that this bird remained thirsty all year round and would only quench its thirst with the first drops of rain. Therefore, the presence of this cuckoo indicated the arrival of the monsoon. While the endurance of the cuckoo is the stuff of old wives tales, its association with the monsoon gains credence from the fact that the Pied-crested Cuckoo migrates to the subcontinent during the monsoon, and therefore is a sure shot marker of the monsoon as well as an indicator the regular cycle of seasons.

#### *Owl*

The last of the birds to be mentioned in this piece is the owl. In Hindu mythology, the owl is the vehicle of the Goddess Laxmi. As Laxmi's vehicle, it is indicative of wisdom, fortitude and intelligence. However, it is commonly believed symbolize the Goddess of poverty and strife, Alaxmi and is hence, looked upon as a messenger of bad news. However, the negative aspects are associated with the idea of the owl only when wealth is misused. While this association simply makes the owl unwelcome where this belief holds strong, the owl's affinity for the Goddess of wealth spells trouble for it. Owls are sacrificed during Diwali owing to the superstition that this bestows wealth upon the performer.

Irrespective of the owl's propensity towards prosperity or misfortune, it is a very important component of the ecosystem, especially in agricultural regions. Its diet primarily consists of rats and other rodents, which are crop pests that cause huge losses to farmers. It is simple: owls are 'lucky' in that they're alive-both for themselves and human beings.

#### *Blackbuck*

In the subcontinent, prosperity has many symbols and one of them is the blackbuck. The Vedas designated this stunning antelope of unrivalled speed as the steed of the wind god himself. They also draw the chariot of the Moon god and are symbols of purity and peace. It was also considered the foremost offering at a sacrifice. Called Krisna-sar in Sanskrit, this dark antelope with its twisted horns and streamlined body was found in plenty all across the open plains of the subcontinent. Hunting lore from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is filled with accounts of open fields filled with herds of blackbuck that stretched as far as the eye could see and further. Since its habitat lay outside the forest, it came to stand for fecund land that lent itself to human use in the form of civilization and its various adjuncts. It holds a greater degree of reverence in the scrublands of present-day Rajasthan where the Bishnoi tribe revere it as a representative of the founder of the sect, Jambo ji. The blackbuck feeds on the Khair plant, which is valuable to the Bishnois. To them, the presence of the blackbuck indicates the presence of the Khair on which they depend for food and other economic reasons. Today, the blackbuck is threatened by habitat loss as well as poaching and hunting for meat and sport.





*Blackbuck. Image courtesy: Nikhil Nagle*



This veneration extends to forests and plants too. Numerous plants in India are sacred to various Gods and Goddesses and are worshipped. Such as the Tulsi, Peepal and Bel. There also exists the tradition of sacred groves wherein entire tracts of forests have been deemed sacred by local communities and hence, have been protected from destruction. In an age when environmentalism wasn't even a fad, communities noticed that water sources ran dry when certain forest tracts were lopped off and hence, this strengthened their resolve to protect the remainder. In India, there have been numerous instances of communities rallying up to the cause of the environment-be it the Chipko movement of 1962 or the Bishnoi sect who sacrificed their lives so that the Khair tree wouldn't be cut.

*Left: Woman worshipping a Tulsi plant Image courtesy: Wikipedia*

In essence, worship of nature and animals has more to do with fanciful stories that belie a vivid imagination. Scratch a little deeper below the surface and one finds an ethos of protection and conservation of both the environment, and ultimately human life itself.

*-Kavya Chimalgi  
Last Wilderness Media Pvt Ltd*