

Mythological Aspects of Snake Worship and its Ecological Sustainability through Historical Outline

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Abstract: Throughout history, humans have expressed their relationship with nature in various ways that reflect their cooperation and harmony with the natural world. These expressions show how humans depend on and value nature for its blessings and gifts. Many religions also honor nature and its elements as sources of divine or sacred power, wisdom, guidance, inspiration, or revelation, as well as meeting human needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. For instance, some religious traditions worship the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the water, the fire, or the wind as expressions of the divine or as vital forces of life. Furthermore, humans have been given the responsibility to protect and care for God's creation, as taught by different religious traditions. This means that humans have a moral and spiritual duty to respect and preserve the diversity and integrity of nature, as well as to avoid or reduce any damage or destruction that may disturb its balance and harmony. Religion plays an important role in environmental issues and values. However, religion may not have expressed its concern for these issues in the same way as we do today. Modern environmentalism arose in response to the ecological crisis caused by human activities such as industrialization, urbanization, deforestation, pollution, overconsumption, and climate change. These issues need scientific knowledge, technological innovation, political action, and social change to solve them effectively. Religion may not have the same tools or strategies as environmentalism, but it can offer a different perspective and a complementary approach that can improve and enrich the environmental discourse and practice. Religion can offer a holistic vision of the relationship between humans and nature that is based on values such as love, compassion, justice, peace, and harmony. Religion can also encourage and motivate people to work for the common good of all living beings and to seek solutions that are sustainable and fair. Religion can also cultivate a sense of awe and wonder for the beauty and mystery of nature that can foster a deeper connection and a greater appreciation for its worth and meaning.

Keywords: nature worship, mother goddess, symbolism of snake, eco-system, snake worship.

1. Introduction

Some ancient communities lived in harmony with nature, respecting both the living and non-living components that constitute the eco-system, which is defined as "a large community of living organisms in a particular area" (Swamy et al., 2003). In general, the connections that people establish with

nature can be influenced by various aspects of their lives, either material or spiritual (Alves et al., 2013). The Hindu tradition exemplifies how the reverence for 'Mother Earth' contributes to a lifestyle that is in harmony with nature. The worship of trees, animals, forests, rivers, and the sun, and considering the earth itself as 'Mother Goddess', are part of the Indian culture. There is also the custom of attributing a specific animal as the vehicle of their gods and goddesses. These practices reflect the Hindu belief that everything in the universe is interconnected and interdependent, and that humans have a moral duty to protect and preserve the natural environment (Chapple, 2002). By honoring the sacredness of nature, Hindus seek to achieve a balance between their material and spiritual needs, and to foster a sense of gratitude and responsibility towards their surroundings. Moreover, Hinduism teaches that humans are not separate from nature, but rather part of it, and that they share a common essence with all living beings (Atman) that ultimately transcends the physical world (Brahman) (Chapple, 2002). This worldview encourages Hindus to respect the diversity and complexity of life, and to avoid harming or exploiting any creature or resource unnecessarily. Hinduism also offers various ethical principles and practices, such as ahimsa (non-violence), dharma (duty), karma (action and consequence), and yoga (union), that guide Hindus to live in harmony with themselves, others, and nature (Chapple, 2002). The term ecology was coined by German scientist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 as a combination of the Greek words oikos (house) and logos (science). Religion has many connections with ecology, as it reflects the values and practices that influence the protection of nature and biodiversity. Ecology also helps to understand the key relationships among plants and animals, and between organisms, including humans, and their environment. Ecological sustainability is a planning concept that allows human society "to live within the limits of the bio-physical environment" (Goodland, 1995). In the 1990s, the humanities began to participate in environmental studies with the development of environmental literature and history, as well as environmental ethics, religion, and philosophy. The eco-sensitivity displayed in the classical and folk traditions and lifestyles of the Hindu civilizational stream is important to

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highlight its relevance, significance, and potential. The world is especially evident in the diverse natural settings and bioregions where religions have developed over time. For instance, India is the center of a large sacred bioregion where three religious traditions, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism have both shaped and been shaped by the environment.

India has a rich and diverse tradition of respecting and honoring nature and its elements, which is reflected in various religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and others. Sacred texts and teachings that urge people to show reverence for nature and live in harmony with it originated in the Indian subcontinent. Nature worship was an ancient custom in India and all forms of life were considered sacred. Living in accordance with nature has been an integral part of Indian culture. This is evident in many aspects of Indian society, such as traditional practices, religious beliefs, rituals, folklore, arts and crafts, and daily life. One of the fundamental principles of nature (the interrelationship and interdependence of all life) was formulated in the Indian ethos and expressed in the ancient scripture, the *Isopanishad*, more than 2000 years ago. The *Isopanishad* states that everything in the universe belongs to God and humans should only take what is necessary for their survival and not exploit nature. It also teaches that humans should not harm other living beings or disturb the natural balance. The *Isopanishad* is one of the oldest *Upanishads*, which are philosophical texts that form the core of Hinduism. Many Hindu gods and goddesses are associated with animals as their vehicles. For example, Lord Ganesha rides a mouse, Lord Shiva rides a bull, Lord Vishnu rides a bird or a snake, Goddess Durga rides a lion or a tiger, Goddess Saraswati rides a swan or a peacock, and so on. These animals symbolize different aspects of the divine attributes and also represent the respect for all creatures (Allocco, 2013). Hinduism also believes in the concept of reincarnation, which means that souls can be reborn in different forms of life depending on their karma. This implies that all living beings are connected and have a potential for spiritual growth. Sacred groves or forests protected with devotion were part of Hindu and Buddhist culture. These were areas of natural vegetation where people worshipped local deities and spirits and refrained from cutting trees or hunting animals. Sacred groves served as sanctuaries for biodiversity conservation and ecological balance. They also provided various benefits to the local communities such as water sources, medicinal plants, food, fuel, fodder, etc. Sacred groves are still found in many parts of India, especially in the Western Ghats, the Eastern Himalayas, and the Northeast region. India has a long history of nature worship and conservation that is rooted in its religious and cultural traditions. The Indian worldview recognizes the sacredness of all life forms and the interdependence of humans and nature. This has shaped the Indian way of living in harmony with nature and its elements. Primary Section Heading

2. Forms of Snake-worship

Snakes are fascinating creatures that have been revered and feared in various religions and cultures for thousands of years. They belong to the order of scaled reptiles called squamates and

have a wide range of habitats and sizes (Ewart, 1878). They can move swiftly on land and water, burrow in the soil, climb trees and rocks, and even swim fast - all without limbs. They have distinctive features such as the hood, the markings on the hood, the lidless eyes, and the different colors that make them stand out from other reptiles. Snakes are also important for the ecological balance and the food chain. These remarkable characteristics have inspired many myths and symbols about snakes and have led to their worship under different names in various parts of the world (Vogel, 1926; Oldham, 1988; Eliade, 1987; Martin, 1972; Nagar, 1988; Sarma, 1956). Snakes have been associated with wisdom, evil, protection, healing, sexual vitality, cosmic power, and much more in different traditions. Snakes have also been found in many archaeological sites and literary sources that date back to the Vedic period (Eliade, 1987; William, 1983). There are also several festivals related to snakes in different countries. Snakes, therefore, have a rich and complex history of religious ecology that reflects the diverse human responses to their natural connections (Vogel, 1926). Religious ecology is a field of study that explores how individuals and cultures construct symbolic systems from their available environmental relations and provides a basis for understanding the different cultural responses of various individual processes through insights on practical ways of implementation (Vogel, 1926).

The Naga, a mythical snake-like creature, has been portrayed in different ways and media in Indian history. Eliade (1987) classified the Naga into three types based on how they look: Theomorphic (like gods), Anthropomorphic (like humans), and Therio-anthropomorphic (like animal-human hybrids). The Theriomorphic Naga figures were very popular in mediaeval art, as they showed the lasting cult of snake worship in different regions of India (Smitha, 2003). For instance, some of the Ajanta frescoes depict a seven-headed Naga king with his wife, and some of the Māmallapurama sculptures depict snake demons with hoods (Singh, 1983). The Naga also appears in various old texts, such as the late Vedic literature, the epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), the Puranas, Buddhist text 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). The texts also tell various stories about the Naga, such as their mythical origin, their clash with King Parikshit, their role in the churning of the ocean, their hostility with the Pāndava, their defeat by Krishna and Balarama, and their link with Padmanabhan (Vitsaxis, 1977). The Naga also affected the iconography of several deities, such as the twenty-third Jain Tirthankara Parsvanatha, the seventh Jain Tirthankara Supārasvanātha, Śiva and Balarama. The Naga symbols were widely used in various artistic expressions, such as weapons, pillars and ornaments (Chao, 1979; Noss, 1990; Parrinder, 1983).

3. Various Aspects of Snake-worship

The ritualistic aspects of religion are influenced by the biological and cosmological significance of Snake. Religions convey a worldview that situates humans in a meaningful and

responsible cosmos, which is expressed through stories, symbols, rituals, ethics, history, and institutions. However, the religious expressions of symbols, rituals, laws, and community life vary according to the geographical and historical contexts of India. The natural cycles of life, death, and rebirth are often represented in religious traditions and enacted in practices that show reverence for the mystery of life and gratitude for nature as a source of sustenance for body and soul. The Puranas depict a complex mythical cosmology that is shaped by narrative demands. According to classical Hinduism, this world is governed by time, which is cyclical and endless. The world is populated by countless beings, such as gods, demigods, bodhisattvas, spirits, demons (asuras), and various creatures, some resembling humans or animals, others being fantastical or hybrid. The celestial bodies, such as the sun, the moon, the planets (including Rahu and Ketu, the nodes of lunar eclipses), the zodiacal signs, and the asterisms (nakshatras) are also personified and depicted in sculpture and painting. The alignment of human life with natural systems is a key feature of religious cosmology that is manifested in myths, symbols, and rituals. Religions also have ethical guidelines to prevent the exploitation of land and species, which are found in many scriptures.



Fig. 1. The diagram (created using AI) illustrates how snake worship and eco system are linked. The arrows show the direction of the influence or effect. The diagram is not all-inclusive, but it reveals some of the key elements of the relationship

Time is a powerful force that creates and destroys everything. This is the idea behind the myth that says time is another name for Yama, the god of death, or Shiva, the god of destruction. Time is also a cycle of endless repetition, as shown by the year and the doctrine of reincarnation. The soul can either reach the ultimate reality of brahman, or return to the world of birth and death. The year is a symbol of this process and is identified with Prajapati, the god of creation and sacrifice. Snakes are also symbols of creation and destruction, as well as fertility and wisdom. They can shed their skin and renew themselves, or they can bite and kill with their venom. They are associated with

various gods and goddesses in different cultures, such as Asclepius, the Greek god of healing; Kali, the Hindu goddess of time and death; and the Egyptian cobra, which represents immortality and inner vision. Snakes can also form a circle by swallowing their own tail, which signifies eternity and wholeness. Snakes have a profound meaning in life, as they embody the mysteries of death and rebirth, ambition and power, intellect and intuition, and wisdom and understanding. They also remind us of the importance of balance and harmony, as they can be both beneficial and harmful, depending on how we interact with them. Snakes are fascinating creatures that inspire awe and respect in many cultures around the world.



Fig. 2. The diagram (created using AI) illustrates how snake worship and eco system are linked. The arrows show the direction of the influence or effect. The diagram is not all-inclusive, but it reveals some of the key elements of the relationship

4. Importance of Snake-worship in Eco-system

Snakes are amazing animals that have a significant impact on the ecosystems they inhabit. They are predators that feed on various prey, such as rodents, frogs, birds and even other snakes. By doing so, they help control the population of pests and diseases that can harm humans and crops. For example, snakes can reduce the damage caused by rats and mice that eat grains and seeds, contaminate food and spread diseases like leptospirosis and plague. They are also prey for larger animals, such as eagles, mongooses and crocodiles, which depend on them for food and nutrition. Snakes are part of the food web that maintains the balance of nature. However, many snakes are facing serious threats from human activities. Some of the factors that endanger snakes are habitat loss, urbanization, disease, persecution, unsustainable trade and invasive species. These factors reduce the population and distribution of snakes, which can have negative consequences for the biodiversity and health of the ecosystems. For instance, habitat loss due to deforestation, agriculture and mining can destroy the shelters and resources that snakes need to survive. Urbanization can increase the risk of road mortality, predation by domestic animals and conflict with humans. Disease can affect the immune system and reproduction of snakes. Persecution can result from fear, ignorance or superstition that leads people to kill snakes or capture them for illegal trade. Unsustainable trade

can deplete the wild populations of snakes that are exploited for their skin, meat, venom or as pets. Invasive species can compete with or prey on native snakes or introduce new pathogens or parasites. Snakes need our protection and conservation to ensure their survival and role in the environment. Snakes also have a cultural and religious significance in many societies. They are symbols of wisdom, power, fertility, healing and transformation in various traditions. For example, in ancient Egypt, snakes were associated with royalty and divinity, as seen in the uraeus (cobra) that adorned the crowns of pharaohs. In Hinduism, snakes are worshipped as nagas (serpents) that guard sacred places and bestow blessings. In China, snakes are considered auspicious and lucky, as they are one of the 12 animals of the zodiac. They are also objects of fear, hatred, superstition and myth in others. For example, in Christianity, snakes are often linked to evil and temptation, as seen in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In some African cultures, snakes are believed to be messengers of misfortune or ancestors that need to be appeased. In Australia, some Aboriginal people regard snakes as creators or ancestors that shaped the land and its features. Snakes have inspired human imagination and creativity for millennia. They are featured in art, literature, music and folklore around the world. Snakes are not only fascinating animals but also crucial components of the natural world. By respecting snakes and learning more about them, we can overcome our fears and appreciate their beauty and diversity. Snakes deserve our attention and care as much as any other living being on this planet.

5. Conclusion

The protection of nature and natural resources was inherent in the Indian worldview and faith, manifested in religious practices, folklore, art and culture permeating every aspect of the daily lives of people. Classical Indian literature is full of metaphors of man as one with nature. It encourages people to give respect to any kind of animals and feel a connection with them. Many animals are regarded as sacred and worshiped by some Hindu and other communities and have thus received protection for centuries. The tiger and the cobra, though greatly feared, are given protection on religious grounds. The common practice of snake worship helps people to accept even venomous creatures (Das & Balasubramanian, 2017). Snakes play a vital role in any ecosystem. Their presence or absence from an area directly affects the health of an ecosystem. Snakes, as predators and prey on a variety of animals, tend to control rodent populations in particular. Rapid development nowadays threatens the survival of snakes in many ecosystems (Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2019). Indeed, it prevents people from killing the cobras recklessly. Snakes have been related in

various religions with wisdom, evil, protection, healing, sexual vitality, cosmic power and much more.

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