



Zoology: An Extension of the Indian Way of Life

Pallavi Patnaik

For any lay person, Zoology may merely be a branch of biology which relates to the animal kingdom. However, in the context of Indian culture and Hindu religion, it transgresses this narrow definition.

Let alone to an avid student of Zoology, animals fascinate all human beings in general. Each individual feels connected with at least one animal, be it in the form of religious reverence or deep-seated fear. Although animal worship is not exclusive to Hinduism, the symbolism and significance attached to it is essentially unique. Admittedly, in the context of our country, animals are impetuses for growth, conduits of unity and love, and undeniable symbols of our culture. Even the diversity of animals in a way reflects the immense diversity of India itself.

Hinduism is replete with examples of animals as vehicles of our myriad gods and goddesses, and at times as deities themselves. The one-tusked elephant headed Ganesh is not a mere veneration of the elephant, but an undeniable symbol of the nation itself. The Matsya or fish, the Kurma or turtle, the Varaha or boar, the Narasimha or half-lion and half-human are bright examples of our religious tryst with animals.

It is beyond the realm of debate that animals occupy a very significant position in India, be it as incarnations of deities, myths and legends or otherwise. Animals also embellish religious art and architecture.

The cow is treated as a mother to Hindus, possibly because it gives milk and hence akin to a mother. It gives a lot selflessly as a mother, which naturally makes us feel very close to it. Besides, the cow's milk is used for religious rituals and rites.

Especially in the context of Hinduism, animals are believed to be manifestations of divinity itself which is closely intertwined with the cycle of Karma, wherein it is stressed that human beings have progressed from animals due to good Karma in the past life and will be reborn as animals for their bad Karma in the present life.

The Hindu belief of the sacredness of animals is a dominant and beautiful aspect of Indian culture. Hinduism has many animal deities, modelled after the animals which one sees in one's everyday life. We worship the monkey as Hanuman and we respect even the tiny mouse as



the vehicle of Ganesh. Shiva's bull or snake, Saraswati's swan, Laxmi's owl, Kartik's peacock, Durga's lion, Yama's buffalo are only a few of an array of examples which can be given. Dattatreya, who personifies Brahma, Visnu and Maheshwar, has four dogs accompanying him.

Even in our social milieu, animals are considered to bring good luck in different ways. For instance parrots are considered as a sign of fertility. Therefore, when people get married, walls are painted with depictions of parrots, with the hope that the bride and groom will have children. Alternately, when a cat crosses our path or we sight a single mynah, we consider it to be inauspicious.

Besides Hinduism, even Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam all intrinsically connect with animals in one way or the other. It is a fact that only by comprehending the role that animals play in all aspects of Indian life one can truly understand the universal essence of the Indian spirit. Our culture is extremely spiritual and hence respects and cherishes life in all its forms, animals, birds, reptiles and insects included.

Pallavi Patnaik, Research Scholar, P.G Department of Zoology, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack.