

Interconnectedness of Organisms & Conception of Mental Health in Indian Culture

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ABSTRACT

India is a vast country and presents a great deal of geographical, cultural, mythological, spiritual, and religious diversity. India as a country exhibits similar diversity in flora and fauna species. There is an interconnectedness in this diversity as well. Human beings are deeply connected to other organisms biologically. The respiration process and the food chain exemplify that we are dependent on each other for survival thus we need to pay respect to every organism on earth to maintain that balance. In this term paper, I shall introduce how we all are interdependent, how our mental health is based on the balance of this association, and how Animal & Plant worship culture in India is related to this interdependence between organisms. Indian Psychology emphasizes collectivism and coexistence which means an individual's self is an outcome of one's family, society, environment, and many other factors. Animals and Plants are a part of this collective self thus need to be respected, protected, and prioritized in human lives. Finally, we explore various concepts, benefits & researches prevalent in India and the world related to the worship of animals and plants. Also, the problems caused due to rapidly losing connections between organisms.

Keywords: *Relative Self, Food Chain, Zoolatry, Animism, Totemism, Natural Resources*

In the current universe earth is the only known planet where life is possible. Survival on earth is interdependent on all the organisms that are present in nature. Whether it is animals, plants, insects, or the human race. It is necessary to live in harmony with other organisms for efficient production of resources and disposition of waste. E.g., In the respiration process, we inhale oxygen and exhale CO₂ and plants inhale that CO₂ waste and exhale oxygen to complete the process and facilitate survival. Food Chain is one of the biggest examples of interdependence, as in India it is said commonly that “*Jeev jeevasya bhojanam*” means every creature is some other creature's food (food chain). Thus, interdependence is necessary for survival and balance in nature.

Earlier there was a balance in this interconnection but with the evolution of organisms “Survival of the fittest” or “Survival of the fitter” became a norm according to Charles Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species”. Darwin took the “Survival of the Fittest” phrase from sociologist Herbert Spencer which meant that one who is the best to adjust the surrounding

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environment will be successful in surviving and reproducing. Darwin was not a very firm believer of this idea rather he was of the idea, 'survival of the fittest' because the struggle of existence is relative and not absolute. This means our existence is multidimensional.

In this struggle of survival of the fittest, the stronger ones put down the weaker ones. The human race to substantiate their existence has started practices that curb other organisms and make them the fittest to survive. Practices like deforestation, burning of fossil fuels, overpopulation leading to exploitation of resources, pollution, etc. have probably shown that the importance of other organisms' existence is not of much value to the human race. We need to ponder over it and answer the question that, 'Is the survival of humans only important to us?'. We need to question our selfish acts which are causing an imbalance in the harmony of the coexistence. This also disturbs the food chain due to the reduction in the habitat of animals and plants each other's food is either excessive or has drastically reduced.

We are also losing interconnections with the other organisms due to technological advancements, change of priorities (our luxury is more important than nature's care), and drastic lifestyle change seeking more comfort every day. This simply leads to exploiting nature for our benefit.

Now this disturbance in natural balance, coexistence, and food chain causes multiple problems in mental health. We get more prone to stress and anxiety due to this race of being the fittest. We can also suffer from depression or mania due to lack of food, lack of natural resources around and as survival is the biggest goal of any organism, stress related to survival is the basis of most mental disorders.

To gain the balance back we need to prioritize nature and value the coexistence. According to my research, all this exploitation was one of the major reasons for the emergence of Plant and Animal worship. People thought that whatever is equivalent to God or symbolizes God should not be hurt thus and rightly so people try to protect whatever is worshipped. For example, Hindu people do not cut Peepal tree, banyan tree, Mango tree, and other trees of mythological relevance, they also worship cows and do not kill them.

Thus, worshipping can be one of the ways to protect them. Though it is not widespread due to multiple religions and beliefs it can come across as some help.

Animal and Plant Worship Paradigm in India

Worshipping something or some people is a very common practice in India. Worship simply means to cherish and value that thing or person. Animals and Plants or Nature, in general, are very valuable to India as Indian lives are agriculture-based. It has a tribal background to it where plants and animals are the only sources of living.

Animal Worship is also known as Zoolatry. Zoolatry is a word formed by the combination of Greek words "zoion" meaning "an animal" and "latreia" meaning "worship or service paid to the gods". It is not so clear that where and when did zoolatry started but it is very prominent in most of the places of the world in different forms. In India, Animal worship means to glorify animal deities or incarnations of gods in the form of animals. It also means to give importance to the valuable contribution of animals in our lives, in the form of food, food provider, or utility of these animals as vehicles to human service, etc. There are multiple forms in which animals are worshipped in India like incarnations of gods or their vahana, and also as a provider. The most important reason behind animal worship is spiritual

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or mythological. According to Hinduism India is believed to be home to almost 33 Crore gods and goddesses. According to the mythic of India, each god has one or the other animal as their vehicles like Lord Shiva has 'bull' as the vehicle, Lord Vishnu has Eagle, Lord Kartikeya has Peacock, Lord of Rain i.e. Indra has Elephant, etc. it makes them related to god thus worthy of worship. Some animals are worshipped because gods incarnated in their form like Lord Vishnu incarnated in the form of Boar in his one of the Dashavtars, he also incarnated as Kurma (Tortoise) thus these animals are considered to be god. Lord Ganesh of Hindu mythology has the face of an elephant thus elephants are also considered live images of Lord Ganesh. Not only in Hinduism but also in other religions like Buddhism and Jainism animals are worshipped. In Buddhism and Jainism, the major reason for worshipping animals is to protect them rather than anything mythological.

Worldwide Plants are considered a very significant part of human life but in India, many plants are worshipped. Plant worship means glorifying plants because of their benefits or their use in the process of worshipping God as an offering. Indian mythology has abundant references to plants in worship because of its use of every part as one or the other offering. E.g.: A plant of tulsi is worshipped because of it being offered to God of Creation Lord Vishnu as it is believed to be his wife in one of his incarnations. According to *Manu Smriti* trees are alive and are formed so because of past Karma thus they also experience whatever is happening around them. In *Hindu mythology*, it is believed that God created trees for the betterment of society as they work as the most significant provider by making almost all of their parts consumable to nature. In Bhagwat Gita, Lord Vishnu said “*aśvatthaḥ sarva-ṛikṣhāṇām*” meaning amongst all trees I am Peepal tree. This increases the relevance of accepting the tree as God.

Plants are worshipped in other religions also like Buddhism because it is believed that *Gautam Buddha* took salvation under a Banyan Tree also known as the *Mahabodhi tree*. Jainism has no god worship rituals but the pipal tree is regarded as auspicious because it is considered to act as a symbol of the Jain religion.

In the Christian religion, Fir trees are decorated and, in a way, worshipped on the day of the Christmas festival (birth of their god Jesus) because of their everlasting greenery which signifies the everlastingness of life. Thus, mythologically plants are worshipped majorly because of their providing abilities or used as offering to the god. Most sages preach the worship of trees because it is essential for living on this earth and early intellects used plants for consumption and treatment. People used to worship God and feared dangerous circumstances if disrespected any god thus sages connected plants and animals to God so that they could be saved and used sustainably.

Therefore, animals and plants are a significant part of Indian's life and they have many reasons to worship. According to Indian mythology flora and fauna are an essential part of nature and nature is directly related to God in form of offerings, incarnations, or as a provider thus making it worthy worshipping.

Scientific Underpinnings of worshipping Plants and Animals

Plants and Animals combine to make nature around us. These are the most essential components of the earth which contribute to forming a living and balance between human beings and the environment.

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Sir Francis Galton talks about Nature and Nurture in human development. Nature here means inherent or genetic qualities and Nurture means the development of the human mind by the impact of external factors or the environment. By studying this theory and many other similar theories we conclude that environment plays a much more important role in human mind development as human interaction with his or her immediate environment results in learning and understanding new experiences and conditioning helps in our growth. Thus, it is scientifically proven that a fulfilling environment is very necessary for the psychological growth of human beings, and worshipping nature just shows cherishing our great bounties. There can be many other scientific reasons for worshipping animals and plants.

In the case of animals according to the evolution theory of Charles Darwin, human beings have evolved from animals thus they are considered as our ancestors. This can be one of the reasons for worshipping them as elders or ancestors to seek their blessings and guidance.

To see the scientific importance of plants and animals is endless. Firstly, plants, are living as they inhale carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen. This process keeps the life cycle going. One reason behind the worship of plants is also that they are life-givers. Plants like tulsi and the Banyan tree produce excessive amounts of oxygen. The plant of tulsi is very pure and scientifically proven that it acts as a cleanser for environmental pollution. One of the greatest examples of this is that area around The Taj Mahal is being planted with many tulsi plants to keep the environment clean.

The Great Banyan tree is believed to release oxygen all day that is why it is considered auspicious and a lifesaver thus cherished and worshipped.

Another scientific reason for cherishing plants and animals is because of their medicinal and antibiotic qualities. Plants like tulsi, turmeric, ashwagandha, aloe vera, Parijat(kalpavriksha), Gooseberry, and many more have been used for years to treat mild to severe diseases. Diseases like cough, a common cold can be easily treated with these plants only. In India, the study of medicines and treatment called AYURVEDA includes only treatment through plants, herbs, shrubs, animal produce (cow milk, cow urine, pig fat), and natural products in general. This kind of treatment is being used from ancient sage times till now. Various researches were also conducted on cow produce from across the world. This makes it even more important to cherish and worship these bounties on which once our country was completely dependent for healthy survival.

One of the recent research projects on why cows are so much worshipped in India than any other country found out that Indian cow milk due to its food intake in India is extremely high in type 2 of Protein which makes it much healthier than any hybrid cow milk thus India depends on its agriculture and dairy culture and values it similar to a god. There are many other similar reasons due to which people of India cherish their natural gift of God.

Worship of Plants, Animals & its relevance to Mental Health

‘Psychology is the scientific study of the human mind, behavior, and complex mental processes.’ This is the western definition of psychology, but ‘Indian Psychology is an approach to the psyche of a person based on the Indian ethos, the characteristic spirit of the Indian civilization.’ It is the psychology rooted in the Indian consciousness based on Yoga, and a life-affirming spirituality. Religion is an integral part of the Indian psyche and many Indian psychology concepts are taken from various religions. India is a country where

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world's eight major religions are present with complete equality and freedom. Each religion and faith have its way of worshipping. Thus, worshipping is also an intrinsic part of Indian culture and psyche.

Indian form of worship ranges from idol worship, spirituality to plant and animal worship. All these are mostly related to mythology and religion but it does have a psychological perspective to them.

In my opinion, whatever humans do have a connection with their minds and thinking process. According to my research, I came across the following psychological reasons for animals and plant worship.

Happiness and stress reduction: A *Blog* on World Mental Health Day by Manchester City of Trees talks of how trees are directly connected to our mental health and happiness. In the blog the word **Biophilia** is mentioned which was popularized by American biologist Edward O Wilson in the 1980s and it is the idea that humans have an innate connection to the natural world, built up through hundreds and thousands of years. The biophilic model means incorporating natural elements both indoor and outdoor and research suggests that this method can help to reduce stress, blood pressure and increase productivity, creativity, and well-being. Researches also suggest that the companionship of animals offers a great way to reduce anxiety and can be a great source of comfort. Nature is an important part of most of the therapies as it gives a sense of existential goals and also treating any mental disorder is related to mental peace which is abundant in Nature. It is research which states that walking among trees and animals can reduce the level of cortisol.

Ahimsa: Indian Psychology teaches that how important it is to save our nature from destruction created by humans themselves. Buddhism psychology and Jainism have Ahimsa as one of their pillars of religion. They believe that saving the creatures and trees or protecting and feeding the helpless is one of the ways to gain salvation or Nirvana. In Jainism they have the culture of not even killing ants, in Hinduism killing animals and cutting trees is a serious offense. By connecting flora and fauna with God has led to its protection out of respect for god.

Fear: In ancient times when there were no technologies and easy access to food, there was Adivasi culture and people were dependent on animals and plants for food. A need arose to save natural bounties so that they can be used for living for a longer duration. Intellectuals and people of importance noticed that the common person was afraid of God or some higher energy and accepted everything related to him respectfully. Thus, they correlated animals and plants with God so that out of fear of punishment from God, they would protect them and use them sustainably.

Relation with Yoga: Yoga and Meditation is integral part of healing in psychology. It not only targets physical health but also mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Indian psychology talks about liberation, living in consciousness, and salvation (Self Actualization), yoga and meditation is path to attain it. Yoga was popularized by an Indian sage Maharishi Patanjali who talks about Ashtanga Yoga and seven chakras of the body which are needed to attain salvation. One of the most important chakras which are the most necessary to attain liberation is shaped in the form of a serpent(snake) which signifies energy, thus one more reason to worship. Yoga and meditation are mostly done in the lap of

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nature to be calm and find peace of mind. It also includes gratitude towards divine energy which is a kind of Bhakti from Hinduism.

Life Lessons Learned from Nature: Nature is a great teacher as it is a great healer. Almost every tree worshipped has some of the other life lessons hidden in it which motivates people to cherish them even more with their life lessons. E.g.: Banyan tree has long, hanging roots which signify being down to earth even if you are very huge as the tree and it is also scientifically proven that banyan tree can survive for hundreds of years which is why it is worshipped on many occasions and festivals for the wish of long life as it has. Another plant mostly worshipped is Tulsi which is a symbol of purity and is believed to increase life longevity and is an adaptogen i.e. it is a *non-toxic herb* that reduces all kinds of physical, mental, and biological stress. All this is also one of the reasons for worshipping the pious tulsi and it is considered almost human-like. One more example is the Peepal tree which is mythologically considered to be the avatar of Lord Vishnu but it has a life lesson i.e. it has *extremely deep roots* which teaches us to have deep roots in life, thoughts, culture, and mindset. Similarly, many other trees are cherished like bamboo, mango tree, banana, coconut, etc. for many of their qualities. There are many of the animals which are life-givers like a cow and life lesson givers like dogs. *Cows are life-giver* and considered to be a *mother*. Similarly, dogs are also worshipped as the avatar of Rahu but people also *value dogs as they are loyal* and researches have shown that keeping them as pets also helps in mental sanity. There are many more animals like elephants, parrots, bulls, etc. which are powerful, have high self-esteem, and always teach us to live life with self-esteem and confidently. One of the great life lessons that we get from god and animals that makes them worthy of worship is that the family of lord shiva has different vehicles i.e. bull (lord shiva), Lion/Tiger (Goddess Durga or shakti), peacock (Karthikeya) and rat(Ganesh), all are each other's food but they live happily and do not harm each other. This is the lesson that we should *accept all the differences* and try to live as happily as possible.

Indian Psychology has many Indian ethics to it and one of them is *collectivistic nature* rather than individualistic nature. Indian people take everything together and have *collective consciousness* i.e., they are not only affected by their own emotions but also by the people they live around and the nature in which they live.

Another concept is yoga which has many postures related to animals and trees like Bhujangasana (snake pose), Tadasana, Cat's pose, etc. which enhances our flexibility.

Another one is helping the needy nature of the person that is why we feed animals and water plants even before eating ourselves. Thus, paying respect for what we have lets us to mental peace and personal satisfaction.

There are other Indian psychology concepts as well like ego here means attachment and attachment leads to miseries thus to attain liberation, we need to detach ourselves from worldly pleasures and it begins by thinking of others, helpless and needy rather than ourselves.

There are many more psychological and mythological aspects to this topic that might be left untouched but almost everything done by the human being is related to him/her psychologically.

Approach Worldwide for cherishing Plants and Animal

There are many pieces of research by different psychologists around animals and plants used in worship.

Totemism is one such concept widely researched. Totems are representations of the human relationship with animals, plants, and inanimate objects. These are sometimes also an emblem of a family or a clan. In other words, it is the symbolic representation of human affiliations. Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Wundt did their separate researches on this where they explain that most of the religions have animals or plants as their totems like Zodiac signs have animals or plants as their symbols because they talk about human traits related to that animal or plant. According to Durkheim, major religions including philosophical beliefs are related to shamanism which is based on totemism symbolically or spiritually. Sigmund Freud gave reference to the names of tribal people or their surname which is psychologically representative of ancestors and being tribal, the most significant ancestor and worship-worthy totem is animals and plants because they spend their life around them and cherish their nature.

There are multiple pieces of research by various institutes that relate animals and plants to worship and God somewhere reduces the cruelty associated with them like accepting them as a god would psychologically make people more respectful and afraid at the same time as they do not want to face the repercussions of harming god. It sometimes also works the other way around according to WHO as their research said that all the sacrifices in the name of God have increased the number of animals killed and trees chopped. E.g., Cutting of trees in Holi or sacrifice of a goat in Bakarid, etc. In today's time, the young generation has started questioning the blind rituals thus things are turning around.

A 2014 University of Exeter study found that overall people living in greener urban areas were displaying fewer signs of depression or anxiety. Visiting forests and nature in general, can also improve mood and attention span, and even enhance psychological stress recovery. There are multiple studies on Metaphors and their behavioral associations with humans' behavior. In an article, the author talks about the god metaphor where he describes how we humans are associated with God and many of our features like decision making and judgment quality is often metaphorical to God and we are said to be godlike.

Similarly, there are many more researches defining how and why we link animals and plants to God and cherish them.

CONCLUSION

Being in the environment and around flora and fauna has a very positive impact on a person's mental health and well-being. Trees and the positioning of trees also impact how our mind works. Being in nature provides a sense of satisfaction and serenity of mind. It helps us to increase positive feelings and emotions and watching out for the beauty of flora and fauna also provides a sense of gratitude for our beautiful life. This report or review has made a point that Animals, Plants, Humans, and God are all interrelated and incomplete without each other. We also came to know that worshipping nature is integral to India because our lives are based on nature and natural bounties. Cherishing it gives us a sense of gratitude and safeguards nature as well.

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Conflict of Interest

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