

Over-religious Activity, A Threat to Biodiversity: A Case Study (2): Save the Owl (Aves: Strigidae)

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ABSTRACT Owl is sacrificed to conserve wealth on Diwali night, as a religious practice. This mythological activity is eco-negative, may cause the end of this endangered bird if the practice is spread up everywhere.

INTRODUCTION

In the Vedic age, nature was worshipped as the manifestation of the divinity. In course of time a conscious energetic personality realized in each system, later named as *Devataa* such as *Soorya* (Sun), *Chandra* (Moon), *Indira* (Hydrological cycle), *Barssa* (rain), *Maruta* (Air), *Jala* (Water body - Ganga etc), *Agni* (Fire), *Graha* (Different planets), *Pruthibi Mata* (Mother earth), *Brukshya Devataa* (Plants as God), *Baruna* (Sea as God) etc. In the Kali Yuga (present age) the philosophy of *Tantra* and Mythology entered into Hindu religion. *Tantra* has a broader meaning - 'Spread to Save' (Bernard 1989). The supernatural power, a universal concept, got manifested to perform different functions; an ecological spread over (of powers). These set of ecological factors and sub-factors were recognised as mythological personalities. Their structure was designed scientifically as a *Devataa*, holding different weapons in their arms (more than two) and provided with an animal vehiculum (*Vaahana*). The weapons represent the modus operandi of their powers, while the vehiculum is nothing but the expression of the God's personality in animal form (Vitasaxis 1977).

Recently a news is broadcasted in national media (Das 2016) - "To bring Dewali fortune to a few, Owls home - delivered for sacrifice". This religion based eco-negative activity for the owls is certainly a threat for this endangered bird; may cause the end of the entire family, if the religious dogma is spread and favoured all over. This communication is devoted to focus on the myth behind animal worship in our country and as well to create eco-consciousness about owls.

ETHNIC-SCIENCE BEHIND ANIMAL WORSHIP

In Indian scenario, some of the animals like monkey, cow, bull, elephant, rat, birds, tortoise, snake, crocodile, fish etc. are worshipped directly. Out of ten major divine incarnations of God *Vishnu*, the initial four - *Matsya* (Pisces), *Kruma* (tortoise), *Varaaha* (boar) and *Nrusingha* (Lion-man) represent the zoological evolution and the later six focus on anthropological and cultural changes (Panigrahy et al. 2002). Many mythological deities are worshipped having animal heads with a human body or vice-versa. The *Panchamukhee Hanumaan*, a unique integrated form of five animal heads on a *Vaanara* (Monkey) body, represents the ancient animal classification depicted in Manusmriti and later conformed in Gita (Padhy et al. 1999, Padhy 2016b). Addition of *Vaahana* to the mythological Gods, even though is symbolic, it plays a vital role in conservation of animals. The particular animal associated with the deity is ordinarily not killed (rather conserved) by the sect of worshippers. The cow as the mother of every one, is famous in our country and commonly we are hospitable to an ox. There is a special worshiping place for birds - Pakshi Tirtham in Tamil Nadu and separate temple is devoted for rats in Rajasthan.

Generally people are reluctant to kill a snake, a cat, a rat as they are associated with our mythology. Feeding the crow in the morning before onset of hotel business is an outcome of mythological influence. In day to day ritual of Hindus like *Vaishvadeva* Puja, a special share of food is dedicated for dogs, crows and insects (Padhy 2008a), which shows the highest philosophical thought for conservation of ani-

mals (Dash and Padhy 1998). Moreover the block buck - *Antelope cervicapra* known since the Vedic age as an ecological indicator, is protected in different parts of our country naturally by local people from aesthetic point of view (Padhy et al. 1997). Similarly conservation of birds, fishes, tortoises, rats, snakes and monkeys in various religious places is not uncommon in India.

Devataa in Animal form

The vehiculum animal of a *Devataa* represents its personality as presented earlier (Vitasaxis 1977). All the *Devataas* of Hindu mythology are broadly classified into five groups - *Ganesh*, *Surya*, *Vishnu*, *Siva* and *Durga*. This classification is based on *Tantra* philosophy which has a root in Vedas. Due to this, *Tantra* is known as the fifth Veda. The above five sect representative *Devataas* have their specific *Vaahanas* and how their basic characters are reflected on the behaviour of the concerned animals (Padhy 2008b), is discussed as follows:

The Ganesh

He has an elephant head with a huge human body structure with a small rat as *Vaahana*. The God is considered as the guide, protector, and master of human society. He carries the prayer of a worshiper as a messenger to the concerned God. That is why, *Ganesh* is worshipped first (*Agra Puja*) before worshipping any God. *Ganesh* is specially worshipped to overcome all sorts of obstacles (*Bighnna Naasana*).

The elephant - a huge structured body, passes through whatever stands in its way is a practical symbol of overcoming any physical obstacle. The vehiculum rat is a tricky animal drills holes and slips through narrow space beneath closed doors or under thick walls. So, *Ganesh* is an integrated symbolic personality with elephant like physical ability and mouse like technical skill, always with a solution at hands for every problem (*Bighnna*).

The Soorya

The vehiculum of Sun god is a chariot with a single wheel (The structure of God Himself) pulled by seven horses, represent the seven colours (spectra) of the light. The red horizon of morning named as *Aruna*, is his coach. Goddess

Ushaa (morning) and *Raatri* (night) are considered as His sister and wife respectively; this is how *Tantra* represents the spread of nature.

The Vishnu

The God is regarded as the fosterer of the biosphere. The name *Vishnu* means spread throughout everywhere; the universal life energy present right from a unicellular organism to gigantic life form. His mount is *Garuda* (eagle), the bird that flies at high in the sky with a deep penetrating vision on the earth. This represents its access to every titbits of the nature; a basic character of the fosterer.

The Siva

The God is ever immersed amidst the calmness of the highest state of yoga - *Samadhi*. He is worshipped as *Lingam* - the phallus, being fixed on a *Yoni* (point of creation - female sex organ). *Siva* also symbolises the power of destruction of cosmic ecology.

The animal vehiculum of *Siva* is *Nandi* (bull) famous for its calmness and procreation; but virulent when gets disturbed.

The Durgaa

She is the only Goddess in the group, represents *Shakti* (energy, power). *Durgaa* is an integration of all Godly powers. Her vehiculum, the lion is the most powerful animal and regarded as the king of the forest.

Similarly, in addition to the above five *Devataas*, the association of animal diversity with other Gods and goddesses and analysis of their characters are beyond the scope of this communication. Association of Biodiversity with Indian religion and Myth is a separate project study, needs an independent communication. As concerned to this article the vehiculum of Goddess *Lakshmi* is owl, discussed separately.

Mythical Owl of Lakshmi

Goddess *Lakshmi* is the consort of *Vishnu*. She represents the beauty, good luck, wealth, source of food, diversified nature, perfection, completion, purity and cleanliness. Scientifically, she is the source of energy (food) for the ecosystem that migrates in the food chain from

producer to consumer. She is the female power, feeds the biodiversity and supports the male power *Vishnu* in the process of fostering, as the parents in a family.

Owl is the *Vaahana* of mother *Lakshmi*. The presence of this bird with the Goddess in Hindu mythological pictures is an odd combination. Excess wealth with a person is considered as a good luck and expressed as blessings of *Lakshmi*. But the philosophical and yogic view is contrary to above; which says that, availability of anything at any place and time is true *Lakshmi*. Hoarding wealth is a wrong concept of the Goddess.

A wealthy persons in general is suspicious to others and looks every one with a mistrust vision; expressed as an owl's eye. Excess wealth makes a person restless in the day time and sleepless throughout the night. This character is truly reflected on the owl, which is active in the night time (sleepless) and remains alert throughout the day (restless) to hide itself in deep forest. This is how the *Vaahana* owl represents its master *Lakshmi*, as a wealth hoarder. Moreover, the hiding character of owl and safe custody of wealth in hidden form (*Lakshmi*) is a unique matching character between the master and her bird vehiculum.

From sociological point of view no one feels happy when he finds an owl in the nature; may be a rare vision. He expects rather a mishap in near future. It is a strong belief that, if an owl sits on the roof of a house; death of a family member is expected. However, the positive outcome of this myth is questionable. To express any misfortune there is a saying that "an owl is sitting on my (or some one's) head". For a sleepless night people comment - "I could not sleep and was sitting like an owl". Another thrilling myth in practice that, if anyone is fed the meat of owl with black magic, he suffers psychological depression and turns almost mum being ineffective for any physical, financial and social torture against him. This myth is supported by Ayurveda (Tripathy 1953) which claims that, the meat of owl is a prohibited food. If eaten it causes stupidity, spoils the intellect and makes one unrealistic. Wicked women feed owl meat to their husbands in secret to bring them under control; is also a *Tantric* way of subduing another personality.

Anything excess is bad. There is a Sanskrit quotation: *Atii Sarbatra Gaihartam* - Excess of anything is dangerous everywhere. This quotation is also applicable to excess wealth which

never gets happiness to anyone. At this state, owl is the right representative of *Lakshmi*, if she is considered from abundant wealth point of view. The Goddess has another name *Chanchala*, which means fast-moving. Wealth moves very fast from one hand to another. A person who is a multimillionaire now, can turn to a beggar in the next moment or the vice-versa can occur at any time. That is why, people are very cautious for the preservation of their property. This extra carefulness of richness is responsible for the ill activity like sacrifice of owl, which is reflected as a religious activity. Wealthy people are convinced that, if the *Vaahana* of the wealth Goddess is sacrificed with some black magic, she cannot fly away from their house and their richness will remain everlasting.

Kumar *Purnima*, the full moon night of *Aasvina* month is the birth day of mother *Lakshmi*. She has emerged during the *Samudra Manthana* (churning of cosmic ocean) (Padhy et al. 2001) and considered as the daughter of *Ratnakara* (the Ocean), the mine of wealth as per Hindu mythology. The Goddess is specially worshipped for fifteen days from *Kumar Purnima* to *Deepabali*. The torturing of *Aamlakam* plant (*Phyllanthus embolica*) in a temple premises as a representative of *Lakshmi* was reported earlier (Padhy 2016a). Similarly on *Deepabali* day owl is sacrificed to obstruct the movement of *Lakshmi* making her vehiculum-less. This brutal activity no doubt is a result of great hankering for unlimited wealth.

This demoniac temptation for wealth is rightly presented in Bhagavad Gita.

- *Bound by a hundred ties of hope, given over to lust and anger, they strive to secure by unjust means hoards of wealth for sensual enjoyment* (16/12).
- *This today has been gained by me; this desire I shall fulfil; this is mine, and this wealth also shall be mine in future* (16/13).
- *That enemy has been slain by me, and others also shall I slay. I am a lord, I enjoy, I am successful, powerful and happy* (16/14).
- *I am rich and well born. Who else is equal to me? I will sacrifice, I will give alms, I will rejoice. Thus deluded by ignorance.* (16/15).

Above all, Manusmriti (the first ethical law book for human society) has discouraged the sinful killing of owls and has prescribed a penance to this effect (Dash and Padhy 1998).

SAVE THE OWL

Owl is from phylum - Chordata, Class- Aves, Order - Strigiformes, Family - Strigidae of Animalia Kingdom. In Sanskrit it is known as *Uluuka* with additional names *Debandha* (blind in day time), *Pechaka* and *Kaakaaree*. The family Strigidae has 25 genera comprises around 250 species as reported in 2008 (Konig and Weick 2008). Out of these, three species of Mascaren owls from genus *Mascarenotus* and one named laughing owl of genus *Sceloglaux* are reported as extinct recently. Because of fast urbanization, these birds are helpless to have a proper roost to hide themselves. Overall, the whole family Strigidae is suffering from some sort of endanger due to ecological imbalance.

Typical owls (Fig. 1) vary greatly in size. They have a large head, short tail, cryptic plumage and round facial discs around the eyes. The family is generally arboreal and obtain their food on the wing. The wings are large, broad, rounded and long.

Because of their nocturnal habits they tend not to exhibit sexual dimorphism in their plumage, but in many owl species females are larger than males. The feathers are soft and the base of each is downy, allowing for silent flight. The toes and tarsus of some species at higher latitudes are feathered. Numerous nocturnal species have ear-tufts, and feathers on the sides of the head which has a camouflage function. Interestingly, in many species of *Glaucidium* genus, false eye patches are seen on the backs of their heads. Apparently these patches convince other birds that they are being watched at all times.

Hearing in owls is highly sensitive and the ears are asymmetrical allowing the bird to localise a sound. The feathers of the facial disc are arranged in order to increase sound delivered to the ears. In addition to hearing owls have massive eyes relative to their body size. Owls are able to see fine in the day time, a contrary to popular belief that they have ill vision in day light. But they cannot see well in extreme dark.

Owls, due to nocturnal habit generally spend much of the day roosting. They always avoid detection and take a flight before quite close approach of any person. Their cryptic plumage and adoption of inconspicuous locations are an effort to avoid predators and mobbing by small birds.

The thrilling news of owl sacrifice as a religious activity in the Diwali night, published in news media and T.V.; may get fortune for some people but this activity is a problem of threatening for this bird in the country. The abstract of the news is as follows (Das 2016).

- As Diwali approaches, bird markets in up see a seasonal and very brutal trade in owls. The belief is that if an owl is sacrificed in a house during *Lakshmi* Puja, the goddess will be forced to 'Stay' with the family.
- A lot of the trade in the country is routed through Agra. In the city, the birds can even be home delivered. Sometimes, the trader will sacrifice it for believers if they are queasy about it.
- Agra is one of the major hubs for this trade. Places like Korai-Karavili village (the worst place in India in terms of owl trade), near Fathepuri Sikri, and Kosi Kalan in Mathura are in famous for it.
- Owls are sold at a premium generally for black magic, or during the Diwali for sacrifice. They are often delivered to the buyer's doorstep. The price range is upward of Rs. 30,000 (40,000 T.V. source) per bird.
- Driven by religious myths and superstitious beliefs tied to them, these birds are sought for their talons, skulls, bones, feathers and meat, which are used in talismans, black magic and traditional medicine.
- Though the exact number of owls traded and sacrificed each year remains unknown, the trade spikes in the days leading upto Diwali. The new moon night of Diwali is considered the most auspicious time for owl sacrifices.
- The Indian (rock) eagle owl, brown fish owl, dusky eagle owl, Indian scops owl and mottled wood owl are five of the most traded owl species in the illegal wild life market.

In general religious beliefs and dogmas are highly contagious. If this superstition migrates from place to place and initiates such negative activity, it may cause the end of this bird population in an area. The cost of the bird is no doubt high, which is more business provoking for animal traders and the sacrificer being a rich person hardly bothers for the tune of payment. Unfortunately, the people who are involved in trade of owls consider it a more benign crime compared to trade in other animals; as reflected



Indian Eagle Owl



Brown Fish Owl



Dusky Eagle Owl



Indian Scops Owl



Mottled Wood Owl



Barn Owl

Fig. 1. Typical Indian Owls
Source: Author

in the news. Let us come out of such religious superstitions and save the biodiversity.

Moreover, the brutal activity of owl sacrifice on Diwali night (30.10.2016), may be, was a reflection as the demonetization event just after a week (8.11.2016) and exposure of the black money hoarders (from baggers to Chief Secretary) throughout the country; has proved the *Tantric* execution as false.

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