

Hindu Ethics and Nonhuman Animals  
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 From  
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Westerners have long admired certain qualities of the Eastern spirituality. This article examines the Hindu religious tradition through myths and scripture, moral teachings and contemporary comment, to explore the Hindu vision of how human beings fit into the larger universe, and how we ought to interact with other creatures. This article is not critical in nature, but reveals how much we might learn from the spiritual and moral teachings of the Hindu tradition concerning our proper place in nature.

I do not turn away my dog; I turn away you.

(Mahabharata)

Animals are spiritually important in India. Evidence from the earliest known Indian civilization indicates that animals had religious significance. Excavations have unearthed images of bulls, unicorns, elephants, and tigers on clay seals (Munsterberg 18–19; Zimmer, plate 21–23). The titles of many Vedic hymns are named after animals, including “The Frogs,” “The Cows,” and “The Bird.” “The Frogs” presents the croaking of frogs as equivalent to the religious chanting of priests; both were viewed as critical to bringing rain in the proper season, and rain was understood to be essential to all living things (Maurer 208).

Animals hold “something of the divine” in India (Coomaraswamy 15–16). Indian literature teaches Hindus to love nature and wild animals. Animal life and the wilderness shine in the Mahabharata (an epic composed between 400 BCE and 400 ACE). The story-line describes lakes “where elephants bathed and flocks of swans and wild red geese rested”; deserts, mountains, and deep forests form the setting for this engaging epic that so warmly describes the rich, varied, and beautiful animals living in the forests of India (Mahabharata 155):

[T]he rain began to fall and all the Earth was peaceful. In the forests of Kailasa, while the rain fell day and night, the animals were talking—the yak and the deer, the monkeys and boars and bears, the elephants and oxen, lions and leopards, buffalo and tigers—and the frogs ran joyfully about, and the sparrows and cuckoos sang. (Mahabharata 167)

The lives and well-being of these many unnamed animals are placed on a par with that of humans. When a young woman meets an ascetic in the forest, she asks, “Is all well with your life here, and with your trees, and with the animals and birds that live with you?” (Mahabharata 127). Similarly, when the fire god, Agni, is hungry and needs to consume a forest in order to regain his strength, he asks permission from Krishna. Krishna asks if there are any people, animals, birds, or trees that will be harmed. Agni replies that the animals will run away, the birds will fly away, and “the trees have their roots beyond my reach” (Mahabharata 81).

As these noteworthy characters demonstrate, we are to be mindful of any aspect of nature that we might harm, and compassionate.

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“Speaking animals appear in some of the most ancient texts of India, going back to the early first millennium BCE” (Olivelle xi). Many animals communicate with humans in the popular Indian epic, Mahabharata. These animal characters are sometimes just as they appear, but other times they are human beings, or even gods in animal form. There is no clear division in the Hindu tradition between gods and people, or between gods, people, and animals. In other instances these characters are a mix—a divine animal, or a creature with both human and animal traits (Mahabharata xix).

Animals are individuals and persons in Indian sacred literature. Some animal characters are noble and heroic, or holy, while others are lowly and evil—just like their human counterparts. Hindu readers think nothing of a swan or a deer, a character in their sacred texts, who is preaching or who lives in an organized community, complete with rulers and nuclear family units, just like a human community. A contemporary Indian scholar comments: “And who could tell what was the store of wisdom garnered behind the little old face of the grey ape out of the forest, or hoarded by the coiled snake in her hole beside the tree?” (Coomaraswamy 16). In the Hindu tradition, animals are given the benefit of any doubt and assumed to be persons not unlike ourselves.

To this day in the Indian imagination there is a unique sympathy with animal expression. Man or boy, gentle and simple alike, telling some story of mouse or squirrel, will bring the tale to a climax with the very cries and movements of the creature he has watched. It is assumed instinctively that at least the fundamental feelings, if not the thoughts, of furred and feathered folk are even as our own. And it is here, surely in this swift interpretation, in this deep ignition of kinship, that we find the real traces of temper that went into the making long ago of. . . the gentle faiths. (Coomaraswamy 14)

In the Mahabharata, animals are insightful and generally stand on the side of the good. For example, animal cries alert the main characters, the Pandavas (five brothers), when enemies enter the forest. A fawn reports that their mutual wife has been stolen, allowing them to pursue the thief in a timely manner (Mahabharata 176–77). It is through listening to the “deer and bear among the trees” that one brother learns that he is not under a spell, but is in his right mind. And when a snake bites, the bite is for the “victim’s” own good, allowing a pursued man to become deformed, twisted, and ugly so that his enemies will not find him. The Naga that bites even provides two pieces of silk to don when the man is ready to assume his normal appearance (Mahabharata 131). Snakes are often spiritually powerful and benevolent in the Hindu tradition.

Hindu myths teach that animals and humans were once closer and communicated on equal terms. For example, the equally popular epic, the Ramayana (composed between 300 BCE and 300 CE), has primary animal characters such as Jambavan the bear and Jatayu the eagle. Lakshmana—Rama’s brother and a key character in the epic—was himself a human incarnation of the Great Serpent Adishesha in whose coils Vishnu rested. For these characters, whatever their form or shape, when they spoke and acted, “their physical appearance passed unnoticed” (Ramayana 98). The eagle Jatayu “nobly” fights for the good, and loses his life in the process (Ramayana 128). By an “effort of will” he stays alive long enough to inform Rama of what has happened, which begins the main

storyline, the all-important search for Sita (Ramayana 95). Jatayu's older brother, also a gigantic and noble bird, later joins the search and battle to recover Sita (Ramayana 129). Family relations are no less important for an eagle than they are for a human. The bear community also comes forward to fight for the good. Jambavan the bear is "full of knowledge and wisdom" and provides important council as the tale unfolds. Each animal is intelligent, cultured, and sports her or his own spirit, achievements, and physique (Ramayana128). Animals are individuals, and many are primary characters in this sacred story that is central to Indian religion.

Animals also play a very prominent role in the Pancatantra, compiled for the instruction of princes between the third and fifth century CE (probably from stories that had been told and retold for centuries, and which have also influenced the Buddhist tradition). These colorful stories teach principles of good government and public policy through fables. In this text "instruction is carried out by animals and the teaching is all about good or wise conduct" (Rukmani 106). Characters include crocodiles, owls, monkeys, bulls, fish, pigeons, snakes, mongoose, frogs, sparrows, tigers, jackals, cranes, crows, crabs, biting insects, cats, and many more. Each animal is endowed with personality (both good and bad), personal interest (such as not to suffer and to be well fed), desires (such as to have bodily safety and companionship), and inclinations to be noble or evil, just or unjust. "Humans and others share the world equally in the Pancatantra, and they are all governed by the same natural laws" (Rukmani 107). In these stories, compassion and nonviolence extend outward into the larger world of life.

For example, in the Pancatantra chapter on "friendship", a crow, pigeon, mouse, tortoise, and deer become fast friends through a host of engaging occurrences. They weather trials and tribulations, share their personal histories, and rescue one another from hardship, as each character needs help in turn. Readers are intended to learn moral lessons from these animal characters. At one point, the pigeon is caught and the mouse chews through the netting to free him. But the pigeon insists that all other animals be rescued first, because a leader always takes care of underlings before taking care of self. When the mouse loses his wealth, and concurrently his followers and fortunes, the crow carries him to safety. Thus the mouse learns that wealth is easily lost, while other aspects of existence are more enduring and worthy of pursuit—such as friendship. Next, the deer becomes caught in a trap; the crow finds him and carries the mouse over to cut the leather ties. The tortoise comes along at last, to see if his friend is safe. But as the deer is released, a hunter arrives, taking the tortoise away in fresh binds. The remaining friends hatch a scheme to save the tortoise: the deer lies by a nearby lake, with the crow pretending to peck his eyes. The hunter drops the tortoise to rush over and claim the "dead" deer. Meanwhile, the mouse cuts the leather bindings and frees the tortoise, who slips into the lake. The deer then leaps up before the hunter has reached his prize, and the crow flies away while the mouse runs off. The hunter is left empty-handed.

The hunter in this story is viewed as cruel, and is thwarted at every turn by the animals he seeks to kill. The importance of the Pancatantra reaches beyond young princely readers. These texts are understood to offer sound moral advice for all. This story blatantly notes that hunters disrupt the lives of animals, terrifying them and destroying

their families and communities. Hunters are also mocked for incompetence, greed, and their fundamentally bloodthirsty intent, reminding all readers that eating flesh is a choice, a choice that is not available to those who hold compassion for other creatures (Olivelle 71–104).

An anti-hunting message is not surprising, given that the Pancatantra, like most sacred Indian writings, affords life a high value and teaches nonviolence. In the above story of the four friends, when the deer is young, he is rescued by a “noble” man who saves the deer from being beaten by “thoughtless people.” They are beating the deer because he speaks to human beings. In a noteworthy yet not unusual line, the nobleman remarks, “All species of animals. . . do indeed speak, but not in front of people” (Olivelle 99). Later in the story, the mouse offers the crown of moral spiritual teachings: “What’s righteousness? Compassion on all beings” (Olivelle 91). Here we have not only personality and intelligent behavior with intent, but also a clear moral statement protecting the lives and wellbeing of animals.

Hunters are also mocked in the Mahabharata. Early on in the story, a king shoots a stag that is mating. “[T]he stag looked up at him and with tears in his eyes asked, ‘Why have you done this?’” (Mahabharata 31). For his indiscretion the deer curses the king: “Death will strike you down when you next make love” (Mahabharata 31). And so the hunter hands his kingdom over to his son and ultimately dies young, in the arms of his wife. Deer expect a measure of decency, even from hunters.

Similarly, when exiled into the forest, one of the great and holy Pandavas, Yudhishtira, is approached by the deer in a dream: “[W]e are the deer of this forest. Majesty, now only very few of us remain, like seeds, like broken words; if you do not leave us we shall all perish for your food” (Mahabharata 142). In the morning he tells his brothers, “We must move on and let the forest animals recover” (Mahabharata 142). In another portion of this epic, a swan that has been captured says, “Do not hurt me. Let me go” (Mahabharata 120). The swan promises to help the man if he turns the bird loose, and the swan is as good as his word (Mahabharata 120–22).

Animals characters in Hindu stories make it clear to all that they want to live, just as people do, and can be allies if protected and preserved. Another king in the Mahabharata, “angry that a deer had escaped him. . . , mortally wounded a serpent who meant him no harm” (11). The snake curses the king “for his cruelty,” vowing that the king will be bitten by a snake, and die, within seven days. Nagas are powerful, and though the king tries to protect himself, the snake gains access to the king in the form of a beetle and sinks his fangs deep. The king’s son then uses his magic to try to kill the powerful Naga. A man who is half Naga then arrives on the scene and describes to the king where he can find the Naga he wishes to kill. For his assistance he is granted one wish, and of course he asks that the life of the serpent be spared. In remarkable contrast with the first few chapters of Genesis, the story ends with an encouragement that snakes and people live in peace with one another: “[H]ave no fear of any serpent but think—Serpents of good fortune, live in peace here with our dear ones” (Mahabharata 14).....

The Ramayana features the god, Vishnu, in the form of the man, Rama, who is married to Sita. As noted, this holy epic has many lively animal characters, who engage in

exciting adventures. The monkey community helps Rama—an incarnation of a god. This story reveals that monkey society has its own code of ethics, distinct from the moral code of human beings, though in many ways the same (Ramayana 111). These hordes of nonhuman primates are critical to his success, and are “beings endowed with extraordinary intelligence, speech, immeasurable strength and nobility, and were of godly parentage” (Ramayana 98). Rama felt an “instinctive compassion” for the king of the monkeys and his community (Ramayana 99).

The monkey hero Hanuman, ignorant of both the depths of his learning and his physical powers, rises to Godhood by helping Rama. He is a mighty and powerful monkey, who can fly through the air, roar like thunder, and wreak havoc with his exceptionally long tail (Storm 127). Hanuman is commander in chief of the monkey army, fighting on the side of the gods, bearing almost the “entire burden” of the war, in a classic story of the struggle between the powers of goodness and evil (Ramayana 145). Hanuman and his monkey community do most of the work to build a bridge to the island, Lanka, where abducted Sita is being held by the evil demon, Ravana. This allows Rama’s army (composed of bears and monkeys) to storm the demon fortress and rescue Rama’s wife. Before the battle begins, Hanuman turns into a cat to find Rama’s lost wife, Sita. He then returns to monkey form and gives Sita a token from Rama, instilling hope in the unhappy prisoner. Hanuman then reveals himself to the enemy, who lights his tail on fire. Hanuman simply assumes his full, gigantic form, and rushes through the streets of Ravana’s town setting the enemy city ablaze. Later, he returns with the bears and Rama to defeat Ravana (who is neither human nor animal). At one point “Hanuman hoisted Rama on his shoulders and charged” into battle (Ramayana 133, 142–43, 144,147). The great god is carried to war by the monkey, Hanuman.

After the battle, Hanuman perceives the good in one who crosses the lines from the enemy’s side. Hanuman’s insight allows this “traitor to evil” to become the new king in place of the evil Ravana. Hanuman is essential to the victory of light over dark, of goodness over evil (Basham 80–81), as are the many other monkeys, and bears, in Rama’s army. Thy animals fight on the side of the good.

Hanuman the monkey is not only a fierce fighter for good (and a prankster), but a god himself. He is honored and worshiped by Hindus for his spiritual devotion—his loyalty to the great god, Rama --Hanuman is said to be present wherever Rama’s name is even whispered. At a corner of any hall, unnoticed, he would be present whenever the story of Rama is narrated to an assembly. He can never tire of hearing about Rama, his mind having no room for any other object. The traditional narrator, at the beginning of his story-telling, will always pay a tribute to the unseen Hanuman, the god who had compressed within himself so much power, wisdom, and piety. Hanuman emerges in the Ramayana as one of the most important and worshipful characters; there is a belief that to meditate on him is to acquire immeasurable inner strength and freedom from fear.

(Ramayana

170)

While others are slow to comprehend the magnitude of searchers who come into their village, Hanuman immediately recognizes the great god Vishnu, in the form of Rama (Ramayana 99). Hanuman’s mind is “always fixed on Rama,” and Indian art sometimes

portrays Hanuman ripping open his chest to reveal Rama and his wife, Sita. There, in the core of this monkey's body, where his heart should be, dwells God (Ramayana122).

It may be questioned whether there is in the whole of literature another apotheosis of loyalty and self-surrender like that of Hanuman. He is the Hindu ideal of the perfect servant, the servant who finds full realization of manhood, of faithfulness, of his obedience; the subordinate whose glory is in his own inferiority. (Coomaraswamy 22)

Hanuman is worshiped because he is devoted to god, because he fights on the side of goodness, and because he does all of these things in a humble and selfless manner. In contrast, the cruel and selfish heart of Ravana is vulnerable, and it is through his deficient heart that he is ultimately defeated (Ramayana 159). Hanuman is thus a model of how people ought to approach the divine. This monkey's image is found in nearly every ancient fort in south India, and he remains "one of the main deities in most villages of northern India (Danielou 173).

.....the ordinary-looking monkey is none other than Hanuman [reminding] remind people that god sometimes appears in animal form, and that sometimes an animal is simply divine, as is the case with Hanuman. Such stories remind those of faith to treat animals with respect.

Indian deities are associated with an animal that serves as their "vehicle and companion" (Coomaraswamy 16–17). Consequently, Hindu goddesses and gods are often depicted in the company of animals. For instance, Shiva rides on his trusty bull, Nandi, who is the giver of life. Nandi is associated with the lofty principles of justice and virtue. In temples dedicated to Shiva, Nandi often stands at the entrance. Skanda, son of Shiva, flies through the air on a peacock and has the rooster as his emblem (Danielou, plate 19, 22). The great god Brahma rides a goose, a bird known for migrating great distances, "a symbol to Hindus of the soul's quest for release" (Brockington 195). The fierce goddess Durga wields a battery of weapons and rides a powerful lion (or tiger). Ganesha keeps company with a rat who controls all things hidden, including the soul or atman. Vishnu is associated with Garuda, a mythical bird (half bird/beast, half man) who represents the magical sounds of the sacred scripture, the essence of knowledge, and who transports people from one world to another (Danielou 220, 298, 288, 296, xxvii, 160, plate 20). In more ancient texts, Garuda stands on his own, and becomes associated with Vishnu only in later writings (Brockington 195). These diverse animals are among the oldest characters in Indian lore, dating back to a time when nature deities reigned. They are also among the most colorful and beloved, as is the case with Hanuman.

Vishnu is often depicted reclining on the coils of the cosmic serpent amid the cosmic ocean (Zimmer 60–61). Nagas, semi-divine serpents, guard the waters and are "superior to man" (Zimmer 63). While there are stories of naughty snakes, as in the case of Kaliya in Krishna mythology, snakes are not hated or killed in India, no matter how deadly. In central India I witnessed two men with a stick and a bucket who picked up a cobra from a sidewalk outside a temple, and carried it away to a safer location. Snakes are not viewed as "other" in the Hindu tradition; south Indian royalty have often proudly

claimed nagas in their ancestral lines (Zimmer 63). In any case, violence and killing are not consistent with the spiritual life in the Hindu tradition. For thousands of years, respect and compassion have prevented violence against snakes, rats, cockroaches, and pretty much every creature of the earth.

Hindu gods often interact closely with animals. Stories of Krishna would not be complete without images of his boyhood, cavorting cattle and pea-fowl in the countryside around his home (Dwivedi 7). He spares the life of the naughty serpent, Kaliya, partly for the sake of his snake-wives. As an infant, he is sometimes depicted suckling directly from a cow, with his mother's help, and with the calf alongside. Myths tell of his childish delight when he grabbed the tails of cows to be pulled through mud and manure (O'Flaherty, Hindu 219).

As he grows older he tends cattle for his family, as most rural Indian children still do. Stories of Krishna's youth among cattle express tender affection between cows and calves, and emphasize the dependence of calves on their devoted mothers (Gosvami 157). Krishna takes seriously his duties as a cowherd, as do the other boys, and the gentle bovines are well cared for. The youthful Krishna is often depicted in Indian art playing a flute alongside a gentle cow.

In the Hindu religious tradition, no clear line divides human beings, gods, and animals. Hindu religious texts are filled with stories of divinities such as Hanuman as animals (Embree, Hindu 210–11). The gods also take animal form in the course of their godly duties. The great god Shiva manifests as men and women. . . , aquatic animals. . . tortoises and fishes and conchs. . . Indeed, the illustrious god assumes the forms of all creatures too that live in holes. He assumes the forms of tigers and lions and deer, of wolves and bears and birds, fowls and of jackals as well. He it is that assumes the forms of swans and crows and peacocks, of chameleons and lizards and storks. (Embree, Hindu 235)

Similarly, the great god Vishnu is not only the great man, Rama, but also fish, tortoise, boar, and man-lion (Danielou 165). Each animal—including Rama—is just one form assumed for the purpose of setting the balance straight between good and evil. For instance, Vishnu's fish incarnation is explained in the Matsya Purana. This fish is the savior in the Hindu flood myth. A devout man comes upon a tiny fish while engaged in oblations. He perceives the fish's vulnerability and protects the little fish, but the fish quickly outgrows its new quarters and cries "Save me! Save me! I have come to you for refuge!" (O'Flaherty, Hindu 182). Vishnu, in the form of this fast-growing fish, soon becomes gigantic and must ultimately be turned loose in the sea. This fish then, in turn, saves the worthy devotee, the man whose compassion has proven him worthy. When the flood comes, the fish pulls the man over the waters in a boat that the fish instructs him to build. How does Vishnu, in tiny fish form, come to see that this man is worthy of being saved from the ensuing great flood? On hearing of the flood, this man's only wish was to "be able to protect the multitude of all beings, moving and still, when the dissolution takes place" (O'Flaherty, Hindu 182).

As a tortoise, Vishnu helps the gods churn the ocean so that they can obtain the nectar of immortality, with which they defeat the demons and restore order to the universe

(Embree, Hindu 210). The cosmic snake, often depicted with Vishnu, also helps the gods obtain the nectar, by allowing himself to be used as a rope with which to churn the waters (O’Flaherty, Hindu 275). As a result of this churning, precious animals are brought to earth, including a man-lion best demonstrates that gods, people, and animals can all be one and the same. In this story, a pious boy is being persecuted by his powerful and cruel father. The evil father, through previous piety, received a boon from the gods, and therefore “could not be killed by day or by night, by god, man, or beast, inside or outside his palace” (Danielou 169). Vishnu comes to the rescue, arriving “at twilight (neither day nor night) as a lion-headed man (neither man nor beast)” among the pillars on the porch (neither inside nor outside the palace) (Danielou 169). The man-lion is at once god, man, and beast, and saves the world from evil.

Ganesha, son of the great God Shiva, provides another fine example of a deity who is god, man, and beast. Ganesha has a short, squat body, a broken tusk, a potbelly protruding beneath his four arms, and an elephant’s head (Danielou 293). He did not always have such a distinctive head, but when his head was severed by accident, he was given an elephant’s head (Embree, Sources 330). Ganesha’s unusual head is never viewed as ghastly or problematic—even by his mother—but as “auspicious” (Embree, Sources 329). His strange appearance, including the uncertainty as to whether he is man or beast, has not harmed his (Embree, Sources 330). Ganesha’s unusual head is never viewed as ghastly or problematic—even by his mother—but as “auspicious” (Embree, Sources 329). His strange appearance, including the uncertainty as to whether he is man or beast, has not harmed his popularity. “Not only is he worshiped at the beginning of every enterprise, his image is seen at the entrance of every house, of every sanctuary” (Danielou 293). Ganesha, for all of his power, is “gentle, calm, and friendly, a god who loves man and is loved by him” (Coomaraswamy 18).

Not only are gods and animals (including humans) often indistinct, but so are people and animals. In the Mahabharata, a red deer gives birth to a young one that is half human and half deer. This little one grows up in the forest. A great drought comes to the area, and in the nearby city it is learned that only “a man with a pure heart” can save them (Mahabharata 145). It is predicted that, if such a man were to ask, rains would return. The villagers are aware of the deer-man, and they know that he is “as innocent as a deer” (Mahabharata 145). He is lured into the city, and when he arrives, so do the rains. The Indian philosophy of reincarnation, or transmigration, links all forms of life (Dwivedi 7), diminishing the sense of individual self and strengthening links with every other living being. Transmigration is the belief that, after death, souls lodge in another body—not simply another human body, but any body (Embree, Hindu 50). Transmigration has been an ongoing process for eons, in Indian philosophy. Therefore, who we are now is merely “an infinitesimal part of a much larger picture that encompasses all of life” (Kinsley 64). Every animal, whether primate or rodent, at some point across incalculable eons, was reincarnated as our mother, brother, or best friend. Transmigration fosters an understanding of all species, every individual of every species, as kin (Kinsley 64). Not only is every other creature our relative (in the sense of having been of the same family in previous lives) but we also are every other species because we might be reborn as a civet or jackal in our next life. Reincarnation helps Hindus to see themselves in every

other living being, and to see every other living being in themselves. Furthermore, inasmuch as Indians see God in humanity, they must also find the divine in animals. “Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth, wherein a person may come back as an animal or a bird, means that Hindus are called to give other species not only respect, but reverence” (Dwivedi 6).

In the Indian tradition, reincarnation and the condition of one’s next life are based on karma. Karma means “action”—actions determine karma. Karma is a force of justice whereby “every act carries with it an inevitable result” (Embree, Hindu 51). We are the rulers of our own fate, and we reap precisely what we sow (Embree, Hindu 62). Our actions toward animals help determine our future existences. In the Hindu worldview, all living beings are in moral relationship to one another; we are defined morally by our conduct toward nature (Curtin 71). This spiritual reality is evidenced in an unwillingness to destroy even a poisonous snake.

Hindu sacred texts called the Shastra offer an example of morality reaching across species through transmigration. In this story a woman who wishes to avoid the realms of hell asks, “[W]hat action is it that is good for all creatures?” (O’Flaherty, Textual 124). She asks this because, for Hindus, the “pain a human being causes other living beings. . . will have to be suffered by that human being later, either in this life or in a later rebirth” (Jacobsen 289). Those aspiring to a relatively pain-free future existence must avoid even the accidental killing of other entities (Basham 59). Harming other life forms brings bad karma (McGee 84). Bad action, bad results. Human fate is determined by how we behave toward the myriad beings with whom we live. One might argue that karma does not lend one to care about other creatures, but only about one’s self—one’s future lives (Nelson 142). Such an outlook focuses overly on motive. For the cow that was not killed for hamburger, the reason matters little. She will stand in the hot Indian sun and chew her cud, not minding that the Hindu may, ultimately, have had a selfish motive for sparing her life. In any event, one would look far and wide for a Hindu who believes that the divine does not discern motive.

Hindu teachings of reincarnation and karma lead naturally to ahimsa, an injunction of “non-injury toward all living beings” (Jacobsen 287). Ahimsa literally means “not to harm” and is most often translated as “nonviolence”; it is perhaps in the concept of ahimsa that the Indian tradition most adamantly supports animal liberation. In the Hindu tradition, the common Christian precept to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” is enhanced so that “every living being is thy neighbor” (Kushner 148). Every Hindu is encouraged to practice nonviolence toward “the community of all beings,” “to inflict the minimum amount of violence” (Kinsley 65). The thirteenth-century Hindu poet, Jnanadeva, put words to this common Hindu spiritual ideal: “Let universal friendship reign among all beings” (Embree, Hindu 250).

Another Indian religion, the Jain tradition, is best known for ahimsa. It is in one branch of the Jain tradition that people walk with whisks to brush away insects that they might otherwise inadvertently trample, and wear cloth over their mouths to avoid the possibility of inhaling an insect. Many will not boil water, knowing that this process kills life-forms. Jain literature and belief are indebted to the larger Hindu tradition not only for the concept of ahimsa, but also for the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Jain

scriptures comment: “In hurting [animals] men hurt themselves, /And will be born again among them” (Embree, Sources 64).

Jains also share the Hindu sense of animals as people, with voices that grieve when harmed:

From clubs and knives, stakes and maces, breaking my limbs,  
 An infinite number of times I have suffered without hope.  
 By keen-edged razors, by knives and shears,  
 Many times I have been drawn and quartered, torn apart and skinned.  
 Helpless in snares and traps, a deer,  
 I have been caught and bound and fastened, and often I have been killed.  
 A helpless fish, I have been caught with hooks and nets;  
 An infinite number of times I have been killed and scraped, split and gutted.  
 A bird, I have been caught by hawks or trapped in nets,  
 Or held fast by birdlime, and I have been killed an infinite number of times. . . .  
 Ever afraid, trembling, in pain and suffering,  
 I have felt the utmost sorrow and agony. . . .  
 In every kind of existence I have suffered  
 Pains that have scarcely known reprieve for a moment.  
 (Embree, Sources 63)

For the famous Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, who was influenced by the Jain tradition, “ahimsa was not just a way of living, but an eternal quality of truth itself” (Shinn 219). To live a spiritual life, to live a life of truth, was to practice ahimsa (Shinn 220). Gandhi writes, “A votary of ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa [harm/violence]”(Gandhi 349). Gandhi was, of course, a vegetarian—but not quite a vegan—for he drank goat’s milk. When he learned of “the tortures to which cows and buffaloes were subjected by their keepers,” he was resolved to give up milk, but eventually began to drink goat’s milk (Gandhi 272–73, 328). Even this small concession troubled his compassionate and dedicated mind (Gandhi 455). We can rest assured that an informed Gandhi would have nothing to do with the milk or flesh of Western factory farms. Gandhi “respected the rights of all creatures to fulfill their lives” (Kinsley 65).

Early Western visitors to India marveled at the way in which spiritual teachings were realized in daily life (Jacobsen 288). One surprised and frustrated visitor noted:

Pesticides spell killing. . . small and perhaps invisible insects. . . . This killing is anathema [for Hindus]. . . . By nature, the [Indian] agriculturist is generous, wanting to bestow on others what he reaps out of Mother Earth. He [sic] does not think that he alone should enjoy the fruits of his labor. . . to kill those unseen and unknown lives. . . is foreign to his nature. . . . It takes some time for [them]. . . to get acclimatized to the very conception of killing tiny helpless and unarmed creatures.

(Curtin 71, from Journal of the Indian Pesticide Industry)

In fact, the Manu Smriti speaks against occupations in agriculture because such work “causes injury to many beings. . . . [T]he wooden implement with iron point injures the earth and the beings living in the earth” (Embree, Hindu 94). For many Indians, profiting from animal suffering is simply not worthwhile in light of karma and reincarnation. Hindus believe that a soul continues to take birth in different life-forms [reincarnation]. . . . [T]here is a profound opposition in the Hindu religion. . . to the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, [including] birds, and fish for human consumption. . . . [Such] abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is considered unjust and sacrilegious. (Dwivedi 6)

Given the spiritual law of ahimsa, it is not surprising that Hindus have been largely vegetarian for centuries; even today “a substantial part of the population is vegetarian” (Brockington 205). “Almost all the Hindu scriptures place a strong emphasis on the notion that God’s grace cannot be received by killing animals or harming other creatures. That is why not eating meat is considered both appropriate conduct and one’s dharma,” or duty (Dwivedi 7). The ancient Indian laws of Manu warn, “A person who kills an animal for meat will die of a violent death as many times as there are hairs of that killed animal” (Dwivedi 7). Raising and killing animals for food is sacrilegious. In India the “wanton killing of animals is little better than murder, and meat eating is little better than cannibalism” (Basham 58).

Perhaps the most renowned aspect of Hindu ideology is reverence for cows—a creature that Westerners have long disparaged as stupid and expendable. Yet in India, the cow is sacred (Agarwal). A Vedic hymn, titled “The Cow” is in part addressed to the cow and exclaims, “[L]et them lie down in the cow-shed! Let them be pleased in us!” (Maurer 291). This Vedic hymn, written to honor cows sometime before 1000 BCE, identifies the cow with the entire universe (Embree, Hindu 39–40). Many Indians treat cattle with respect because they symbolize munificence and mother’s love, and because they provide life-sustaining milk when a mother cannot breast-feed her child. “The cow is venerated as the great provider and is naturally therefore identified with the earth and regarded as too sacred to be killed” (Brockington 205). Indians reference “mother-cow-love,” and Indian literature often compares a good mother to a cow, running to those who are in need “as a cow runs to her calf” (Mahabharata 58).

Cows also symbolize human responsibility to animals. The principle of protecting the gentle and largely defenseless cow expresses our own vulnerability and need of protection. Protecting those least able to protect themselves demonstrates “reverence for all forms of life” and acknowledges that we, too, “are related to and dependent on the whole creation” (Rao 34). In this sense, worshiping cattle “is taken as symbolic of reverence and respect for all forms of life” (Kinsley 65). As the earth nurtures us, so must we nurture others who are in need—whether a cow or a Barkudia skink (a legless lizard found only in India, now so rare as to be sighted only once in the last eighty-seven years).

In the Hindu tradition, humans are part of a larger whole. The Upanishads include many teachings of “oneness,” reminding believers that all things are “the One that lies behind all” (Zaehner 7). In this spiritual vision of oneness, none is an island unto itself—each

shares the essence of every other earthly element as well as the essence of God, or Brahman. Brahman, in turn, is understood to lie behind and within ourselves and all that we see and know on earth (Embree, Sources 30). “This Great Being. . . dwells in the heart of all creatures as their innermost Self. . . . His hands and feet are everywhere; his eyes and mouths are everywhere. His ears are everywhere. He pervades everything in the universe” (Svetasvatara). Oneness admits of no separation; the many wondrous animals and every aspect of earth are recognized as indistinct from God:

O Brahman Supreme!  
Formless art thou, and yet. . .  
Thou bringest forth many forms. . . .

Thou art the fire,  
Thou art the sun,  
Thou art the air. . .  
Thou art Brahman Supreme. . . .

Thou art the dark butterfly,  
Thou art the green parrot with red eyes,  
Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas.

(Svetasvatara)

The Upanishads teach that the inner essence of each living being is identical with the inner essence of every other being. “[A]s by one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known,” so all things are one in essence (Chandogya 92). To know what it is to be human is to understand what it is to be a flounder or myriapod. As a pinch of salt placed in water cannot be seen or touched, but changes freshwater to salt water, so the subtle essence of life runs through all, cannot be perceived or touched, but pervades the giant squid, the massasauga, and the endangered broad-nosed gentle lemur (Chandogya 104–05). The ground of each individual’s being “is identical with the ground of the universe,” whether that individual is mollusk or bird (Embree, Hindu 59). As all rivers flow to join one great sea, so do all living beings come from separate bodies, but we are united by this shared “subtle essence” (Chandogya 102).

The Mahabharata also teaches oneness of being. Those who are spiritually learned are said to behold all beings in Self, Self in all beings, and God in both. The Mahabharata reminds that “all living beings have souls, and God resides as their inner soul” (Dwivedi 5). More directly, all that exists is God (Dwivedi 5). Hindu writings teach the devoted that any thread of the divine that flows through human beings, flows through all. In the worldview of the Mahabharata, the universe and everything in the universe has been “created as an abode of the Supreme God” (Dwivedi 5). God is in all that exists, and all that exists is “meant for the benefit of all” (Dwivedi 5). This means that human beings may not dominate. Each species is expected to live “as part of the system, in close relationship with other species” but without any one species dominating or exploiting others (Dwivedi 5).

This message of oneness is heightened in the most famous portion of the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna (one form of the great God Vishnu) reveals himself

saying, “I am the life of all living beings. . . . All beings have their rest in me. . . . In all living beings I am the light of consciousness” (Bhagavad 74, 80, 86). The Bhagavad Gita reminds Hindus: “I am not lost to one who sees me in all things and sees all things in me,” and those who love God must have “love for all creation” (6. 30, L. Nelson 95). God is the life of all that exists, and Hindus are instructed to extend compassion to all fellow beings (Nelson 67). A holy person (assumed to be a man in most religious literature) sees himself in the heart of all beings and he sees all beings in his heart. . . . And when he sees me in all and he sees all in me, then I never leave him and he never leaves me. He who in this oneness of love, loves me in whatever he sees, wherever this man may live, in truth this man lives in me. And he is the greatest Yogi he whose vision is ever one: when the pleasure and pain of others is his own pleasure and pain. (Bhagavad 71–72)

In the Bhagavad Gita, a pundit is one who “treats a cow, an elephant, a dog, and an outcaste” with the same high regard because God is all, and those who are spiritually advanced, those who are true devotees of the divine, find “in all creation the presence of God” (Dwivedi 5).

The Hindu worldview holds that people “have no special privilege or authority over other creatures. . . [but] they do have more obligations and duties” (Dwivedi 6). Writings from the second century BCE present specific duties expected of Hindu citizens (in this case citizens of the Mauryan empire), including both nonviolence and compassion (James 504). Compassion is also a common theme in the great epics, evident in revered personalities—those who are gods in human form. For example, in a dream near the end of the Mahabharata, Yudhishtira (one of the five Pandavas) finds himself in a great desert where he is befriended by a small brown dog. All of his beloved human companions die for want of water, but the dog remains. When the god Indra arrives to rescue him from the “death-desert,” Yudhishtira first inquires as to the whereabouts of his lost human companions and is told they have “gone before” (Mahabharata 365). Indra then encourages Yudhishtira to join them:

“Come, get in.”

“Lord of the Past and Present,” said Yudhishtira, “this little dog who is my last companion must also go.”

“No,” said Indra. “You cannot enter heaven with a dog at your heels. . . .”

“He is devoted to me and looks to me for protection. Left alone he would die here.”

“There is no place for dogs in heaven. . . . It cannot be.”

Yudhishtira frowned. “It cannot be otherwise.”

“Don’t you understand: You have won heaven! Immortality and prosperity and happiness in all directions are yours. Only leave that animal and come with me; that will not be cruel. . . .”

“I do not turn away my dog; I turn away you. I will not surrender a faithful dog to you. . . .”

“But I can’t take him! I’ll put him to sleep; there will be no pain. No one will know.”

“Lord of Heaven,” said Yudhishtira, “you have my permission to go.”

“Your splendor will fill the three worlds if you will but enter my car alone,” said Indra.

“You have left everyone else—why not this worthless dog?”

“I am decided,” answered Yudhishtira.  
(Mahabharata 365–66)

Here we see a moral and spiritual champion, Yudhishtira, turn away the great god Indra—and life in paradise with his loved ones—for the sake of stray dog. As it turns out, the stray dog soon transforms into Dharma, the God of moral law. Yudhishtira is praised for his steadfast commitment to a small, common mutt against the will of Indra, and against what most of us might consider common sense. The lesson is clear: Compassion and loyalty to all beings is central to the spiritual life and critical to salvation.

The Hindu tradition has much that might help us to heal our world, and to heal our relations with other creatures. The earliest roots of Indian religion reveal nature as sacred. Spiritual visions of transmigration, karma, oneness, and ahimsa remind Hindus that they are not separate from the world around them, but are spiritually tied to all living beings, and that all creatures share similar interests. Indian sacred literature provides a wealth of warm and personable, vibrant and fascinating animal characters, from monkeys and bears to snakes and dogs. Indian God’s are associated with animals. Hindu mythology does not draw stark lines between species, or between the gods and earthly creatures: An individual can be born of deer and human; a god can manifest as human, tortoise, or man-lion, and a small, playful monkey can turn out to be the god, Hanuman. These mixed personalities remind readers that people are one small part of a larger community, that all beings share the spark of life and the light of the divine, and that our very salvation is dependent on life-choices that express this spiritual understanding.

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Animals of Indian Mythology

Dr. Krishnanand Kamat

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Ancient Indians had recognized the animals' right to co-exist with man and therefore they were loved, nurtured and even worshipped. In order to impress upon the commoners about their importance, the animals were given the status of gods and goddesses. They declared that Almighty incarnates in different animal forms. The kings and the emperors opted different animals in their emblems. Many festivals were/are observed in honor of several animals. In order to inculcate love for animals among children, animals were made heroes in stories. The rulers gave them prime position in art and architecture.....

The concept of Dashavatara of Lord Vishnu, in a way represents the organic evolution theory. In order to indicate the aquatic origin of the animals, the Lord incarnates in the form of a Mathsyas, a fish. This is followed by an amphibious animal Kurma, a turtle. Third incarnation is Varaha, a boar which is completely a terrestrial animal. Narasimha represents a beast's attempt to attain a human form....

There are many instances in our scriptures where ancient Indians had mastered animal languages. While king Kekaya was with his queen, he overheard the conversation of a pair of birds nesting in his courtyard which made, him laugh. He admitted to the queen that he understood birds' talk but refused to share this with others which was a taboo. When the queen insisted to know the contents of the bird's conversation, the king preferred to divorce her on the advice of his guru who had blessed this boon on the king than divulge the code. In Chandogyaupanishat another interesting incident has been mentioned. One evening a pair of cranes were flying back to their place of rest ; the talkative one said to the other that the king Janasbruthi is a very religious and learned person and therefore we must be extra careful while flying over his kingdom. This other crane reacted sharply and asked, "Does this king come anywhere near wisdom of Raikva?" The king overheard this conversation, located Raikva who was relaxing under a bullock cart and learned Bramha-jnana from him....

The emperors, kings and queens adopted different animals as their emblems. The Gangas of Talkadu opted for an elephant, whereas a lion was Kadamba's choice. Hoysala's emblem has a tiger whereas the Vijayanagara kings settled for a boar. Mysore

Maharajas went for Ganda-bherunda, two-headed mythical bird. These emblems were printed on flags that were hoisted at the time of different religious functions. Coins of different denominations were minted by embossing these emblems. These emblems were also displayed prominently on temples, forts and palaces.....

The crocodile is given prime of place in Hindu religion. It is believed that the Ganga river depends on a crocodile for her very frequent visits to Bay of Bengal from the Himalayan mountains. The rain-god Varuna also rides on Makara. Kamadeva's emblem is Makara and hence his wife carries it whenever she goes. At times the couple takes a joy ride on this animal. In one of the expeditions of Himalayas, Hanuman was bathing in lake when all, of a sudden a huge crocodile clasps his legs. With great difficulty he drags the animal out of water. The cruel animal turns itself into a beautiful damsel and proclaims that because of Daksha's curse she became a crocodile and it is Hanuman's contact that revoked the curse.

<http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/prani/animals.htm>

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Vahanas are Mounts of Hindu gods and goddesses. For thousands of years Hindus have been worshipping their gods mounted on vahanas. Mostly they are animals. Big Temples in Tamil Nadu take their beautifully decorated gods and goddesses on various vahanas along the streets of the town. It is happening even today. During the annual festival of each temple, gods' processions are organised. Some temples like Madurai Meenakshi temple do it more times in a year.

The origin of Vahanas is shrouded in mystery. Hindu Agamas have rules about Vahanas for each deity, each day and specific decoration. Various philosophical explanations are given about the vahanas. But before going into the details, let us look at the mounts of gods and goddesses around the world. This shows the influence of Hinduism, what is known as Sanatan Dharma, is around the world.

Chronologically speaking Vahanas first appeared in the Middle East in Babylonian and Sumerian cultures. We see them in Egypt and Greece. In India, it has started in Indus Valley. I have already written about Indra on his elephant Airavata in an Indus seal. Some scholars interpreted the figure as a woman standing on elephant. We have Indra's wife Indrani on elephant in a Bangladesh sculpture. Either way it can be interpreted as Vedic Gods.

Most of the ancient Vahanas are in standing position. But later day Hindu iconography showed them comfortably sitting on an animal or a bird. Kanchi Shankaracharya (who attained Samadhi when he was 100 year old) gave a series of lectures in Chennai in 1935. Talking about California may be a corrupted word for Kapila+Aranaya=kapilaranya (read my article about Is California ,kapilaranya?) etc., he raised a question and answered at one go "did Hindus go around the world to spread their religion? No. This was the religion that existed once in all parts of the world".

I agree fully with Sri Kanchi Paramacharya. We see the vestiges of Sanatan Dharma in all parts of the world and Sanskrit words and names of Vedic Gods in every culture. Going by this rule, we can boldly say that the Hindu Vahanas seen in Egypt and Sumerian sculptures are due to Hindu influence.

<http://swamiindology.blogspot.com/2012/10/hindu-vahanas-around-world.html>

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In one of his past lives, before attaining Buddhahood, the Historical Buddha was a wise monkey king who enabled his followers to escape from hunters. [In] the "Mahakapi Jataka" ... the future Buddha is a compassionate leader of a troop of monkeys who escape across a river on his back; carved on a stupa railing pillar at Bharhut, c. 150 BC; India Museum, Calcutta.

<http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/monkey-india-china-p2.html>

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Hindu deities have particular vehicles or 'vahana' on which they travel. These vehicle, which are either animals or birds, represent the various forces that he or she rides. These deities are seldom depicted without their corresponding creatures.

Vehicles as Symbols

Goddess Saraswati 's vehicle, the graceful and beautiful peacock denotes that she is the controller of the pursuit of performing arts.

Vishnu sits on the primal serpent, which represents the desire of consciousness in humankind. Shiva rides the Nandi bull, which stands for the brute and blind power, as well as the unbridled sexual energy in man - the qualities only he can help us control. His consort Parvati, Durga or Kali rides on a lion, which symbolizes mercilessness, anger and pride - vices she can help her devotees check. Ganesha's carrier, a mouse represents the timidity and nervousness that overwhelm us at the onset of any new venture - feelings that can be overcome by the blessings of Ganesha.

Below is a list of Hindu gods and goddesses who are inseparably linked with their respective 'vahanas':

Aditya - seven horses

Agni - the ram

Brahma - seven swans

Durga - the lion

Ganesha - the mouse

Indra - the elephant

Kartikya - the peacock

Lakshmi - the owl

Saraswati - the swan or the peacock

Shakti - the bull

Shani - the crow

Sheetala - the donkey

Shiva - Nandi, the bull

Varuna - seven swans

Vayu - a thousand horses

Vishnu - Garuda, the eagle & Adi Shesha, the serpent

Vishwakarma - the elephant

Yama - the male buffalo

<http://hinduism.about.com/od/godsgoddesses/a/vehiclesofgods.htm>

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Sacred animals also became the mounts (vahanas) of various Hindu gods. Symbolizing or complementing the energy or character of deity, they came to be integral to iconography and were always depicted with the deity.

Among the early Aryan gods to receive mounts were Agni (fire) whose vahana was a sheep, Varuna (water) naturally mounted on a crocodile, Vayu (wind) appropriately astride an antelope, and the Moon riding the heavens on a deer.

Carnivores, the dreaded enemy of man and his cattle, came to be the mounts of the Goddesses Durga and Kali. Their ferocity and strength was an obvious accessory to their destructive and demonic aspect and established their supreme power. Herbivores on the other hand, were associated with male gods. Nandi, the bull, vahana of Shiva, reflected his legendary virility.

The Deer, consistently associated with Brahma, were also represented with Shiva who is frequently depicted holding a deer to signify his status as Pashupati, Lord of the Beasts.

Lord Vishnu soars above the earth on Garuda, the golden eagle-hawk, who is swifter than the wind and the sworn enemy of snakes. He has the head, wings and talons of a bird but the body of a man. A sense of power and strength is always evident in depiction of Garuda.

Brahma's mount is the hamsa, variously interpreted as a swan or goose. The bird was later also associated with Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Its veneration was believed to ensure success in every enterprise. Apart from its depiction with the deity, the hamsa also frequently adorns lamps, symbolizing the goddess's capacity to dispel the darkness of ignorance.

Kartikeya, god of war, has a peacock for his vahana. This apparently incongruous relationship has been traced to the bird's formidable ability to destroy snakes.

Indra, king of the lesser gods and lord of rain, rides the elephant Airavata. Also allied with Laxmi, goddess of prosperity, elephants were widely represented.

The river goddesses, Ganga and Yamuna, were appropriately mounted on a tortoise and a crocodile respectively. The fish, a symbol of fertility, as were all aquatic creatures, was related to the god of love, Kama, and often emblazoned on his banner. His consort, Rati (passion), was usually represented with a parrot. Commonly portrayed in erotic sculpture, this bird also indicated the mood of love.

<http://svzoo.org/html/anicult2.htm>

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ANIMALS

AND

BIRDS:

HINDU DEITIES VEHICLE

Animals and birds play an important role in Hindu religion. Hindus are known to respect cow as it is considered to be extremely sacred. Cow is also known as Aditi, meaning 'Mother of Gods'. In Hindu mythology, the cow is considered the mother of all including Gods and humans. Every part of the cow holds religious symbolism; the horns symbolize the Gods, legs represent each of the Himalayan mountains and her face represents the sun and the moon. The Gopuras or the tower in South-Indian temples are often carved with the deities and animals. Some of the animals and birds which are popularly known to be the vehicles of the Hindu deities are: The Rat is Lord Ganesha's vehicle. It symbolizes Ganesha's ability to destroy every obstacle. The Bull (Nandi) is Lord Shiva's guardian and vehicle. The bull is said to embody sexual energy and fertility. Riding on its back, Shiva is in control of these impulses. The Tiger is the vehicle of Goddess Durga, the destroyer of evil. Sometimes it is drawn as a lion, appearing without stripes which symbolizes mercilessness, anger and pride. The peacock, vehicle of Goddess Saraswathi, represents arrogance and pride over its beauty, and by having a peacock as her mount, the Goddess teaches not to be concerned with external appearance and to be wise regarding the eternal truth. The Owl, vehicle of Goddess Lakshmi, the owl represents spiritual wisdom, the blindness associated with seeking worldly rather than spiritual wealth. The Swan, also known as Hamsa is the vehicle of Lord Brahma, symbolises intelligence and discrimination. Garuda is the lord of all birds and Lord Vishu's vehicle. He is a remover of obstacles and a fanatic enemy of serpents.

The Elephant (Airavat) is the vehicle of Lord Indra, the Storm God and bringer of rains. It symbolises reliability, dignity, power, royalty and pride. The Crocodile or Makara is the vehicle of Lord Varuna, the God of Rain. The crocodile symbolises dignity, power, speed, strength, cunning and bravery. The Horse, the vehicle of Lord Surya or the Sun God, who is the chief of the 'Navagrahas'. He rides upon seven horses which symbolise the seven rainbow colours. [www.boldsky.com](http://www.boldsky.com)

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Great reverence is given to the animals in Hindu mythology either with direct representation or as God themselves, such as Lord Ganesha (Elephant God) and Hanuman (Monkey God). Vijayalakshmi, the author of the article, mentions various animals which are considered the vehicles of Hindu Gods. She says that some people may think that these animals just act as a means of transportation, but they are symbolic representative of something immaterial and formless. These creatures or Vāhana ("vehicle") serve as the vehicle and as the sign of a particular deity. Apart from those already mentioned, other vahanas are: Agni's carrier is usually a ram. Lord Yamaraja's vehicle is a water buffalo. Karttikeya's vehicle is a peacock. Vayu, the god of wind, rides an antelope. Yamuna devi rides on a turtle or fish, and Saraswati devi and Ganga Ma on makaras.

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WHAT DO THE VEDIC TEACHINGS TELL US?

The Sanskrit word Vihana means 'vehicle' or 'carrier', denoting an animal or creature that serves as a vehicle or mount for a deity. The vahana accompanies, pulls the chariot of, or serves as the seat or mount of the transcendental personality he serves. A vahana is sometimes depicted on banners and emblems to identify the cult or affiliation of the devotee. In some instances, the vahana assists an exalted personality to manifest on planes or in spheres or worlds hierarchically inferior to their own. In one of Vishnu's pastimes, for example, he is described as riding upon Garuda, "since the Lord is not accustomed to stand on earthly ground". ... The Supreme Personality of Godhead said, "Of lordly elephants I am Airavata", thus Airavata is the king of all elephants. Airavata (Airaawat) is the vehicle of Lord Indra, king of the demigods.

[edicviews-worldnews.blogspot.com/2013/02/prominent-role-of-animals-in-hinduism.html](http://edicviews-worldnews.blogspot.com/2013/02/prominent-role-of-animals-in-hinduism.html)

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Animal symbolism – Gods and their vehicles – Part 1

by Venu Payyanur

In the modern world, vehicles are seen as the status or power symbol of the person riding it more than a mere means of transportation. For example, Airforce one, the most famous official aircraft of the American President is specially designed and built and also the most photographed aircraft in the world. The car specially built for him by Cadillac is called the "Beast". There is this rich Indian business man who lives in his 27 story house with 168 cars including a Benz costing in excess of rupees five crores. Politicians in India, including MPs and MLAs are constantly fighting to get a red beacon (lal bathi) on top of their cars to signify their authority and position in the social milieu.

In Hindu iconography, positive aspects of the vehicle are often representative of the deity that it carries. The vehicle of a particular deity in Hinduism has symbolic and philosophical significance. The symbolic meaning varies from deity to deity. Some Vahana teach human beings the value and importance of selfless service, devotion to duty and patience. Often the Vahana of a Hindu God indicates a wrong or evil human quality which has been controlled by riding on it, or a good quality inherent in an animal or bird that needs to spread and adapted by all. Many vahana may also have divine powers as they serve the God/Goddess selflessly and remains in the presence of the lord all the time. And they will also have the power to grant boon or shower curses. The God/Goddess may be seen sitting, standing or riding the vahana or at times the vahana may be seen sitting near the God. These Vahana are the representation of the various energies (animal energies) that exists in the universe as well as in human beings and they need to be controlled and channel properly so as to transform ourselves spiritually. Each god or goddess is in-charge of a particular energy which he or she rides and controls at his or her will. These energies are present in man also, mostly as wild animal energies and they need to be controlled and channelled properly in order to transform the lower self and establish divine consciousness in him. For this he has to propitiate different gods who if satisfied with his supplication arise or descend into his consciousness and help him master them.

Below is a list of Hindu gods and goddesses and their respective 'vahanas'

- Aditya (Sun God) – seven horses
- Agni – the Ram
- Brahma – Hamsa (swan)
- Durga – the lion
- Ganesha – the mouse
- Indra – the elephant
- Subramanya – the peacock
- Maha Lakshmi – the owl
- Saraswati – the swan or the peacock
- Shani – the crow
- Shiva – Nandi, the bull
- Varuna – seven swans
- Vayu – a thousand horses
- Vishnu – Garuda, the eagle & Adi Shesha, the serpent
- Yama – the male buffalo

Vishnu – According to various Puranas, Vishnu is the ultimate omnipresent reality and one of the most important Gods among the Trinity. Vishnu's vahana is the eagle King named Garuda. Garuda is depicted as having the golden body of a strong man with a white face, red wings, and an eagle's beak and with a crown on his head. This ancient deity was said to be massive, large enough to block out the sun. Throughout the Mahabharata, Garuda is invoked as a symbol of impetuous violent force, of speed, and of martial prowess. Garuda symbolises the space element and the power of the sun, which can dry up the water. Hence Garuda is the natural enemy of snakes and he devours or controls them. He represents the spiritual energy of which devours the delusions of jealousy and hatred, which are represented by the snake. Garuda is also the openness: he can stretch out his wings and soar into space. Garuda represents the human thoughts which can fly in all directions at incredible speed. Lord Vishnu can help us to control our thoughts.

Another name for Garuda is "Veda atma"; Soul of the Vedas. The flapping of his wings symbolizes the power of the Divine Truth of Vedic wisdom. Also the eagle represents the soul. Garuda carrying Vishnu symbolizes the soul or jiva-atma carrying the Super soul or Param atma within it.

Lord Vishnu is seated on Adi Shesha, the serpent god, who represents the desire consciousness in us. The serpent Anantha represents thoughts, endless thoughts that pass through our minds all the time. That is why it has thousand hoods symbolising thousands and thousands of thoughts passing through our minds at any given time. In many pictures, the serpent is shown with five hoods, which represents our five senses, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching, based on which our thoughts are generated. Lord Vishnu can help us either to fulfil these desires or control them.

Vishnu is shown wearing two earrings: The earrings represent inherent opposites in creation — knowledge and ignorance; happiness and unhappiness; pleasure and pain. Similarly his vehicles also represent the inherent opposites in creation – Garuda and the snake seshha.

Lord Shiva represents the aspect of the Supreme Being that continuously dissolves to recreate in the cyclic process of creation, preservation, dissolution and recreation of the universe. Lord Shiva is the Lord of mercy and compassion. He protects devotees from evil forces such as lust, greed, and anger. He grants boons, bestows grace and awakens wisdom in His devotees. Lord Siva rides the Bull, Nandi, which stands for the bullying, aggressive, blind and brute power in man. The bull symbolizes both power and ignorance. It also stands for unbridled sexual energy, Kama. Only Lord Siva can help us control these and transform them. Lord Shiva's use of the bull as a vehicle conveys the idea that He removes ignorance and bestows power of wisdom on His devotees. Have you seen villains in Hindi movies, they are generally shown as physically strong persons with lack of intelligence or thinking power. They are the bulls, if under control will do whatever the master wants, or else it can destroy you also.

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