



Insects in the Religions of India

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*The greatness of a nation and its moral progress
can be judged by the way its animals are treated.*

— GANDHI (1849–1948)

There are numerous publications on insect mythology on a wide range of topics. These publications concern mainstream religions such as Judaism and Christianity in the Bible (Kritsky and Cherry 2000) and Islam in the Koran (El-Mallakh and El-Mallakh 1994). Insect mythology has been reported from every continent except Antarctica and even on obscure topics such as witchcraft (Weiss 1930) and shamanism (Cherry 2007). Insects are also used symbolically throughout the world's religions in a variety of roles (Hogue 2003). However, a glaring gap in our knowledge of insect mythology lies in the religions of India. India is home to some of the world's oldest religions and is an ancient mythogenic center whose mythologies have spread to other cultures over time. Both in the past and today, its religions are a major influence on millions of believers. However, Hogue (1987) noted that besides Judaism and Christianity, involvement of insects in other major world religions has been relatively unexplored by entomologists. This situation has not changed since Hogue's comment. This paper reports on insects found in the religions of India.

Buddhism

This religion was started in approximately the sixth century B.C.E. by Siddhartha Gautama (later called the Buddha, meaning "Enlightened One"). Its view of God is primarily non-theistic, with polytheistic views in some sects. Karma, reincarnation, and attainment of nirvana are

core beliefs. More than any other religious perspective, Buddhism has had the greatest impact on the evolution of Asian civilization. Originating in India, Buddhism spread throughout Asia through missionary activity. Today, Buddhism thrives as one of the world's main religions, with 300 to 500 million followers worldwide (McDowell and Brown 2009).

It is interesting to note that the origin of Buddhism may be partially due to insects. In his 1962 book *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, the famed mythologist Joseph Campbell reports the following encounter of the young Prince Gautama: "He was riding his white steed, Kanthaka, across a field that was being plowed, when he saw its young grass not only torn and scattered, but also covered with the eggs and young of insects, killed. Then filled with a deep sorrow, as for his own kindred slaughtered, he alighted from his horse, going over the ground slowly, pondering birth and destruction, musing, 'Pitiable, indeed.'" This and later encounters helped the Prince later formulate the principles of Buddhism.

The belief in karma and reincarnation extends even to insects. If one's bad deeds surpass good deeds, one will be reborn as a *shudra* (the lowest of the traditional social classes), a foreigner, an animal, a bird, or even a reptile or insect (Knappert 1995). Thus, one may even speculate that in the past, an insect was a more "advanced" animal—possibly a human being. This is consistent with Hogue's (2003) observation

that entomological mythology commonly employs transformations of beings between the insect and human form and combinations thereof. According to the teachings of Buddha, killing insects and other creatures has karmic consequences and should be avoided whenever possible (Landaw and Bodian 2003).

The legend of Avalokiteshvara is especially noteworthy for his compassion towards all life, including insects. This Bodhisattva was about to achieve complete release from the vortex of rebirths when he heard all creation lamenting. In his selfless, boundless compassion, he renounced the release for which he had striven through innumerable lifetimes so that he might stay in this world as a teacher and aid to all beings. He later appears among merchants as a merchant, among princes as prince, and even among insects as an insect (Campbell 1982).

Hinduism

This very old religion originated in prehistoric times, so the exact date of origin is unknown. It is believed to have come from the polytheistic religions of the now-extinct Aryans. The Hindu view of God is polytheistic with a monotheistic concept. Karma, reincarnation, and the caste structure are core beliefs. There are more than 830 million practicing adherents, with most living in India (McDowell and Brown 2009).

Animals able to talk and who possess magical powers are common to folk tales of all countries, but they are nowhere as



Fig. 1. Kali, the "Black One," is a terrifying warrior goddess who wears a necklace of skulls or severed heads. Her epithet is "The Bee."

numerous or fantastic as those of Indian mythology (Stutley and Stutley 1977). These animals are especially evident in Hinduism, ranging from animal gods to minor roles. Typically, vertebrates assume powerful roles, such as gods, while insects are numerous only in minor roles. The restriction of insects to minor, non-powerful roles is consistent with Jobes' (1962) observation that insects are the lowest stage of Hindu reincarnation.

Several examples of insects found in Hinduism are shown in Table 1. Ants and honey bees are common, which is typical of the widespread occurrence of these two groups in mythologies around the world. In addition to Table 1, other reports of arthropods in Hindu religion are as follows. Hogue (1987) notes that Hindu holy writings teach that ants are divine, the first-born of the world, and ritually the anthill represents the earth. Kali (Fig. 1) is the ferocious female world ruler who leaves death and destruction in her wake and is sometimes described with the epithet "The Bee" (Knappert 1995). Jobes (1962) notes that Kama (Fig. 2), the god of love, carries a bow of sugarcane with a bowstring of bees, and fires arrows tipped with flowers to inspire love. Knappert (1995) goes farther and also puts bees on the flower-tipped arrows. Bhramari Devi (Fig. 3) is called the goddess of the black bees. Bhramara means "relating to the bee," and this goddess is one aspect of Devi, the Universal Mother (Turner and Coulter 2000). Beside the spider example noted in Table



Fig. 2. Kama, the god of love, uses bees in his bow and arrows to inspire love.

1, Stutley and Stutley (1977) note that the spider sitting in the center of its web is a spinner of illusion and reminds Hindus of maya, the supernatural force behind the creation of the transient world.

Jainism

This religion was started in the sixth century B.C.E. The founder is thought to be Vardhamana (later called Mahavira or "Great Hero"), although some historians claim that its origins are unknown. The religion has an unspecified belief in the divine, and core beliefs in nirvana, karma,

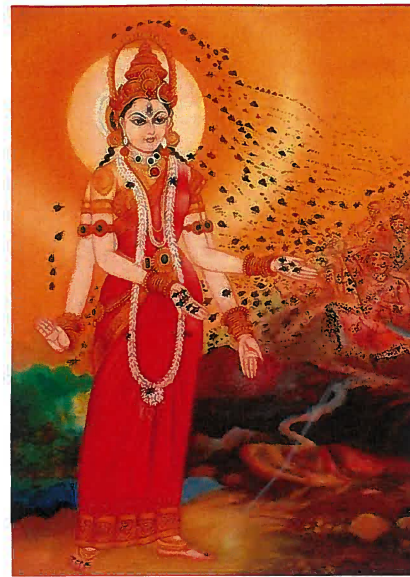


Fig. 3. Bhramari Devi is the goddess of black bees and one aspect of Devi, the Universal Mother.

and reincarnation. A major focus is to do no harm to any living organism, and hence its followers are strictly vegetarian. Jainism is practiced by millions of Jains all over the world, but especially in India, where more than four million Jains are found (McDowell and Brown 2009).

Of the six "great vows," or Mahavratas, that are central to Jainist belief, perhaps the most important is the concept of ahimsa ("not harming"), which extends even to insects (Gibson 1998) because killing insects may have karmic consequences. This has resulted in several

Table 1. Arthropod references in Hinduism (Stutley and Stutley 1977).

Arthropod	Sanskrit	Role
ant	Gaja	elephant figure made from ant-hill to intimidate enemies
ant	Makha	ants decapitate Visnu (god)
ant	Upajihirka	ants have considerable ritual significance and are the basis of numerous myths
honey bee	Anna	honey is metaphor for food in mystical sense
honey bee	Bhringa	victim offered at an asvamedha (horse sacrifice)
honey bee	Kariristi	honey is food offering to induce rain
honey bee	Madhu	honey widely used in rituals as remedy and for fertility
honey bee	Mahavrata	honey part of fertility festival
honey bee	Susna	Vedic demon turned into lump of honey by Indra (god)
beetle	Bhringi	a seer transforms to a beetle to complete worship
cochineal insect	Indragopa	associated with Indra (god) as rain giver
silkworm	Raksa	silk bound around wrist to avert Evil Eye
spider	Vasistha	sweat from Vasistha becomes venomous spiders



Fig. 4. Jain monks wear mesh over their faces to avoid inhaling insects and carry soft brooms to sweep their paths clear of any creatures to avoid stepping on them.

Jainist behaviors to avoid killing insects when possible (Fig. 4). Water may not be drunk at night for fear of swallowing some unseen insect, and masks may be worn to avoid inhaling insects (Campbell 1982). Jain adherents may walk with a broom to sweep clear the ground before they tread on it. This is done to avoid treading on insects and other small organisms, as this is seen as "treading on souls" (McDowell and Brown 2009). In the sect of Digambara, monks go completely naked and carry only a peacock feather whisk to sweep insects from their path (Wilkinson 1999). Moreover, vows may be taken limiting the number of steps taken every day, since every step endangers the lives of insects, worms, and similar creatures (Campbell 1982). The Jainist vow of non-violence against living things (including insects) even limits them from pursuing many professions, such as agriculture. For this reason, Jainism grew into an urban religion (McDowell and Brown 2009). Because its extreme reverence for animal life in general, Cherry (2011) has called Jainism the most "insect-friendly" religion.

Sikhism

Despite the fact that Sikhism is the world's fifth largest religion, many people in the West are unaware of its existence. However, Sikhism stands alone as the youngest of the world's major religions. It originated 1496 C.E. as founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji as a monotheistic religion. Its core beliefs are the existence of only one god,

equality of all human beings, and karma and reincarnation. Sikhism is practiced by 23 to 26 million people worldwide, with the majority living in India (McDowell and Brown 2009).

Sikhs believe in reincarnation as it is mentioned in their holy book, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*. Everyone goes through the cycle of births and deaths until one attains freedom from the cycle of rebirths, called *mukti*. Sikhs believe that the whole creation is a combination of matter and soul. Some are shaped as rocks and mountains, some are created as plants and vegetation, and some have been made as worms and insects. According to Sikhism, there are approximately 8.4 million species on this earth. Both the states of life, fixed and locomotive (including worms and insects), manifest themselves in multifarious forms and colors in various births. God abides in all of them (Kohli 1993). Sikhs believe in one God, who created the world and is present in everything from people to insects, and God's *jot* (spiritual light) is also present in inanimate objects (Barrow 2010). Sikhs believe that God takes care of the whole creation, including insects and worms, and this is mentioned in their holy book: "O Lord, you are kind and compassionate; you give your gifts to even worms and insects among the rocks" (Khalsa 2006).

Conclusion

In conclusion, insects play a range of roles in Indian religions, ranging from trivial to important. These roles are commonly found in mythologies worldwide. However, the core beliefs in karma and reincarnation found in Indian religions result in a unique viewpoint towards insects not seen in other religions. The unnecessary killing of insects as well as other animals is stressed because this may have karmic consequences. Moreover, in no other religion may an insect be thought of as a potential candidate for bettering itself through future reincarnations, possibly even attaining the ultimate bliss of nirvana. This latter concept may seem strange to one unfamiliar with Indian religions, but as Shakespeare noted in *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

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