Forest and Wilderness: Animals in Central Indian Folk myths

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ABSTRACT

The co-existence of tribal societies is not a new phenomenon, they are being together for hundreds of centuries and this can be understood through their folk myths and folk stories where they have legends in animal forms who teach them social co-existence, morality, polity, devotion, and sometimes philosophy. If we take a particular case study among the Gond tribes of Central India then there are hundreds of these kinds of stories that tell us about the respect for animals from human beings in different ways particularly the practice of humanitarian behavior towards animals. Even in their religious mythological stories, they have special characters of animals that are being treated as important for human society and existence.

The aim of this paper is to I- describe and discuss the various kinds of animals among the tribal myths of central India, II- to analyze and explore the level of co-existence and interdependence between tribes and animals through these tribal myths, III- bring out an Idea for the modern society from the forest tribes and their myths that how we can make space for animals and how we can live together with perpetual respect and dignity.

Keywords: Myth, Folklore, Animal, Human, Tribes, Gonds, Pashupati

Introduction

From the time of evolution of life on the earth and the emergence of human beings, animals have been their co-existing counterparts. And we cannot deny their history and rights over the earth as we have for human beings. If we see the whole human history we would find out that we have been interdependent to each other on various living aspects, and it is still in practice in various tribal societies around the world. Tribal societies are being supposed to lagging in the race of development but on the emotional and human front, they have developed more advanced and efficient practices to live with nature and particularly with animals.

Understanding Human, Nature, and Animal

With the journey of time, human beings have learned various things and one of the first major things is to share this earth with other living beings. In the race of development and modernity, we are forgetting our responsibilities towards nature and other living beings and this has led us to the world where humans have become self-centric creatures. If we see and analyze the historical journey of human on this planet then we would find that earlier there was a struggle for existence for human on this earth because they were under the evolutionary process and certainly they evolved more than other animals, this was the first stage where there was a competition between human and other creatures for the domination over nature/earth and in the second stage we can say that there was/is a struggle among the human beings in the name of race, religion, and nation and the third stage is the concept of superhuman where through the tools of biotechnology, embryology, and genetics we are claiming to win over the law of nature and we are assuming that we are the real game-changer apart from the human everything is less important.
In the blind race of development and modernity, we have forgotten the importance of co-existence with animals and so-called other creatures of the planet. It is our miss understanding that the right over the earth is only reserved for us instead it is equal for animals also.

If we want to understand the divine concept of co-existence between humans and animals we need to look back and get some fresh ideas from the old myths and stories when humans and animals were sharing the common space and they were aware that they are interdependent with each other. These old myths and stories are still preserved by the peoples of deep forests, especially by those who are lagging in the race of development either socially, economically, or technologically and we call them in modern terms as “tribes”.

The definition of “tribe” as it has emerged from the attempts of scholars is ‘a social group usually identified with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity, and unifying social organization.’ (Chattopadhyaya, Kamaladevi, Tribalism in India.)

**Representations of Animals in tribal Myths & Stories**

India has perhaps the highest tribal population among any other single country whose major population is non-tribal. Tribes in India form about seven percent of our total population. In India, there are many states which are full of natural resources, rich vegetation, and high-density forest areas, for example, all the North-Eastern states, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh and due to less penetration of urban space and ideology in these regions still, there are tribal populations and they are surviving there with the idea of co-existence with nature and animals.

Through this paper, we will talk and discuss particularly myths and stories from Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, in these two states there are various tribal groups like Gond, Kol, Kotaku, Baiga, Halba, and Bhil, etc. Among them, Gond is the biggest tribal community of central India and Baiga is next to them, both tribal groups are rich in myths and stories which are related to the depiction or representation of prime characters by animals same as the stories of Panchtantra where the critical subjects like ethics, morality, and politics were being taught in ancient India. But the myths which are being propagated within these tribal societies are different from the stories of Panchtantras because here they are also passing their traditional knowledge and rituals through these myths and stories.

The stories which the tribal tells are myths, not fairy tales, and here is the difference. “Myth is primitive ethnology expressed in poetic form,” and as well said by Verrier Elwin that “Myth makes everything contemporary” it is the central dynamo of life and the link which binds them to secrets of nature. In other words, myth allows them to come to terms with nature's varied and bewildering phenomena. Myths also give substance to old customs and beliefs which otherwise get worn out and become dead wood and thus valuable lessons of experience and sound fundamental values kept alive in the current mainstream.

**The Myth of the Finding of Earth**

In the beginning, there was nothing but water, water, water. There was no voice of God no voice of bhut (devil), no wind, no rocks, no path, and no forest. As the sky is now, so was water then. On the great lotus leaf that drifted here and there on the waters sat Bhagwan (god) there was no fruit or flower to his life he was alone. One day he rubbed his arm and with the dirt that came off, he made a crow, his daughter Karicag. When she fly god said to her, “go and find some earth for me, I am lonely here, I want to make a world.”

The crow flew and flew, who knows where it went. At last, the breath left its body and it fell with a thud on the back of kekramal chhatri which is the great tortoise, who was sitting in the water with one arm on the bottom of the ocean and one arm reaching to the sky.

Then this great tortoise said, “What is the matter? Why are you panting like that”, O elder brother I was so tired that my life was leaving my body.” Where are you going, little sister..? “I am searching for the earth where can I find it ..?” Go and look for the Gichanraj, the worm at the bottom of the ocean; it is he who has swallowed the earth. I will take you to Logundi king who will help you.

So, the great tortoise took the crow to king Logundi and king Logundi become ready to make help for crow. The great worm was sleeping at the bottom of the sea the cage landed near his head. The tortoise and the crow came out and woke him up. He was very angry. “I have slept for twelve years,” he shouted and now you have broken my sleep. I have had no food all that time, so now I am going to eat you.

Tortoise got behind the crow when he heard that. Whose daughter are you? The worm asked then. I am the daughter of God. Why have you come here? “I have come to find the earth.” Did your father put the earth here so that you should come and look for it? When she heard that the crow got very angry and sad that if you don’t give me the earth, I will beat you. That made the worm
frightened and he said, “The earth is not here my daughter it is over there but it is guarded by devils that will burn you to ashes if you go near him. But the great tortoise didn’t believe this pretense. When he saw that the worm was afraid the tortoise came out from behind the crow’s back and jumped on the worm and seized him by the neck.

Give me the earth once or I will cut off your head, so said the tortoise. So he began to squeeze and squeeze. The worm wriggled and twisted this way and that, and screamed. The worm gave all the earth to the crow and then the tortoise tugged at the chain and Logundi king pulled two off them up. Tortoise tied the earth round the crow’s neck with a rope and the crow flew away and away; till at last, she came home to god.

The god undid the earth from the crow’s neck and put it in his lap. Then he called a young virgin. She made a pot out of leaves and put the earth in it and she churned it for eight days and nine nights she churned till all was ready. The god rolled the earth out like a round bred and spread it on the face of the water. There it began to grow till it had covered all the waters.

**The Myth of the True Pashupati**

In the Baiga myths, there is space for Mahadeo (Shiva) and Parwati in the legends Mahadeo and Parwati are simply a typical couple who get the better of the Baiga at every opportunity. They might almost symbolize a conflict of the Baiga with civilization.

According to this myth, Mahadeo and Parwati made birds and animals out of mad and gave life to them, and instructed the Baiga community that they should not eat tigers and Jackals. After a time Parwati become pregnant and went away to her own house, for twelve years Mahadeo lived alone in the jungle. Parwati felt very lonely: every day she used to ask “when will he come.” At last, she made a tiger from the dirt she rubbed from her breast and sent it to frighten Mahadeo hoping that he would then run home to her. But Mahadeo instructed Baiga that he should kill this tiger and he killed him with his ax. The Baiga buried the tiger under the tree and due to his overconfidence he was trying to kill another tiger but another tiger lifted his paw and said, wait to listen to my story so Baiga sat down on the stump of a tree.

The tiger said “whenever I catch men, goats, cattle, chickens in a village, all the people will call on you to help them. You won’t get gold or silver but wherever you will do your magic in a village or forest, there I will never come and the people will trust you and will give you enough for your livelihood. And this way he saved the lives of animals and become a true Pashupati in the Baiga folk myth.

From the above two popular myths which are prevailed among the tribes of central India, we can collect some elements of fact to make a logic that they have given optimum space and respect in their mythologies to the animals. There are various stories and legends among these tribes where a crow, a parrot, or a dog played a major role.

If we analyze the first story then we would found that the importance of the crow because according to their myth crow was the first animal that was made by the tribal god Bhagwan. Since crow was sent to find out the earth with the help of a tortoise from sea worm it symbolizes various things, first is that the tribes have tried to properly synchronized with animals of all the living space from the sky which is represented by a crow to the land and water which is represented by tortoise and sea which is represented by a worm. And the second interesting thing is that even in the stories of the creation of the earth various animals are participating actively and that’s why these tribal peoples have much respect for the animals.

Regarding this story of the creation of the earth, there is much in the early Puranas where lord Vishnu incarnates himself in various animal forms like Fish, tortoise, snake, and Pig and saved the world; however, there are possibilities that due to the similarities in the legends of these two traditions they must have had some kind of interaction that’s why they have picked some common factors.

But the most important thing is that it appears from their mythological stories that they have never deny the animal world and they were aware of the value of life and co-existence.

Now if look over the second myth which is about the god Pashupati, Pashupati is the god of all animals, if we go through the etymology of the term Pashupati we would find its clear meaning pashu means animals and pati means lord. According to Vedic and Puranic tradition, Shiva who is also known as Mahadeo among the tribes is the Pashupati who takes care of all the animals on the earth. In the second story, there is a clear transformation of a Baiga tribe into a savior of animals when he tried to kill the second tiger and through this incident, he becomes Pashupati among humans.

Like these two folk myths, there are several myths where the idea of co-existence, perpetual interdependence, and harmony in nature has prevailed. As we know that God is the prime and ultimate creation of the human being according to the theory of *existencenism*, where human and animals are the product as well as a gift of nature, in the above myths peoples have imagined the god who first made the animals shows the level of their higher understanding where gods were cohabiting with animals in the earth.

The symbolism and the essence from the above tribal folk myths are very important and relevant in our time also. Because in the blind race of development and modernity knowingly or unknowingly we are denying the rights of animals on the earth and forgetting that they are also part of nature as we are. The Great Ideas of co-existence and perpetual sharing of natural space between
the Humans and animals still exist among some tribes of Central India because they have developed that tendency through the long ages and which areas visible in their myths.

**Conclusion**

As we know that nature has its philosophy of “Be natural”, and we should also try to make it possible. We can learn from our past stories & myths that how we should not act and vice versa well. The folk myths which I have taken through this paper have both the sense in one aspect it is past and another aspect it is present; it is past because it is about myth and stories which are several thousand years old but it has concerns with our present. From them, we can learn about the fundamentals of co-existence between humans and animals so that we can live together with perpetual respect and dignity.

**References**