

Animism in Ancient India: A Literary Exploration

Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Higher Education

Barkatullah University

Bhopal, MP, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

Animism essentially postulates that natural objects, phenomena, and the universe itself possess a spirit or consciousness that ascribes humanity into a spontaneous relationship with Nature. This research paper posits animism as a ubiquitous belief ingrained in the Indian cultural fabric through an analysis of selected excerpts taken from ancient Indian representative texts.

Keywords: Animism, Ancient India, Vedic literature, Puranic literature, Epic literature, Upanishadic literature

1.Introduction

Animism is a belief system that attributes spiritual essence to natural objects, phenomena, and the universe. The principle expresses a deep connection between humans and the natural world. Animism is evident in archaeological artefacts, relics, religious texts, literature, and cultural practices.

The term “animism” was popularised by anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871), where he defined it as the belief in spiritual beings. Tylor described how the concept evolved after its coinage by G.E. Stahl. Other anthropologists, such as Émile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski, developed the idea further by exploring animistic beliefs in different cultural contexts. The theory fell out of favour with the modern

standards of anthropological research but was revived again with the surging appeal of ‘new animism’. This paper explores the occurrence of instances of animism in representative classical texts of the ancient Indian literary tradition.

2. Hypothesis

Animism is a fundamental aspect of ancient Indian culture, deeply integrated and simultaneously revealed in ancient Indian sacred texts.

3. Research Questions

- How is animism reflected in the *Rig Veda*?
- What examples of animistic beliefs can be found in the Ramayana and Mahabharata?
- How do the Upanishads and Puranic literature depict animistic concepts?

4. Theoretical Frame

Animism posits that everything in the world, including animals, plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena, possesses a spiritual essence or consciousness. It emphasizes the inter-connectedness of all elements of nature, both animate and inanimate.

Animism thus is closely related to the ancient belief of considering nature as sacred and to rituals based on the deification of nature. It fosters a deep respect for the environment and thus can be seen as an extension of the nascent reverence for nature embedded in the infantile human consciousness.

Spiritual Essence: According to animism, every entity in nature has a spiritual essence. This includes not only living beings like humans, animals, and plants but also non-living elements such as rocks, rivers, and mountains.

Inter-connectedness: Animism emphasizes the inter-connectedness of all things and suggests that humans are just one part of a larger, spiritually connected world, fostering a deep respect for nature.

Cultural Significance: Animism becomes the inspiration of various indigenous and traditional religious beliefs across the world from which cultural practices, rituals, world views and religions draw upon substance.

Continuity and Interaction: Animistic traditions believe in the ongoing interaction between the spiritual and physical world that manifests through rituals, offerings, and communication with spirits to maintain harmony and balance.

5. Analysis

Inklings of Animism in Selected Excerpts of Hymns from the *Rig Veda*

The Vedic texts constitute the oldest and the most sacred texts that have laid down the foundation of the Indian spiritual thought. They are believed to have been transmitted for centuries before being written down. The hymns, rituals, and philosophical teachings contained in the *Vedas* constitute the oldest records of human spirituality and metaphorical perception of the Supreme. The Vedic hymns are ingrained with a deep sense of reverence for natural elements such as fire, water, thunder and the sun and embody several instances of the contemporary idea of animism.

The *Rig Veda* is considered to be the oldest *Veda* that unfolds wisdom through a well-structured schema of the ten *mandalas* that contain groups specifically dedicated to particular deities such as the Surya (Sun). The hymns indicate that the primary Vedic deities were deified forces of Nature. They were primarily sung during the rituals of worship associated with these deities. Consequently, they reveal knowledge about the deities whom the *Rig Vedic* is worshipped and concurrently present their worldview that held Nature as divine in both its aspects: animate and inanimate.

To provide specific illustrations, for instance, the *Rigveda* mentions deities associated with natural phenomena like Indra, the god of thunder and rain; and *Agni*, the god of fire.

The first hymn of Book One is dedicated to *Agni* or the Fire deity in the *Rig Veda*, which describes the significance of Fire in sacred rituals:

“अग्निं ईळे पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम् । होतारं रत्नधातमम् ।”

(*Hymns of Rigveda*, 1.1.1, 1)

Translation by Griffith:

I laud Agni, the chosen priest, God, the divine minister of the sacrifice, the invoker, the bestower of wealth.

(*Hymns of Rigveda*, 1.1.1, 1)

The significance of Fire becomes apparent from the text. The elemental force of fire is understandably a crucial force to appease due to the inherent nature of the fire to annihilate and destroy. It is therefore logical to observe that the passage relates to ‘fire’ as the “minister of sacrifice”. However, fire is simultaneously also described as the “bestower of wealth” that invokes a metaphorical understanding of the element perceived by the seers.

Another aspect of nature is illustrated through the thirty-second hymn of the Third Book that contains a reference to Indra, the “wielder of thunder”. The following verse reveals that the Vedic seers worshipped Indra who is associated with ‘thunder’ and ‘storm’.

ये तेषुष्मं ये तविषीमवर्धन्नर्चन्त इन्द्रमरुतस्तोजः

माध्यन्दिने सवने वज्रहस्तपि बारुद्रेभिः सगणः सुशिप्र II

(*Hymns of Rigveda*, 3.32.1)

Translation by Griffith:

Those who increase thy strength and vigour, the Maruts singing forth thy might, O Indra. Drink thou, O fair of cheek, whose hand wields thunder, with Rudras banded at our noon libation. (*Hymns of Rigveda* 3.32.1)

The two illustrations taken from the *Rig Veda* clearly reveal a worldview that considered Nature to be sacred and deified elements/forces of nature. The performance of spiritual rituals that intertwine humanity and nature places the two in a natural relationship of being interconnected. The relationship evidently places humans in a subjugate position, and the hymns can also be perceived as a spiritual means of attaining the power and grace abounding in Nature.

Inklings of Animism in the Selected Excerpt from the *Chandogya Upanishad*

The Vedic literature culminated in the philosophy of the *Upanishadic* literature that put forth the essence of the Vedic wisdom in the form of metaphysical philosophy. The *Upanishads* essentially describe the nature of sublime concepts like Truth, Reality and the Self. The *Upanishads* evolved on a continuum that began with the spontaneous spirituality of the *Vedas* that was filled with wonder for the forces of Nature and instilled it as divine. Eventually, the supernatural appeal of the musical invocations described in the *Vedas* transformed into a more philosophical exploration of the divine during the *Upanishadic* phase which branched out as an extension of the ideological outpourings of the *Vedas*. Consequently, the *Upanishads* are not as replete in rituals and hymns as the *Vedas*. The transforming nature of this tradition thus moves from an appeal that is devotedly ‘believing’ towards an approach that sanctifies the belief system after a logical inquiry into the nature of Reality. The animistic elements thus seem to diminish as the *Vedic* tradition advances towards the *Upanishadic* rendition. But the illustrations surely are not completely lost; they are moulded more indirectly, in contrast to the more explicit instances of reference occurring in the *Vedic* hymns.

The tradition of animism, however, continues with the *Upanishadic* literature in a somewhat dilated form as the texts project natural phenomena and objects not as the ‘supra-

ordinary' but as projections of an esoteric yet metaphorically palpable Truth. For instance, the nineteenth discourse of the third section of the *Chandogya Upanishad* compares the Sun to 'Brahman' in the following verse:

आदित्यो ब्रह्मेत्यादेशस्तस्योपव्याख्यानमसदेवेदमग्र आसीत् । तत्सदासीत्तत्समभक्तदाण्डं
निरवर्ततत्संवत्सरस्यमात्रामशयततन्निरभिद्यतते आण्डकपालेरजतंचसुवर्णचाभवताम् ॥

(*Chandogya Upanishad*, 3.19.1)

Translation by Swami Lokeshwarananda:

Aditya (the sun) is Brahman; *iti adesah*, so it is said; *tasyaupavyakhyanam*, (here is) an explanation of that (statement); *idam*, this (universe of name and form); *agreasatevaasit*, was at first unmanifested (i.e., it was without its names and forms; (lest the word *asat* give the impression that the universe was like 'a flower in the sky,' it is said,) *tat*, this (universe with its names and forms in a subtle state; *sat asit*, became manifest; *tat*, that (subtle universe); *samabhavat*, first emerged as a seed; *tat anḍamniravartata*, that developed into an egg; *tat*, it (i.e., the egg); *saṁvatsarasyamatramasayata*, lay still for a period of a year; *tat*, it (the egg); *nirabhidyaata*, split open; *teanḍakapale*, those two parts of the egg; *rajatam ca suvarṇam ca abhavatam*, turned silver and gold respectively.

(Swami Lokeshwarananda, 3.19.1)

It is apparent from the above that the overall usage of animistic elements declines in a continuum moving from the early *Vedic* hymns appearing in the *Rig Veda* to the philosophical commentary of the *Upanishadic* texts. Though sporadic use of animism is interspersed in individual texts, it can be said that the overall recurrence of elements of animism seems reduced considerably. This is understandable due to the advancement of infantile human consciousness that evolves in terms of mind, *buddhi*, *vivek* and intellect over time. The sense

of wonder associated with the glorification of Nature as a spiritual or divine force seems to diminish with a maturing mind and the associated representation of elements of animism becomes less frequent in the texts.

Inklings of Animism in Selected Excerpts from Epic Literature

The Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, are essentially sacred narratives that contain allegorical references to the metaphorical Truth. They can be regarded as stories that depict the essence of the Supreme Reality by means of engaging accounts of gods and super-humans. Apart from the central narrative, the epics contain numerous instances that deify people, animals or objects associated with nature. There are many instances that connote animistic elements in these texts. The narratives are replete with spirits, gods, and supernatural beings inhabiting natural elements. For example, the concept of *Yakshas*, or nature spirits, and *Nagas*, or serpent deities, described in these texts act as illustrations of worship of imaginary and real aspects of nature.

In the epic *Ramayana*, god Hanuman is described as a ‘Monkey God’. A section from the *Kishkindha Kand* of the epic that describes his matchless power reads:

“उत्तिष्ठहरिशार्दूललङ्घयस्वमहार्णवम्।

पराहिसर्वभूतानां हनुमन्यागतिस्तव।

(*Valmiki Ramayana, Kishkindha Kanda, 4.66.36*)

Translation provided by the ‘translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*’, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT, Kanpur):

हरिशार्दूल O tiger among monkeys, हनुमन् O Hanuman, उत्तिष्ठ rise up, महार्णवम् great ocean, लङ्घयस्व cross, तव your, या such, गतिः capacity, सर्वभूतानाम् among all beings, पराहि indeed supreme.

“O Hanuman, tiger among monkeys, rise up and cross this great ocean. You have that supreme capacity among all beings.” (*Valmiki Ramayana, Kishkindha Kanda, 4.66.36*)

The description above is based on the episode when Jambhuvan reminds Hanuman of his powers and inspires him to cross the ocean and go to Lanka in search of goddess Sita. The mighty god Hanuman prepares himself and takes a leap from the Mahendra mountain. The episode beautifully evokes different powers of Nature that are clearly supra-ordinary. The narrative describes the power of the monkey god Hanuman, the wisdom of the bear Jambhuvan, as well as, the emotions of the army of monkeys assembled to search for Sita. Apart from the animal deities, the passage also describes and glorifies other aspects of nature in both animate and inanimate aspects, as evident in the following verse from the sixty-sixth ‘sarga’ of the *Kishkindha Kand*:

ततस्तंमारुतप्रख्यस्सहरिर्मारुतात्मजः॥(4.67.40)

आरुरोहनगश्रेष्ठमहेन्द्रमरिमर्दनः।

वृत्तंनानाविधैःवृक्षैर्मृगसेवितशाद्वलम्॥(4.67.41)

लताकुसुमसम्बाधनित्यपुष्पफलद्रुमम्।

सिंहशार्दूलचरितंमत्तमातङ्गसेवितम्॥(4.67.42)

मत्तद्विजगणोद्घुष्टंसलिलोत्पीडसङ्कुलम्।

Translation provided by the ‘translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*’, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT, Kanpur):

ततः then, मारुतप्रख्यः as eminent as the Windgod, मारुतात्मजः son of the Windgod, अरिमर्दनः crusher of enemies, सःहरिः that monkey, नानाविधैः with several, वृक्षैः trees, वृत्तम् covered, मृगसेवितशाद्वलम् grassy land inhabited by deer, लताकुसुमसम्बाधम् filled with creepers and fragrant flowers,

नित्यपुष्पफलद्रुमम् ever with trees full of flowers and fruits, सिंहशार्दूलचरितं
 where lions and tigers move, मत्तमातङ्गसेवितम् inhabited by proud
 elephants, मत्तद्विजगणोद्घुष्टम् filled with flocks of intoxicated birds,
 सलिलोत्पीडसङ्कुलम् full of water falls, नगश्रेष्ठम् great mountain, महेन्द्रम्
 Mahendra, आरुरोहं ascended.

The son of Maruta, who was as eminent as the Windgod, the crusher of
 enemies ascended the great mountain Mahendra, full of grassland inhabited by
 deer, thickly grown with various trees and creepers full of fragrant flowers and
 fruits, where roam lions and tigers and proud elephants, a place that echoes
 with sounds of intoxicated birds and waterfalls.

(*Valmiki Ramayana, Kishkindha Kanda, 4.67. 40-42*)

In the epic *Mahabharata* also, there are several instances of worshipping aspects of
 nature. The *Yaksha* (a nature spirit) has been ascribed a significant role in the narrative
 wherein the Pandava king Yudhishtira is able to revive his brothers after they drink poison
 water from a natural spring after successfully answering the questions imposed by a *Yaksha*,
 who metaphorically tests his character. The *Yaksha* is described in the following verse:

वैशम्पानन उवाच ततस्ताभ्यं शवाश्रत्वा वाचसन्नरुषयाभ ।

मस्य ब्रवतो याजन्न क्रम्यतदाधित् ॥ (19)

धवरूनाभहाकाममंतरसभच्छ्रमभ ।

जवरनाकप्रतीकाशभधष्यन्नवतोन्नभ ॥ (20)

सतभाधश्रत्यधतिदशबयतषब् ।

भघगबीयमावाचातजमिभहाफरभ ॥ (21)

Vaisampayana continued, ‘Hearing these accursed words couched in harsh
 syllables, “Yudhishtira, O king, approaching the *Yaksha* who had spoken

then, stood there. And that bull among the Bharatas then beheld that Yaksha of unusual eyes and huge body tall like a palmyra-palm and looking like fire or the Sun, and irresistible and gigantic like a mountain, staying on a tree, and uttering a loud roar deep as that of the clouds.”

(*Yaksha Prashnah E-Text*, 25)

Like the deification of *Yaksha* or nature spirit, the epic describes different kinds of nature deities such as the *Naga devata* or serpent deities.

Inklings of Animism in Selective illustrations from *Puranic Literature*

The *Puranas* emanated from the evolving tradition of classical Indian literature that owes its genesis to the wisdom contained in the *Vedas*. The *Puranas* evolved as texts that made the dissemination of philosophy possible to the masses through the didactic appeal of stories, myths, legends, and genealogies of gods and heroes. They also served as important instruments that led to the convergence of different streams of spirituality, such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The *Puranas*, too, are replete with stories that reinforce animistic beliefs, particularly through the tales that personify natural elements.

The *Puranic* myths about the ‘*dashavatar*’ of god Vishnu in which he appears in various ‘*avatars*’ or divine forms evolving on a continuum as different divine ‘animals’ to preserve the Creation resonate with the ideas expressed in the theory of evolution. It is expressed that whenever there is a ‘decay’ of righteousness (*dharma*) Vishnu takes an avatar to restore order and preserve the Creation. His evolving forms include the ‘*matsya*’ (fish), ‘*kurma*’ (tortoise), ‘*varaha*’ (wild boar), ‘*nara-simha*’, ‘*vamana*’, ‘*parasurama*’, ‘*rama*’, ‘*krishna*’, ‘*buddha*’ and ‘*kalki*’. The evolving form of life begins in sacred water as a divine fish (*matsya*) towards a form that is half human (*nara-simha*), followed by divine human embodiment, each being an epitome of glorious virtues and finally culminating in a mechanical form bereft of the human element, serving both as a signifier of the past and a prophetic projection for the

future. The English translation of the Matsya Mahapurāṇ published in 2007 explains this idea in the editorial note by K.L.Joshi:

Visnu is the only god of the Brahmanical trinity, who is known in the texts to incarnate not only in animal, or composite forms, (half animal and half human) but also in purely human form and even is born of human parents. The theory of incarnation of Visnu could also be traced in the Satapatha Brahmana, wherein the rescue of the Earth from the deep sea by Brahma in the form of a Boar has been discussed... Then, the earth, torn up by a Boar, he takes only thus large was she in the beginning, for, indeed only so large was this earth in the beginning of the size of a span. A Boar called Emusa, raised her up and he was her lord Prajapati, with that mate, her heart's delight, he thus supplies the complete him...

(Matsya Mahapurāṇ, xx)

Parallel Context

The ancient Indian texts are interspersed with animistic beliefs. The findings from the texts can be appreciated in the context of archaeological findings that also provide similar evidence of animistic practices in ancient India. Archaeological findings provide tangible evidence of animistic practices in ancient India. Excavations have uncovered stone and bronze sculptures, inscriptions, and artefacts that depict deities associated with natural elements. These findings suggest that ancient Indians worshipped various aspects of nature, such as the sun, water, and animals. There are several instances that indicate the same, such as the sun inscription from the Kushana period and the stone sculpture of the 'nagas' from the Gupta period.

Living traditions from different regions of India are deeply rooted in animistic beliefs. Ethnic communities have revered natural landforms, such as rivers, mountains, and trees, as

sacred entities. These traditions often involved rituals and offerings to appease the spirits believed to inhabit these natural features.

Many indigenous and tribal communities in India continue to practice animistic rituals and also worship local deities associated with natural elements. There are several popular rituals that involve worship of sacred trees and plants, during which sacrament is offered to sacred trees. Women perform rituals such as the 'Vat Savitri' in which married Hindu women worship the Vat trees by an elaborate ritual of revolving. The Nagas, or the sacred serpent gods are still worshiped during the Nag Panchami festival in different parts of India.

6. Discussion

The evidence of animistic beliefs can be found in various ancient Indian texts.

- a) The sacred *Vedas*, which constitute the bedrock of Hinduism, contain hymns that personify natural elements like fire (*Agni*), wind (*Vayu*), and water (*Varuna*) as deities. This suggests a belief in the spiritual essence of natural phenomena.
- b) In continuation of the reverberations of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* too deify aspects of nature and describe them as deities. Though they do not contain spontaneous invocations as in the case of the *Vedic* hymns, the *Upanishads* clearly mystify nature as a divine power and glorify its aspects.
- c) The ancient Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* feature numerous references to spirits, gods, and supernatural beings inhabiting natural elements like the 'Yakshas' (nature spirits) and 'Nagas' (serpent deities) that reflect animistic beliefs.
- d) The findings from textual evidence parallel the archaeological findings, such as inscriptions and artefacts that depict the worship of natural elements and animals. For instance, sun symbols and inscriptions dedicated to solar deities indicate the reverence for natural forces.

- e) The living traditions in India, particularly those practiced by indigenous and tribal communities in ancient India, practiced animistic rituals and worshipped local deities associated with natural elements like trees, rivers, and mountains.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of ancient Indian texts, reveals the deep-rooted presence of animism in Indian culture. The *Vedic* hymns, epic narratives, *Puranic* myths, and philosophical discourses of the *Upanishadas*, reflect animistic beliefs that emphasise the spiritual essence of the natural world. The personification of natural elements and the worship of nature spirits reflect a worldview that sees the environment as a living, interconnected entity.

Archaeological findings and enduring traditions further attest to the significance of animism in Indian culture. The reverberations of animism foster a sense of respect and reverence for the natural world, which is evident in both ancient and modern practices.

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