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India

Perception of Animals and Nature

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The fish and the tortoise

Sharon St Joan, Best Friends Network

Running throughout the Asia for Animals Conference, hosted this past January by Blue Cross of India, in Chennai (Madras) was a spiritual thread, an expression of the age-old reverence in India for animals as a key element of the sacred.

It would be impossible to focus on India, as we have been doing for the last month during the India campaign, without acknowledging the inextricable link between the sacred and the animals in the traditions of India.

Great credit is due to Dr. Chinny Krishna and Nanditha Krishna for a very worthwhile conference and for all the work and dedication that went into organizing it! Nanditha Krishna was particularly involved in making sure the spiritual traditions of India in relation to animals found their rightful place in the conference.

The civilization of India stretches back in an unbroken stream for at least five thousand years, and possibly much longer. It may be the oldest continuing civilization on earth. This could give pause for thought to those of us who might tend to dash about the planet earth giving our unsolicited advice to all and sundry on every imaginable topic.

During the India Campaign for the month of June, Dr. Chinny and Nanditha Krishna have been traveling, and we were unable, because of logistical reasons, to cover the work done by Blue Cross of India as we had wished to. We hope to remedy this in the near future.

There is a lovely, charming little book (small in size, not in importance) written by Nanditha Krishna, entitled "The Book of Vishnu". It is available from Amazon.com.

Mentioning this book is not intended as a plug for the Hindu religion--just an acknowledgment that according to these spiritual traditions, animals are not viewed as objects, possessions, property, wealth, or in any other way that relegates them to a position as less than human.

Instead they have a high standing as beings who are sacred, pure, innocent, to be revered and looked up to. The animals' true nature is, in this way, honored and valued, by a whole culture.

As is the case with human affairs, nothing is absolutely as it seems, and there is also a very dark side to the presence of animals in religion in India. The original elevation of animals as gods has often deteriorated over the centuries into its opposite. At some temples and as part of some religious festivals, there are animal sacrifices--and sometimes very cruel treatment of the animals. In some cases, people seem unaware that the animals are being injured.

In every country on earth, there is both cruelty and kindness. No one has a monopoly on these traits. On the whole, the traditional representation of animals in India is one of affection and appreciation.

In the Book of Vishnu, by Nanditha Krishna, are told some of the traditional tales related to animals. Vishnu, as the Supreme Being, is able to incarnate in various forms--as a fish, as a tortoise, as a wild boar.

In his first incarnation, Vishnu appears as Matsya, the fish. In a story similar to that of Noah and the Ark, the fish speaks to the king, instructing that he (the fish) be tied to the boat (the ark), in order to keep it afloat. It doesn't just rain for forty days, but rains steadily for a hundred years!

During all this time, the fish continues to pull the boat, keeping it afloat. Clearly, Matsya is a benevolent being, saving all of those who've taken refuge on the ark. Vishnu is in this way the preserver and savior. The fish, Matsya, is the rescuer of the animals and the plants.

In his second incarnation, Vishnu becomes the turtle Kurma. Kurma plays a heroic role too, carrying a mountain on his back. It appears that the devas (the gods) are feeling a bit weak and need extra strength. Some herbs and vitamins have been cast into the ocean, which now needs to be churned, so that it can become a healthy brew to restore the powers of the devas. This is where Kurma steps in, carrying the mountain on his back, which will be the stick used for churning. Kurma has saved the day.

Though my brief retelling of these stories may have thoroughly mangled them, it's not meant with any disrespect, and we hope I will be forgiven. What is clear is that the sacred in the form of the animal--in this case--the fish and then the tortoise are hero figures, They are good, beneficent, strong, able to bring help and salvation.

These stories lead to the perception that the animals are pure, heroic beings--certainly equal to humans and worthy of all respect and protection.

One cannot help but wonder whether, if the western world, rather than seeing nature and animals as subjects who were put on earth to be subdued and dominated, had instead seen animals and all of nature in this light of respect and appreciation-- the earth and the animals might today be flourishing, well and healthy--instead of being plagued with the prospect of vanishing altogether, due to so many human-induced perils.

And who knows, perhaps if such respect and appreciation of animals was there in the past, in myth, legend, or spiritual perception, it may yet return again, so that the earth and the animals may feel a sense of renewed life and strength.

How you can help

To donate to help animals in India, please go to the International Rescue Fund -- India button, on the right.

Thank you!

The website of Blue Cross of India is

<http://www.bluecross.org.in>