**Coiling Faith: Investigating the Impact of Religious Beliefs on Snakes and Human Conflict in India**

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India, a country known for its diverse cultural landscape, has long been a hub of religious beliefs and practices. Among the various religious beliefs, the significance of snakes holds a unique position in Indian culture and mythology. Snakes are revered as deities and symbols of fertility, protection, and power in several religions, most notably in Hinduism. However, the coexistence of humans and snakes has led to conflicts arising from deeply rooted religious beliefs, presenting intriguing socio-environmental challenges.

This paper explores the multifaceted dynamics of human-snake conflicts in India, focusing specifically on conflicts stemming from religious beliefs. The relationship between humans and snakes has been shaped by centuries-old traditions, rituals, and mythologies, which have assigned both divine reverence and fear to these reptiles. Snakes are often associated with deities like Lord Shiva and Nag Devta (Snake God), and their worship is an integral part of many religious festivals and ceremonies.

Despite the religious significance accorded to snakes, the encounters between humans and snakes can result in conflicts, particularly in rural areas where snakebite incidents are more prevalent. Religious beliefs sometimes discourage individuals from taking necessary precautions or seeking medical treatment promptly, which can exacerbate the consequences of snakebite incidents. These interactions often generate fear and panic among communities, further complicating the efforts to strike a harmonious balance between religious beliefs and human well-being.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the complexities surrounding human-snake conflicts in India, particularly with respect to religious beliefs. It explores the case studies, research findings, and relevant literature to examine the social, cultural, and ecological dimensions of these conflicts. By understanding the underlying factors and the interplay between religious beliefs, conservation efforts, and public health concerns, and seeks to shed light on potential strategies for mitigating conflicts and promoting coexistence between humans and snakes in the Indian context.

**Keywords**: snakes, human conflict, religious beliefs, India, coexistence, conservation, mythology, rituals, snakebite incidents.

**Introduction:**

In the diverse tapestry of human societies, the intricate interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and ecological relationships has shaped the course of history and continues to influence contemporary interactions with wild animals (Castillo, 2020). India, a country in South East Asia where cultural and spiritual tapestry is woven with a rich array of religious beliefs and practices, each contributing to the nation's unique identity (Satpathy, 2015). India, renowned for its rich religious diversity and deep-rooted traditions, has long been a stage where humanity's reverence for the divine and its coexistence with the natural world converge. At the heart of this convergence lies the veneration of snakes, which holds a central position in various religious frameworks across the country (Allocco, 2009). From the cosmic serpent in Hindu mythology to the Naga cults of north eastern India, snakes have garnered veneration that transcends the boundaries of belief systems (Lange, 2019; Pathak, 2022). This veneration often stems from their symbolic significance as well as their perceived role in ecological balance, intertwining the spiritual and ecological realms in a unique manner. However, the coexistence of humans and snakes is not devoid of conflict. India's diverse ecosystems harbour numerous snake species, some of which are venomous and pose potential threats to human populations (Sulabh & Pushp, 2008; Bawaskar et. al., 2017; Chakma et. al., 2020; Suraweera et. al., 2020; Malhotra et. al., 2021; Pandya et. al., 2022). The conflict between human interests and snake presence has led to a complex web of interactions, varying from religious rituals and snake handling practices to incidents of snakebite and even snake killings (Vaiyapuri, 2013). This intricate interplay between religious beliefs, cultural practices, and ecological dynamics shapes perceptions, responses, and actions concerning snakes and their habitats. In some instances, deeply ingrained religious beliefs may hinder individuals from taking essential precautions or seeking immediate medical intervention following snakebites, exacerbating the repercussions of such incidents (Nann, 2021). These interactions, fraught with complexity, have the potential to induce fear and panic within communities, thus augmenting the challenge of balancing religious beliefs with human well-being. This paper seeks to provide an exhaustive overview of the intricate tapestry of human-snake conflicts in India, focusing particularly on the intricate interplay of religious beliefs. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that draws upon case studies, research findings, and pertinent literature, the paper endeavours to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of these conflicts. By discerning the underlying factors and deciphering the intricate interactions between religious convictions, conservation initiatives, and public health concerns, the paper aims to shed light on potential strategies for mitigating conflicts and fostering harmonious coexistence between humans and snakes in the unique and vibrant context of India.

**A. Religious Significance of Snakes:**

Snakes, throughout history and across cultures, have evoked fascination and symbolized diverse concepts, from life and death to regeneration and rebirth. In India's spiritual landscape, the veneration of snakes assumes an extraordinary significance, interwoven with the beliefs and practices of various religions (Das & Balasubramanian, 2017).

**Hinduism**:

In the intricate tapestry of Hinduism, one of India's predominant religions, the veneration of snakes emerges as a profound and intricate facet. Far from being mere creatures, snakes in Hinduism embody a rich symbolism that traverses the boundaries of the material world to touch the realms of cosmic energy, power, and profound transformation (Das & Balasubramanian, 2017).

**Cosmic Energy and Transcendence:**

Within Hindu thought, snakes symbolize an embodiment of cosmic energy, an elemental force that courses through the universe (Jayram, V). This symbolism finds its vivid expression in the portrayal of Lord Shiva, the deity renowned for his dance of creation and destruction. In his divine dance, Nataraja, Lord Shiva adorns serpents as ornaments, emphasizing the convergence of opposing forces—life and death, creation and destruction—within his divine dance (Indian culture, GOI). This portrayal encapsulates the dualistic nature of existence, where opposing forces coalesce to create a harmonious cosmic dance.

**Cycle of Life and Transformation:**

The shedding of a snake's skin, a process known as molting (Rutland et. al., 2019), mirrors the cyclical nature of life and existence. Just as a snake discards its old skin to emerge a new, humanity too experiences cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. This transformational process serves as a potent metaphor for the continuous renewal of life, a cycle embedded within the very fabric of existence.

**Serpent Ananta and Eternity:**

The symbolism of snakes extends further to the divine realm, where the serpent Ananta, also known as Adi Sesha, plays a pivotal role. Ananta's coils serve as the resting place for Lord Vishnu, the preserver in the Hindu trinity (Bala, 1946). In this depiction, the serpent embodies eternity itself, its endless coils evoking the timeless nature of the universe and the divine. Ananta's presence beneath Lord Vishnu underscores the symbiotic relationship between cosmic forces and the divine.

**Protection and Fertility:**

In addition to their cosmic significance, snakes are often considered protectors against malevolent forces. Snakes are believed to guard sacred spaces, temples, and shrines, a role that exemplifies their dual nature as both protectors and divine beings. Snakes' association with fertility and prosperity is also profound (Fergusson, 1868). In certain regions, snake worship is intertwined with agricultural practices, where snakes are invoked to bless the land and ensure bountiful harvests.

**Jainism:**

Jainism emerges as a unique and contemplative religion, distinguished by its emphasis on non-violence (ahimsa), compassion, and respect for all forms of life (Howard, 2023). Within this philosophical framework, the relationship with snakes is imbued with a distinct perspective that underscores harmony and coexistence.

**Non-Violence and Compassion:**

Central to Jainism is the principle of non-violence, a foundational tenet that extends beyond human interactions to encompass all living beings, no matter their form. This ethical stance resonates deeply with the reverence for snakes, where they are perceived as fellow sentient beings deserving of compassion and respect. Jain teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all life, urging adherents to treat every living being with kindness and consideration.

**Tirthankara Parshvanatha and the Serpent Canopy:**

In Jain tradition, the Tirthankaras are revered spiritual teachers who have attained enlightenment and guide others on the path to liberation (national geographic society). The 23rd Tirthankara, Parshvanatha, is often depicted with a unique emblem—a serpent canopy that arches over his head. This distinctive representation symbolizes the harmony between humans and serpents within the Jain philosophical framework. It is a visual embodiment of the principle of non-violence, where even potentially fearsome creatures are treated with reverence and care.

**Harmony and Balance:**

The serpent canopy encapsulates a profound message: the coexistence of diverse beings is possible through mutual respect and understanding. This imagery reflects the Jain ideal of living in harmony with all life forms, exemplifying the compassionate ethos that guides Jain practice.

**B. Snakebite Incidents and Religious Beliefs**

Snakebite incidents, a pressing public health concern in India, offer a lens through which the interplay between deeply ingrained religious beliefs and practical realities becomes starkly apparent. While religious convictions hold significant sway in guiding human behavior, they can also hinder prompt medical intervention and exacerbate the consequences of snakebite incidents (Vaiyapuri, 2013).

**Beliefs and Delayed Medical Intervention**:

Religious beliefs often shape individuals' responses to snakebite incidents. For instance, in some communities, the perception that snakes hold divine protection may dissuade individuals from seeking immediate medical attention. This delay can prove detrimental, as timely administration of anti-venom and medical treatment is crucial to mitigate the effects of venomous snakebites.

**Cultural Practices and Treatment:**

Certain cultural practices surrounding snakebites may also intertwine with religious beliefs (Nann, 2021). Traditional healers, who may incorporate spiritual rituals into their treatments, can influence individuals' choices regarding seeking medical assistance. This complex amalgamation of religious and cultural factors can contribute to a delay in accessing appropriate medical care.

**Fear and Panic Amplification:**

Religious beliefs can also influence emotional responses to snakebite incidents, often amplifying fear and panic within affected communities. The perceived spiritual significance of snakes can intensify the emotional impact of such encounters, further complicating the efforts to manage the aftermath of snakebites.

**C. Balancing Religious Beliefs and Mitigation:**

The challenge of mitigating snakebite incidents while respecting deeply ingrained religious beliefs is a nuanced endeavour that requires a multi-faceted approach. Striking a balance between cultural heritage and public health imperatives demands collaborative efforts, cultural sensitivity, and innovative strategies.

**Educational Initiatives:**

Integrating religious teachings with ecological knowledge in educational initiatives can indeed be a powerful approach to promote snake conservation and responsible coexistence. This strategy recognizes the cultural and spiritual value that snakes hold in various societies while also emphasizing their ecological importance.

1. Cultural and Religious Significance of Snakes: In many cultures, snakes are associated with symbolism, myths, and religious narratives. They can represent various qualities such as wisdom, transformation, and balance. Incorporating these narratives into educational programs can help raise awareness about the positive aspects of snakes and dispel negative stereotypes.
2. Ecological Roles of Snakes: Snakes play crucial roles in ecosystems as both predators and prey. They help control populations of rodents and other pests, maintaining a balance in the food chain. Educating people about these roles helps them understand that snakes are valuable components of their environment.
3. Interconnectedness of Nature: Many religious teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. By incorporating ecological knowledge into these teachings, educators can highlight the importance of preserving biodiversity and respecting all forms of life, including snakes.
4. Promoting Coexistence: When religious teachings emphasize compassion, empathy, and respect for all creatures, including snakes, individuals are more likely to adopt attitudes and behaviors that promote coexistence. This can reduce incidents of unnecessary harm or killing of snakes out of fear.
5. Community Engagement: Educational initiatives can involve local religious leaders and communities in discussions about the ecological and religious aspects of snake conservation. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members to protect snakes and their habitats.
6. Incorporating Science and Spirituality: These initiatives encourage individuals to appreciate both scientific understanding and spiritual beliefs. This integration can lead to a more holistic view of the environment and the role that different species, like snakes, play in it.
7. Youth Engagement: Integrating ecological and religious knowledge can be particularly impactful among young people. Children and adolescents are more likely to absorb and internalize such teachings, which can shape their attitudes and behaviors as they grow up.
8. Art and Culture: Artistic expressions like paintings, sculptures, music, and stories can be used to convey the message of snake conservation through the lens of religious teachings. This creative approach can make the learning experience more engaging and memorable.
9. Case Studies and Success Stories: Sharing success stories of snake conservation efforts that were influenced by religious teachings can inspire others to take similar actions. Highlighting instances where communities have successfully protected snakes can serve as a model for replication.
10. Long-Term Impact: Over time, such educational initiatives can lead to a shift in societal attitudes and behaviors toward snakes and their conservation. This can contribute to healthier ecosystems and a more harmonious relationship between humans and snakes.

**Religious Leaders as Advocates:**

Engaging religious leaders as advocates can bridge the gap between faith and practical concerns. Their influence can extend beyond spiritual matters to encompass health and well-being. Religious leaders can be instrumental in conveying accurate information about snakebite prevention, dispelling myths, and encouraging timely medical intervention.

**Cultural Sensitivity in Messaging:**

Addressing cultural sensitivities in messaging is vital, particularly when tailoring public health communication to religious beliefs. By creating messages that resonate with cultural values and underscore the common objective of preserving life, it becomes possible to successfully connect faith with practical measures. This approach serves as a bridge between religious convictions and the implementation of necessary precautions.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the interplay between religious beliefs, cultural practices, and ecological relationships has woven a complex tapestry that shapes human interactions with snakes in India. The veneration of snakes in various religious frameworks highlights their profound significance, from Hinduism's cosmic symbolism to Jainism's ethos of non-violence and harmony. This reverence, however, is not without its challenges, particularly in the context of snakebite incidents. Religious convictions, while deeply ingrained and culturally significant, can sometimes hinder timely medical intervention and exacerbate the consequences of snakebites. Balancing these deeply rooted beliefs with public health imperatives necessitates a multi-faceted approach. Educational initiatives that integrate religious teachings with ecological knowledge can foster a deeper understanding of the value of snakes in ecosystems while promoting responsible coexistence. Engaging religious leaders as advocates and crafting culturally sensitive messaging can bridge the gap between faith and practical considerations. The diverse cultural and spiritual tapestry of India provides a unique opportunity to cultivate a harmonious relationship between humans and snakes. By recognizing the interconnectedness of all life and promoting a holistic view that encompasses both religious significance and ecological roles, it is possible to mitigate conflicts and promote the well-being of both communities and the natural world. Through collaborative efforts, empathy, and innovative strategies, the intricate interactions between religious beliefs, cultural practices, and ecological dynamics can be unraveled, fostering a future where humans and snakes coexist in balance and harmony

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