

## Nature Worship among Hindus: A Case Study of Select Villages from Haryana

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### Abstract

Hinduism, the oldest religion, has numerous natural form worship rituals. Amid vast diversity among Hindu castes, we find spontaneous consciousness and faith in various natural world forms, be it animals, birds or plants. In this paper, the place of such ritualistic practices in the life of a common Hindu is explored. An extensive door-to-door (Household-HH) field survey was conducted in five villages in the Jhajjar district of Haryana during 2020-2021. To avoid sampling biases, a census-based survey of select caste was done in each village. It enumerated primary data from 980 Households (HH) with six main questions related to care and worship of natural form practices. The study aimed to explore and understand the importance of natural forms in the day-to-day life of a common Hindu of different castes. Villages were selected purposively so that larger HH of a specific caste could be available to get better and unbiased results. Both qualitative and quantitative inferences drawn, widely indicated that percentage of HH may differ among Hindus of various castes in worshipping nature forms, but they give a profound value to the living and nonliving elements of the natural environment in their day-to-day life.

**Keywords:** Hinduism, rituals, caste, worship, natural form, Religion.

### Introduction

Religion has been a tremendous uniting and dividing factor in the human history of civilization. Hinduism has been the centre of unification both for the human and natural environment. Hinduism, the oldest religion, has numerous natural form worship rituals. Amid vast diversity among Hindu castes, we find spontaneous consciousness and faith in various natural world forms, be it animals, birds or plants. Nature worship was common among older civilizations. It was either atrocities or attraction of natural forces which made the civilizations to worship natural forces like the sun, rain and forests for mercy or favour. The Sun god has been a common god to almost all older cultures. Primitive people worshiped the deterministic natural forces to lighten their ill effects on human life or to make them prosper. Hinduism has a more profound sense of natural environmental consciousness and is reflected in all its religious books. Since antiquity, Hindus have been practicing an eco-friendly mode of life. Whether we take up our ancient medication system, ritual system, or educational system, all provide a safer and more sustainable view of life. *Charak Samhita*, an older medicinal book, throws light on the preciousness of varied flora and fauna for our survival. It makes us realize that humans cannot survive for long without maintaining biodiversity.

In Hindu religion, rivers like Ganga were designated as Mother as water forms base of life; forests were worshipped as sacred grooves as an instrument to provide oxygen and other valuable products. Later Vedic literature (about 1500 BC) instigates integral balance in Human's, Nature, and God. Natural forces were considered expressions of the Lord Himself and were venerable entities. The Vedas envisage a beautiful natural environment on earth and commands human not to pollute. In the *Rig Veda*, it is mentioned that the universe is formed of five essential elements, namely Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Space (*Akash*). These five elements provide a basis for life in everything, and human is directed to conserve them. The *Yajur Veda* talks about propitiation and peace of all components of earth. The *Atharva Veda* considers earth as 'the mother', and the creations as her offspring. There is a command not to degrade the resources of Mother Earth ([https://www.worldhistory.org/The\\_Vedas/](https://www.worldhistory.org/The_Vedas/)). The local grassroot level traditions have effectively maintained the surrounding environment. If such Hindu practices are followed, then the goal of sustainable development can be realized, and the proclamation of act locally and think globally could be realised. The present paper looks for the continuity or remnants of such nature form rituals practiced by people in a smaller milieu covering five villages from Jhajjar district of Haryana state.



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## Aims and Objectives

The study was designed to explore the mode of nature-worshipping in today's modern scenario with the following objectives-

- 1) To explore the natural form rituals practiced at present by different caste Hindus in the study area.
- 2) To understand the perspective and faith system of different caste people about these nature worship practices in their day-to-day life.

## Review of Literature

Clark (2006) wrote a comparative essay on the use of rituals in Christian, Jewish and Hindu practice. For him, in Hinduism, God is easily accessible through rituals in everyday life. Worship of a deity, *darshana*, *vratas* (vows or fasts), and nature worship are different rituals practiced for a better future in Hinduism. He concluded that rituals provide opportunities to work for a better future and reach beyond one's present situation. Flueckiger (2015) wrote in detail about 'Everyday Hinduism' based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Chhattisgarh, Hyderabad, Tirupati and Atlanta (USA). Her work focuses on everyday ritual and narrative practices of specific people in specific places. Frazier (2012) discussed ritual and practice in Hindu studies. Hindus practice and believe in both natural and social spheres. Grabauskas (2016) vividly expressed the different ways of maintaining biodiversity in a ritualistic flavour among Hindus of India as well as other corners of the world. Tree worshipping has been part and parcel of all the civilizations across the globe. Krishna (2017) elaborately wrote on the relationship between Hinduism and Nature. The land has been mother, the trees being worshipped as sacred grooves and the ponds becoming sacred for Hindus. She maintained that Hindus understand the unity of God and nature. From the grassroot level, they have oral traditions of educating the young ones for a better bond between humans and nature. Singh (2009) has written the ethnography of *Chhatha Pooja* in Bhojpur region of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, performed for the Sun God. He has explored the tradition of worship of Sun-Goddess in Africa, Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, Japan, Korean and Greek cultures. The main objective of *Chhath puja* is to gain divine blessing for the procreation of son(s) and their prosperity. Their practices include fasting, prayer, and celibacy, wearing only unstitched clothes, sleeping on the ground, singing devotional songs throughout the night, preparing special food offerings, taking ritual baths, and worshipping the setting and rising sun on the banks of a river. Toohey (2013) reviewed three works on sacred landscapes in the worlds of Maya and Inca civilizations. He has explained the way people have fed the mountains as a place of worship and sacrifices extracting from the works of Besom, Reinhard & Ceruti, and Bassie-Sweet. Besom's work is based on ethnohistoric and archaeological research on the landscape of Inca civilization in the Andes Mountains, where peaks are seen as sacred. In all three works, how the prehistoric people created ritual and sacred landscapes is detailed at length.

## Data and Methodology

Present work is based on a year-long door-to-door collection of fieldwork entries in a schedule/questionnaire having six parameters for nature-worshipping/care rituals and demographic entries in the selected caste villages. All villages lie within a distance of 10 km. The selection of villages was based on purposive sampling, which required five villages, each having a majority or larger share (>25%) of one caste household (HH). The following villages fulfilled this condition: Balaur-295 HH of Ahirs (Yadav), Isherheri-214 HH of Jats, Shidipur-177 HH of Brahmans, Naya Gaon- 234 HH of Sainis, and Gangarwa- 60 HH of SC's (Chamar). Such selection aimed to know the inter-caste differences among Hindus in parameters taken for analyzing nature worship. For this, an extensive field survey was conducted during the year 2020-21 to collect HH level primary information encompassing 980 HH in five villages.

Exploration is the primary thrust behind this study. In the present paper, the motive was to explore *in-situ* natural form ritualistic practices performed by a common Hindu to worship or care for the natural world forms. A mixed method (quantitative and qualitative data) approach is used to understand the perceptions of different caste Hindus' towards natural form worship. Quantitatively, data is simply analysed in HH numbers and percentage for caste comparisons. A lot of qualitative data like photographs of rituals supplements the quantitative data.

**Results and Discussion**

**Location and Demographic character of the study villages:** All five selected villages belong to Jhajjar district of Haryana state. Four villages were selected from Bahadurgarh *Tehsil*, and one belongs to Badli *tehsil*. The first village is Isherheri (28°37'48" N and 76°56'6" E), having majority HH of Jats (214). The second village is Shidipur (28°38'16" N and 76°54'48" E) with the majority of Brahmans (177 HH). The third one is Balaur (28°40'0" N and 76°55'24" E), an Ahir (Yadav) majority (295 HH) village while the fourth is Naya Gaon (BB) (28°39'55" N and 76°54'30" E), with 234 HH of Sainis. The last village is Gangarwa (28°37'24" N and 76°51'47" E), having 28% HH of single caste SC's having 60 HH of Chamars. These five caste villages had 980 HH, encompassing a total population of 6437 persons (see table 1). Table 1. Study villages- the selected caste, number of HH and population (selected from Jhajjar district, Haryana).

**Table 1. Study villages- the selected caste, number of HH and population (selected from Jhajjar district, Haryana).**

Name of Village	Isherheri	Shidipura	Balaur	Naya Gaon (Bir Barkatabad)	Gangarwa	Total
Caste of Respondents	Jat	Brahman	Ahir	Saini	Chamar	05
No. of Households (HH)	214	177	295	234	60	980
Population under study	1206	1086	1958	1839	348	6437

**Nature worshipping among villagers:**

God is the underlying power of unity, permeating all creation: forests and groves, trees and plants, animals, rivers, water bodies, mountains and gardens. Nature is revered all over India. Every village has a sacred grove presided over by a local deity; every temple has a sacred garden and sacred tree; rivers and lakes are revered, and mountains are the dwelling place of the gods. Nature is a manifestation of the divine (Krishna, 2017). A brief discussion about responses received on the chosen parameters from the study area follows as-

**The Sun God worship- offering water to the sun in the morning:** The worship of the Sun god is described as a fasting ritual and festival in the Mahabharata; people believe that this tradition is in continuity since then. As the sun is the basis of all living beings on earth, it has been revered by various civilizations for ages (Singh, 2009). In the study area, commonly a woman or less typically a man in the HH follows the rituals- after bathing, barefoot facing the sun towards the east, and offer water to the Sun God. Sun God is highly revered among Hindus, as the primary data shows (Table 2), though the number differs by caste. The number varies from 47% to 92% respectively from Gangarwa to Shadipur village. Altogether 81.1% of Hindu HH revere the Sun God every day. The ritual is quite simple, which includes bathing at first and then taking fresh drinking water in a pot (mainly a *lota* either of brass or copper, but many also use steel pots now). Then moving to the eastern side of their home either in the courtyard or on the rooftop or balcony, holding the pot a little upward from the head and slowly pour out the water to Sun God. As the water ends the person join the hands and bow the head to the sun in '*Namaskar*' gesture and the ritualistic process gets over. Though the ritual of Sun worship differs both in intra and inter-caste, the differences are not so extreme to be discussed. Some people add a little *Gangajal* (Holy Ganga water) in the pot and then offer it to God, while some jointly offer water to Sun God and *Tulsi* plant.

**Table 2: Nature worship rituals practiced by Hindu castes in five selected villages in Jhajjar district, Haryana (Source: based on primary field).**

Sr. No.	Mode of nature worship	Village-Isherheri (Jats) No. of HH 214 (% HH)	Village-Shidipur (Brahmans) No. of HH 177 (% HH)	Village-Balaur (Ahirs) No. of HH 295 (% HH)	Village-Naya Gaon (Sainis) No. of HH 234(% HH)	Village-Gangarwa (SC) No. of HH 60 (% HH)	Total No. of HH- 980 (% HH)
1	Offering water to Sun ( <i>Surya</i> )	152 (71)	162 (91.5)	245 (83.1)	208 (88.9)	28 (46.7)	795 (81.1)
2	Watering of <i>Tulsi</i> Plant	92 (43)	155 (87.6)	245 (83.1)	199 (83.3)	19 (31.7)	710 (72.4)
3	Watering <i>Peepal</i> tree and lighting lamp	67 (31.3)	94 (53.1)	94 (31.9)	61 (26.1)	13 (21.7)	329 (33.6)
4	First bread ( <i>Roti</i> ) for Cow	213 (99.5)	177 (100)	292 (99.0)	234 (100)	60 (100)	976 (99.6)
5	Offering water and grains to birds	149 (69.6)	152 (85.9)	282 (95.6)	218 (93.2)	59 (98.3)	860 (87.8)
6	Offering flour to Ants	95 (44.4)	127 (71.8)	181 (61.4)	147 (62.8)	29 (48.3)	579 (59.1)
7	None	01 (0.5)	0 (0)	03 (1.0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	04 (0.4)

**Worship of *Tulsi* Plant- offering water to *Tulsi*:** *Tulsi* is a sacred plant worshipped as an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi and associated with God Shri Krishna (Krishna 2017). The HH where *tulsi* plant venerated is found either in an open courtyard or on the boundary wall in a vase. 'Nobody can touch the plant without washing hands even if taking leaves for medicinal purposes' told an old lady as it is not a plant only but a form of '*Devi*' (mother goddess). The ritualistic steps for its worship also differ, but commonly bathing before going closer to it is a compulsion. After this, fresh water is offered to the plant, and hands are joined in front of the sacred plant. Some women who had this plant in the open courtyard circumambulate the plant seven times while offering water. They do not allow anybody to pour water into the plant or any type of water except the fresh potable water. As the plant leaves prevent or dilute coughing, cold, and fever, the leaves are taken after washing hands and taking permission from the sacred plant by joining hands in front of this plant. No one pours water to *the Tulsi* plant on Sundays. The percent HH where *Tulsi* plant is revered varies from 32% at Gangarwa village to 88% at Shadipur village (Table 2). In total, 72.4% of different caste Hindu HH worship the sacred plant.

**Peepal tree worship- watering Peepal tree and lighting lamp:** Perhaps *Tulsi* and *Peepal* are the most sacred in Hinduism. In India, it is believed that trees are "the abodes or embodied forms of divinities"..... in the sacred *Peepal* tree, "Brahma resides in the roots....Vishnu in the trunk, Shiva in the branches, and all the gods on each leaf" (Grabaukas, 2016). *Peepal* is known for producing round-the-clock oxygen. For ages, it has been protected by Hindu wise man's fear-based conservational measures by asserting that ghosts live in this tree. Numbers of *Peepal* trees are still there on the brinks of village ponds, which help purify water bodies. It is believed that the holy tree removes all the sins earned in several hundred births and grants prosperity (Krishna, 2017). Many villagers worship *Peepal* for many reasons when suggested by a *Pandit/Purohit* (usually a Brahman practicing astrology) for a definite period i.e. daily or weekly on Saturdays. Its worship is also associated with Shani Dev; however, the worshipper of Shani Dev pours mustard oil on Shani's idol, but nothing like this is done for *Peepal*. People visit the temple or any other place where *the Peepal* tree is available, offer water in the morning, and light a lamp near its roots. In all the study villages, *the Peepal* tree is available in the sacred temple compound for its worship. Its reverence during the study period varied from 22% at Gangarwa to 53% at Shadipur village (Table 2). As said earlier, this ritual is highly specific and may be time-bound; at present, about 34% HH in all five villages was practicing this sacred ritual.

**Cow worship- offering first bread (*roti*) to the Cow:** Cow is known as '*kamdhenu*' in the scriptures, which means 'fulfiller of all the wishes.' For Hindus, a cow is like a mother; they usually call it *Gaumata*. Its milk is considered as valuable as nectar. It is central to the faith of Hindus, as is reflected in the study area too. 976 HH (99.6%) offers first bread (*roti*) both times to *Gaumata* (Table 2). However, four HH in two villages do not practice it as they are now affiliated to a particular *Satsang* Guru. But before this affiliation, their families practiced this ritual as usual.

**Bird care- offering water and grains to birds:** An old man said that when his grandfather harvested the crops, he used to say, this whole grain is not for us, a part is for domestic animals, some for undomesticated village's common animals, small part for birds, another more minor part is for ants. This equity in food resources is the legacy of Hindu wisdom. This tradition has been passed through our ancestors to us for whom every life form who cannot earn their living by self need to be provided with the required. In this modern age, birds are given due care religiously on a day-to-day basis in all seasons. The percent variation goes from 70% HH at Isherheri to 98% HH at Gangarwa, providing water and different grains to birds. In all 88% Hindu HH practices this nature form ritual (Table 2). Many HH take water and grains and put it in their fields under a tree, many do the same in their courtyard, and many put water pots and grains on the rooftops.

**Flour to Ants- offering flour to Ants:** In Hinduism, small creatures like ants are also given due care. In the morning, many ladies and gents visit mounds of ants towards the fields and feed them with wheat flour. Some people also offer coconut filled with sugar to the ants. It is mainly done by those who provide them once or twice a year, they dug out a small pit near the ants' mound and put the sugar filled coconut there to ensure a continuous food supply. About 59% of Hindu HH across the study area practice this ritual every day. The highest percent share is at village Shadipur (72%), while the lowest is at Isherheri (44%) (Table 2). Some HH practice it when suggested by a wise man or *Pandit/Purohit* etc., to succeed in challenging situations or for better results in their business.

## Conclusion

Hindus look for divinity in nature. Animals, birds, and sacred grooves have a unique place in their pious hearts. Many of them do not eat till the time they provide food or water to ants/birds/animals. Both qualitative and quantitative inferences drawn from 980 HH of different caste Hindus from the study area, widely indicated that the percentage of HH may differ in worshipping nature forms, but they give a profound value to the living and nonliving elements of the natural environment in their day-to-day life. It shows the empathetic relationship between Hinduism and nature is still in practice, even in the drastically changed socio-economic environment of the 21st century.

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