



Research Paper

Becoming Human-Animal: Revisiting Therianthropy in Indian Mythology

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Abstract

Human-animal hybridity is a part of myths, rituals, and art in many different cultures. This article looks again at therianthropy in traditions by connecting ancient cave paintings, rituals, Hindu stories, and ideas about shifting states of mind and shared symbols. It uses David Lewis-Williams' ideas about how ancient pictures were made along with ways of thinking about masks and rituals that change people. The study looks at some traditional stories before focusing on the figures of Narasimha and Ganesha. Instead of seeing these human-animal figures as just leftovers from old shamanic experiences, the article says that therianthropy is a way that communities talk about the lines between human and animal body and spirit and normal and different states of mind. The study suggests a gap between what we know about where certain stories originated and what we think those stories mean for how people feel and how culture works. By bringing old findings, stories, and ways of acting, the article adds to discussions about how people see themselves and others in Indian studies. The research asks a powerful question: How might altered states of consciousness provide one interpretive framework for understanding the persistence and experiential force of human-animal imagery?

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1. Introduction

The long-standing dichotomy between human beings and animals, and the egoistic or political definition of human beings as superior to non-human animals, appears to have been challenged by *Homo sapiens* living during the Upper Palaeolithic, more than ten millennia before the Darwinian argument concerning the relationship between human beings and other organisms based on their shared biological characteristics and instincts (Darwin, 1859). Unlike Darwin, however, the precursors of the human-animal relationship in the Palaeolithic era did not necessarily draw a rigid line between humans and animals; rather, they juxtaposed and interconnected human beings and animals, as visualised in altered states of consciousness and represented in prehistoric art. Such experiences have been associated with shamanic practices intended to negotiate with the spirit world and address illness, misfortune, and natural calamities within their communities. This metamorphic juxtaposition of human beings with non-human animals is known as therianthropy, while the resulting hybrid figures are referred to as therianthropes. The term *therianthrope* is derived from the Greek *thērion*, meaning “wild beast” or “animal,” and *anthrōpos*, meaning “human being.”

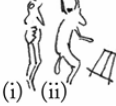
		SAN	COSO	PALAEOLITHIC
STAGE 1 ENTOPTICS	I			
	II			
	III			
STAGE 2 CONSTRUAL	IV			
STAGE 3 ENTOPTICS AND ICONICS	V			
	VI			

Fig. 1. Hancock, 2022, p. 176.

David Lewis-Williams has argued that the visionary representation of mythical human-animal figures may be understood in relation to the experiences of shamans who entered altered states of consciousness through ritual practices. Such altered states could be induced through prolonged dancing and other ritual activities, and Lewis-Williams proposes that visionary experiences unfold in three stages (Lewis-Williams, 2002). Graham Hancock summarizes these stages by explaining that, in the first stage, hallucinating shamans or painters “see the majority of the abstract and geometrical figures”; in the second stage, they visualize “larger shapes, looking like people, or animals, or unknown creatures”; and in the third stage, they experience “soft music

and wandering clouds, seemingly carried by a gentle breeze" (Hancock, 2022, p. 175). Hancock has illustrated the psychological visions of individuals in altered states of consciousness at these three stages through his discussion of San rock art and different prehistoric rock-art traditions in Europe (Fig. 1). He further asserts that "experiences of therianthropy in which 'subjects begin to feel dissociated from their bodies and frequently become part of their own imagery' are common under the influence of a wide range of psychoactive drugs and can even be induced by substances as minimally hallucinogenic as hashish" (Hancock, 2022, p. 178).

While studying San rock art in Southern Africa, Graham Hancock learned from the San people that "these figures depicted shamans in the act of transformation into the animal forms—elephants, elands, lions, birds, jackals, serpents—that they adopted for their journeys in the spirit world" (Hancock, 2022, p. 180). He also highlights David Lewis-Williams's view that:

Once in this deep altered state of consciousness, comparable in some mysterious way to death, they transformed into their animal avatars and undertook terrifying and enlightening psychic voyages in what they experienced as a spirit world. (Hancock, 2022, p. 250)

German ethnologist Ivar Arthur Nicolai Lissner similarly affirms that the shapeshifting of shamans during their spiritual journeys provides a "road to supernatural powers" and that "the spirits can only be reached with an animal's assistance" (Lissner, 1961, p. 279). While discussing the complex relationship between shamanism and archetypal symbolism in his book *The Strong Eye of Shamanism: A Journey into the Caves of Consciousness* (1999), Robert E Ryan argues that the visions of therianthropic images "represent the borderline between the conscious mind and the unconscious, the personal and the transpersonal." (n.p) Carl Jung concludes that the "divine beings, part human, part animal" arise from the 'inherited possibilities of representation' in each individual. He continues,

The guise in which these figures appear depends on the attitude of the conscious mind: if it is negative towards the unconscious, the animals will be frightening; if positive, they appear as the 'helpful animals' of fairytale and legend." (Jung et al, 1956, p. 99)

This archetypal creation of therianthropes has been a universal phenomenon throughout the history of humanity.

From the prehistoric visualization of therianthropes in the ancient rock art of Sulawesi, Indonesia, where hunters were depicted approximately 44,000 years ago with human-like bodies and "heads or other body parts like those from birds, reptiles, and other faunal species endemic to Sulawesi" (M. Aubert et al., 2014, p. 5), to the physical decoration of contemporary artists and performers in many indigenous communities with animal masks and body painting, the human-animal relationship has continued to manifest itself in ritualistic performances and mythological traditions. The constant worship of gods that're part animal and part human in different cultures shows how strong this idea has been. These images show that changing from human to animal is not just something one culture or time period had but is a pattern that keeps coming up in the way humans think and create symbols throughout history. To exemplify this phenomenon, in Greco-Roman mythology, Pan, a god of fertility worshipped in Arcadia, a pastoral region of the northern Peloponnese, was represented as "more or less bestial in form" (Taft & Croce, 2014),

possessing a human torso and caprine hindquarters, legs, and horns. Similarly, the Gorgons—the three sisters Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa—were “described by Apollodorus as having serpentine hair, a fierce gaze, and vicious teeth” (Roman & Roman, 2010, p. 179). The goat-like representation of Pan may refer to the “undifferentiated state in which these opposites are held together in solution, emblematic of the *unio mystica* state, the mystical union of ego and shadow in the first alchemical stage of the *enantiodromic* unfolding” (Coggan, 2020, p. 40). These myths of human-animal deities may be understood as manifestations of the human instinct for transformation and the transcendence of bodily and psychological boundaries. Such an interpretation resonates with Carl Jung’s argument that “Archetypes are typical modes of apprehension, and wherever we meet with uniform and regularly recurring modes of apprehension we are dealing with an archetype, no matter whether its mythological character is recognized or not” (Jung, 1978, p. 273). The persistent association of human beings with animals may also be examined through Jung’s theory of synchronicity, particularly his suggestion that there exists a form of unconscious knowledge through which human consciousness may establish a significant relationship with animals (Hannah, 2006, p. 142). The representation of altered states of consciousness through therianthropic figures is also evident in Hinduism, and its psychological interpretation can be productively examined alongside concepts found in ancient Indian philosophy. Indeed, Indian philosophical traditions developed sophisticated ideas concerning consciousness, selfhood, transformation, and the relationship between human and non-human existence long before the development of modern Western psychoanalytic interpretations.

Against this background, the present paper aims to study selected therianthropic deities in Indian mythology and investigate their possible origins and meanings from neuropsychological and psychoanalytic perspectives. It seeks to explore how human-animal transformation is represented in Indian mythology and whether these mythological figures can be interpreted as cultural manifestations of altered states of consciousness. By bringing together prehistoric art, shamanism, mythology, archetypal psychology, and neuropsychology, this study attempts to reconsider the therianthrope not merely as an imaginary or supernatural figure but as a recurring representation of the human impulse to transcend the boundaries between human, animal, and divine existence. This article says that Indian therianthropy should not be seen as a story about people turning into animals or as just a simple leftover from old shamanic experiences. Instead, the figures that are part animal are a way of communicating that has stayed in culture for a long time. These figures show ways of thinking about changing states of mind, special ceremonies, wearing masks, old stories, and how people see their connection to animals.

2. Therianthropes in Prehistoric India

The earliest archaeological evidence of therianthropic imagery in the Indian subcontinent can be traced, based on currently available evidence, to Mesolithic rock art. A report on rock paintings discovered by archaeologist J. R. Bhagat in the Chamra region of Chhattisgarh in 2014 describes a standing human figure with an animal-like head. Although the figure has been interpreted as representing an alien, it may also be read as a therianthropic image, potentially envisioned more than 10,000 years ago (Times of India, July 15, 2014). Such an interpretation, however, remains speculative and should be considered alongside other possible readings of the figure. The composite figures represented in the “Wizard’s Dance,” in which one dancer wears a “bison-horn mask,” resembling the “bison-man” (Fig. 2) painted during the Upper Palaeolithic period in

Chauvet Cave, France, while another figure wears a “feathered headdress,” resembling the Bird-Man of Lascaux (Fig. 3), may also be understood within the broader context of human-animal transformation. Varad Pande observes that these figures “seem to be moving in a trance” (1981, p. 2). Their postures, costumes, and apparent movement may therefore suggest a ritual or shamanic performance in which the boundaries between human and animal identities become symbolically fluid.

Similar representations can be found in the rock art of Bhimbetka and Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh. Comparable to the masked dancers represented at Bhimbetka, the “masked shaman” depicted in the caves of Pachmarhi—with a figure painted in white clay and brush, holding a long stick across the shoulders and arrows in the hands, accompanied by several circles or symbolic skull-like forms—may be interpreted as a possible representation of ritual transformation (Bradshaw Foundation, n.p.). Another figure, described as “a man with hide and mask of a lion” (Bradshaw Foundation, n.p.), similarly presents the possibility of a human-animal transformation. Although these figures cannot conclusively be identified as therianthropes or shamans, their combination of human bodies, animal attributes, masks, and ritual gestures provides significant visual evidence for examining the prehistoric imagination of human-animal hybridity.



Fig. 2. Wizard's Dance. Credit: Indian Art



Fig. 3. The Bird-Man of Lascaux in France. Credit: World History Encyclopedia

According to Meenakshi Dubey Pathak,

The compositional elements of these Mesolithic paintings are highly developed. They represent an element of the creative spirit of the early people. That their aesthetic sense had developed to a high degree can be seen in geometric designs and in paintings of the X-ray style. (Pathak, n.p.)

Archaeological discoveries from the Indus Valley Civilization provide further evidence for the representation of composite human-animal forms and the possible ritual use of masks. The well-known seal from Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 4), dated to approximately 2700 BCE, depicts a centrally positioned, possibly yogic or ritual figure wearing a horned headdress. The figure has traditionally been identified as "Pashupati" or the "Lord of Animals." Another representation from Padri, dating to the third millennium BCE, depicts a figure associated with a bull or bovine head. A further seal from Mohenjo-daro, dated to approximately 2350 BCE, depicts a horned female figure confronting or attacking a horned tiger. Another seal presents a group of seven figures wearing distinctive headgear, described as "caps having pig tailing" (Gopalakrishnan, 2011).



Fig. 4. Pashupati Seal Credit: Harappa.com

These representations suggest that human-animal hybridity and animal symbolism occupied an important position in the visual culture of the Indus Valley Civilization. However, the identification of the horned figure on the so-called Pashupati seal as a specific deity or as evidence of a fully developed form of Hindu religious practice remains debated. It is therefore more appropriate to regard these images as evidence of human-animal symbolism and possible ritual representation rather than as definitive proof of later Hindu concepts.



Fig. 5: Mask/amulet from Harappa. Photographed by Richard H. Meadow (1995). Credit: Harappa.com

The possibility of ritual transformation in the Indus Valley Civilisation is further suggested by archaeological discoveries of animal terracotta masks. One such mask displays “a feline face with an open mouth with exposed fangs, a beard, small round ears and upright bovine horns” (Fig. 5). Other terracotta figures combine human and animal characteristics and have been dated to approximately 2000 BCE; such objects have been discussed in the archaeological scholarship associated with Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (1986). These artefacts provide an important material context for understanding the relationship between masking, identity, ritual performance, and human-animal transformation in ancient India.

This interpretation is particularly relevant to the psychoanalytic understanding of therianthropy. Psychoanalyst Fulvio Gosso and chemist Peter Webster argue:

Illusions and distortions as the source of some therianthropic figures could therefore easily be an explanation at least as well founded as the hallucinatory hypothesis, especially if we do not overlook cultural aspects linked to the “mask,” the intent to transform, hide, or frighten, and could reproduce a viable shamanic reality. (Gosso & Webster, 2013, p. 26)

Gosso and Webster's idea is very important because it gives a way to look at the pictures of humans and animals. Instead of thinking that every picture of a human and animal came from a different state of mind, they focus on how the mask was used in culture and in performances. They say the mask could be used to change who you are, hide your face, scare people, or talk to spirits. So, the old pictures from India can be seen in two ways. The human-animal pictures might have come from a state of mind from using masks in rituals or from a mix of how people feel and what their culture believes. The old pictures from rock art seals from the Indus Valley, clay masks, and mixed statues show a cultural background for the later pictures of gods that are part human and part animal. Even though we can't say for sure these old figures are the ancestors of the Hindu

gods, they show that people in India have been using human-animal symbols for a very long time. This connection helps us understand gods like Narasimha and Ganesha, who are part human, part animal, and part god. Their special forms make it hard to tell where one ends and another begins. This article therefore treats images not as direct evidence of a specific religious belief but as visual evidence of the imaginative possibility of human-animal hybridity.

3. Becoming Therianthropes in Indian Folk Cultures

The archaic practice of transforming human beings into human-animal figures through the use of animal masks, costumes, and ritual performances remains evident in several folk cultures across India. In addition to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic masks, various tribal communities in India employ theriomorphic masks “not only to personify invisible spirits or supernatural beings but even ordinary human beings to accentuate certain characteristics in the personality” (Maheswaran, 2011, p. 11). The ritual representation of sacred animals is similarly reflected in folk performances in which participants embody particular animals or animal-deities as expressions of devotion. Such performances are often associated with prayers for rain and agricultural prosperity, protection from disease and other misfortunes, and protection from wild animals. The relationship between masks and human-animal transformation can be traced to several Indian folk performances. Like the terracotta masks representing “Anthropomorphized Tigers” associated with the Indus Valley Civilization, tiger masks continue to be used by folk performers in different parts of India. The metamorphic transformation of performers in *Pashu Nritya* during the *Thakurani Yatra* and *Dandari Nacha* in Ganjam district, Odisha, is achieved through the use of animal masks, particularly the tiger mask employed in *Bagha Nacha* (Tiger Dance), traditionally made by members of the Maharana community. Manmath Padhy observes:

Apart from *Bagho Nacha* in Ganjam, mask dances of gods, goddesses, and other animals, like bullocks, horses, demons, are very popular. The basic reason for using masks in mask dance is the reflection of the primitive urge of human beings, where he always wanted to fight with the nature and other external dangers and enjoy greater freedom in self-expression by hiding their face behind a mask. It helps to create an appropriate ambience for transformation into a superhuman being that he represents. (Padhy, 2017, n.p.)

The mask, therefore, is not merely a theatrical prop but a medium of symbolic transformation. By hiding the person's face and assuming an animal or magical shape, the mask creates a special space where the person can act like someone else. Padhya's idea is very important for this study because it shows how wearing a mask is connected to a desire to go beyond life and to form a special link with things that are not human.

Another form of tiger dance, *Puliyattam*, is performed in Tamil Nadu, particularly in the districts of Madurai, Ramanathapuram, and Tirunelveli. The performance is associated with devotion to Lord Ayyappan and the belief that he appeared in the form of a tiger to slay the demon, *Mahishi*. Other popular forms of tiger dance include *Pulikali* in Kerala, performed during the Onam festival, and *Huli Vesha* or *Pili Vesha* in Karnataka, performed during Navaratri. The ritual dimension of such performances becomes particularly evident in the practices associated with *Huli Vesha*. One performer describes the dance as possessing “a deeper meaning” and explains that performers follow a sacred code of conduct during Navaratri. Before applying the body paint, they seek the

permission of their parents, pay homage to them, honour the goddess Mahisha Mardini, and offer *tappu kanike*, together with a coconut, to the divine mother (Daithota, Oct. 21, 2023).

The relationship between masks, songs, dance, and shamanic myth-making, discussed by Markman and Markman (1989), is also apparent in several folk performances of West Bengal. *Chhau* of Purulia district and *Gambhira* of Maldah are traditionally performed around the end of the Bengali calendar year. Renowned Bengali folklorist Ashutosh Bhattacharya argues that these masked dances may have originated in magical beliefs concerning the movement of the sun and the control of rainfall by the sun-god during periods of severe summer drought. He therefore describes the dances as a form of sympathetic magic through which the movement of the sun is symbolically enacted to produce rainfall (Bhattacharya, 1978, p. 148). The therianthropic transformation of performers through animal masks is particularly visible in *Chhau*, where masks representing animals such as tigers, buffaloes, and monkeys are used, and in *Gambhira*, where tiger, deer, and monkey representations occur. Similar practices may be observed in *Kachchhi Ghodi*, which incorporates horse masks, and in *Keelugurram*, performed by the Yanadi communities of Guntur, Nellore, Prakasam, and Chittoor districts of Andhra Pradesh. In these performances, human performers symbolically transform themselves into horses, which are described in the source as “mythical beasts, like unicorns” in India.

The horse plays a role in Hindu mythology. Vishnu is linked to Hayagriva, a god with the head of a horse. This deity shows up in stories where he kills a demon named Hayagriva. The *Rig Veda* also describes the horse in a way. It blends features of a horse, a bird, and a deer in its imagery.

“yad akrandaḥ prathamam jāyamāna udyan samudrād uta vā purīṣāt |
śyenasya pakṣā hariṇasya bāhū upastutyam mahi jātaṁ te arvan ||” (Rig Veda 1.163.1)

Wilson translates the passage as:

“Your great birth, O Horse, is to be glorified; whether first springing from the firmament or from the water since you have neighed (auspiciously), for you have the wings of the falcon and the limbs of the deer.” (Wilson, 2025)

The association between the horse and the transmission of sacred knowledge continues in Vedic mythology. According to Pattanaik (2011), the sun assumes a horse-headed form in order to communicate Vedic knowledge to Rishi Yajnavalkya, while Rishi Dadhichi similarly becomes horse-headed in order to impart Vedic knowledge to the Ashwini Twins.

These narratives suggest that the horse-headed figure functions as more than a mythological curiosity: it becomes a symbolic intermediary between human beings and transcendent knowledge. The relationship between horses and humans may provide an additional cultural context for understanding this symbolism. Wendy Doniger observes that the earliest relationship between humans and horses involved hunting, when horses appeared among the animals represented in cave paintings; following domestication, the relationship shifted toward taming, which subsequently became an important metaphor in the mythology of horses (Doniger, 2021, p. 13).

Within the framework of the present study, however, it is important to distinguish between mythological interpretation and neuropsychological explanation. The horse-headed beings of

Hinduism may be read metaphorically as representations of altered states of consciousness or as figures through which sacred knowledge is communicated, but the available evidence does not by itself establish that these deities originated directly from shamanic hallucinations. Rather, the similarity between ritual transformation, animal masking, and mythological hybridity provides a basis for examining whether a shared symbolic logic underlies these different cultural practices. The symbolic transformation of human performers into birds can likewise be observed in several Indian folk traditions. Performers of Mayur Nritya, or Peacock Dance, a sub-form of Chhau, use peacock masks and costumes to enact associations with Lord Krishna. According to the tradition cited in the source, Krishna assumed the form of a peacock and danced before Radha when she became angry with him. Male members of the Maria Gond community of Chhattisgarh also perform a peacock dance associated with Pandi Dokara, represented by a pole bearing a cluster of peacock feathers (Elwin, 1947, p. 266).

The association between the peacock and the transition from earthly existence to the supernatural realm is also evident in Maria Gond funerary practices. Wooden posts decorated with peacock feathers are placed beside graves because of the belief that “the peacock will help the dead soul to reach into heaven” (Debnath, 2018, p. 886). This belief has an intriguing parallel in the famous Lascaux representation of a “dead man,” whose human body is combined with a bird-like head and is associated with a bird represented on a nearby pole (Hancock, 2022, p. 68). A comparable motif appears in a funerary urn from the Late Harappan Cemetery H at Harappa, which depicts a peacock carrying a small human body toward a celestial realm (Parpola, 2015, p. 186). The association between humans and peacocks continues in *Mayilattam*, performed in Tamil Nadu and Kerala at temples dedicated to Lord Kartikeya or Murugan. Here, performers dress as peacocks and reproduce the movements of the bird as part of their devotional performance. Such practices demonstrate how animal embodiment can function simultaneously as ritual enactment, artistic expression, devotional practice, and symbolic transformation.

The relationship between human-animal transformation and divine mythology can be extended through further examples. In the Uttara Ramayana, Indra assumes the form of a peacock to escape Ravana. Lord Ganesha, in his form of Mayureshwara, likewise assumes the form of a peacock to confront and defeat Kamalasura, as described in the Mayureshwara Stotram of the Ganesha Purana:

Jagad vandhyamekam parakaramekam,
Gunaanaam param karanam, nirvikalpam,
Jagat palakam, harakam, tharakam tham,
Mayuresa vandhyam natha smo natha sma.
(Vedanta Spiritual Library)

Ramachander translates the passage as:

“I am the devotee and the devotee of him, who is the adorable Mayuresa,
Who is the one worshiped by the universe, who is one who is cause of the divine,
Who is the cause beyond characters, who is beyond stains and scars,

Who looks after the world, destroys it and looks after it."

(Translated by P. R. Ramachander)

The peacock also functions as a *vahana*, or divine mount, associated with several Hindu deities, including Kartikeya and other regional forms of divinity. Its symbolic meanings include "integrity," "spiritual renewal and transformation," "protection and guardianship," and "beauty and grace" (Sharma, 2024, p. 12). The recurrence of the peacock in both ritual performance and mythology therefore demonstrates how an animal can move between embodied performance, religious symbolism, and divine transformation. A similar symbolic relationship can be observed in the case of Garuda, the eagle-like divine being in Hindu mythology. The sacredness of Garuda is expressed through ritual performances such as *Garudan Thookkam*, performed in temples dedicated to goddess Kali in southern Kerala, as well as through representations of Garuda as a human-like figure with wings and an avian head. The *Skanda Purana* associates Garuda with divine transportation and liberation. In the passage cited in the source, Garuda carries the ancestors of Candra Śarmā toward the divine realm, where they are released from ghosthood through divine grace (Wisdom Library, n.p.).

The relationship between human beings and bovine forms provides another significant example of therianthropic and zoomorphic symbolism. The zoo-anthropomorphic representation of Nandi, the bull associated with Shiva, the bovine goddess Kamadhenu, and the bull-masked folk performance *Kalai Attam* of Tamil Nadu can be considered alongside the bull-headed Pashupati figure associated with the Indus Valley Civilization. Such representations may also be connected with the symbolic significance of cattle in the *Rig Veda*, where the cow is associated with "motherhood, fertility, and liberality" (Srinivasan, 1979, p. 4). The *Rig Veda* further invokes the cow in relation to prosperity, fertility, and sustainable communal life:

ā gāvo agmannuta bhadramakrantsīdantu goṣṭhe raṇayantvasme|
prajāvatīḥ pururūpā iha syurindrāya pūrvīruṣaso duhānāḥ || (Rig Veda 6.28.1)

Koenraad Elst translates the passage as:

"May the Cows come to us, may they bring welfare, may they sit in our home, may they be satisfied with us. May they be plentiful in calves, in different forms, and in large numbers; may they be available for milking at Dawn for Indra." (Elst, 2020)

The symbolic importance of the bovine form thus extends beyond physical representation and into questions of fertility, sustenance, protection, and communal prosperity. Another significant example is Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu, who rescues Mother Earth, or *Bhumi*, from the demon Hiranyaksha. A comparable animal embodiment occurs in the *Bhut Kola* or *Devi Kola* ritual performances of coastal Karnataka, in which performers invoke *bhuta* or *daiva* spirits and enter into ritual states associated with supernatural beings. The figure of Panjurli, a boar spirit, is invoked in relation to the protection of crops from wild boars. The various traditions concerning Panjurli connect the deity with Shiva's banishment of a boar from heaven to earth and, in some accounts, with the boar incarnation of Vishnu. The human body combined with a boar mask in these performances offers a particularly striking example of ritualized human-animal embodiment. Nevertheless, the assertion that such imagery is necessarily the result of an altered state of consciousness should be treated cautiously. The performance may involve trance or possession,

but its meaning is also shaped by inherited mythology, ritual convention, community belief, costume, music, and performance practice. These dimensions need to be considered together when interpreting the therianthropic body. The symbolic significance of the boar is further reflected in Hindu cosmological thought. René Guénon observes that the entire cosmic cycle of manifestation is designated in Hindu tradition as the *Shvetavaraha Kalpa*, or the "cycle of the white wild boar" (Guénon, 2004, p. 158). Thus, the boar becomes an animal, a divine form, and a cosmological symbol.

Bhotia Dance is a ritual that some people call the "dance of the dead." It is done by people in Uttarakhand. Bhatt says that when a person dies, the soul goes into a goat or a sheep. The soul can leave the goat or sheep if people dance the Bhotia Dance (Bhatt, 2023, p. 7). In the ceremony, dancers dance in front of a person who wears a goat mask. The goat symbol shows change and holy power. In Hindu and Jain stories, goat heads belong to figures like Daksha and Naigamesha. The goat is also used in sacrifice rituals. The *Rig Veda* presents *ajā*, or goat, in relation to the eternal or unborn principle:

ajo bhāgas tapasā taṃ tapasva taṃ te śocis tapatu taṃ te arcīḥ |
yās te śivās tanvo jātavedas tābhīr vahainaṃ sukr̥tām u lokam || (Rig Veda 10.16.4)

H. H. Wilson translates the passage as:

"The unborn portion; burn that, Agni, with your heat; let your flame, your splendor, consume it; with those glorious members which you have given him, Jātavedas, bear him to the world (of the virtuous)." (Wilson, 1866)

Helena Blavatsky interprets *Aja* as the Logos in the *Rig Veda*. Helena Blavatsky describes Aja as the manifestation of the One. Helena Blavatsky defines the Logos as an energy in and co-eternal with Parabrahman, the One (Blavatsky, 2022, pp. 1008–1009). Although Helena Blavatsky's interpretation belongs to an esoteric tradition rather than to the Vedic textual context itself, Helena Blavatsky demonstrates the continued symbolic association between animal forms, cosmology, and metaphysical transformation.

The range of therianthropic and zoomorphic figures in mythology can be extended to Manasa and Rahu. Manasa and Rahu iconography incorporates serpentine characteristics. Kurma, Vishnu's tortoise incarnation, combines /divine identity with the tortoise. Snakes, the Nagas, occupy a sacred position in Hindu traditions. Snakes are frequently associated with terrestrial realms. Snakes' ability to shed their skins has made them symbols of regeneration, renewal, fertility, and prosperity. The serpent occupies an important position in cosmological symbolism. Dutta (2011) associates the intertwined movement of serpents with the *Mithuna* motif and connects this symbolism with creation traditions attributed to pre-Vedic civilizations. The source further interprets the serpentine form as related to the Swastika through the movement of intertwined serpents (Dutta, 2011). These interpretations demonstrate how animal forms can become vehicles for representing fundamental oppositions and processes such as life and death, regeneration and destruction, and creation and dissolution.

Kurma provides another example of animal symbolism within Vedic cosmology. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* associates Kurma, the tortoise, with Prajapati, who assumes the tortoise form and creates living beings. The text subsequently identifies the tortoise with the sun:

"And as to its being called 'kûrma' (tortoise); Pragâpati, having assumed that form, created living beings."

The text further states that the tortoise is identified with the sun and is ritually positioned as an embodiment of the solar principle (*Shatapatha Brahmana* 7.5.1.5–6, trans. Eggeling, 1894). The symbolic value of the tortoise is also explored in the *Taittiriya Samhita*. In that text, the *purodasha*, which is a cake, takes the shape of a tortoise. The story links this tortoise transformation to Prajapati and to the quest for the world. As Julius Eggeling translates:

"They went on praising and toiling; for by (religious) toil, the gods indeed gained what they wished to gain, and (so did) the Rishis."

The narrative subsequently describes the discovery of the sacrificial cake that had "become a tortoise and was creeping about," leading the participants to recognize it as the sacrifice (*Satapatha Brahmana*, Kanda 1, Adhyaya 6, Brahmana 2).

The examples above show that in India, humans changing into animals appears in forms—prehistoric art, folk performances, rituals, myths, and religious symbols. Animal masks help performers step away from themselves. Folk dances change the body into an animal or a supernatural form. Hindu stories often show gods and spirits in bodies that mix animal features or as animals that come to Earth. Just because these ideas appear often doesn't mean they all started from the same place, either in history or in the mind. Instead, the repeated use of animal forms shows a standing cultural habit: using animals to imagine big ideas—like change moving beyond the ordinary, staying safe, making life grow, death and rebirth, and reaching knowledge that is not normally available.

Thus, alongside the therianthropic figures represented in prehistoric Indian art, the ritual performances of contemporary and historical folk communities and the human-animal forms preserved in Hindu mythology provide a broader cultural framework for examining the therianthropic imagination in India. The following discussion can therefore move from these ritual and folkloric manifestations toward the specific mythological figures—particularly Narasimha and Ganesha—whose hybrid bodies most directly raise questions about the relationship between human identity, animality, divinity, and altered states of consciousness.

4. Conclusion

The investigation of therianthropes shows that the blending of human and animal forms constitutes a complex record of the human imagination and its attempts to negotiate the relationship between the self, the natural world, and the supernatural. The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that altered states of consciousness and ritual practices may have played an important role in the emergence and persistence of such representations. The study further shows that the transformation into human-animal figures remains a living cultural practice in several Indian folk traditions. Here, 'transformation' refers to a temporary alteration of identity, embodiment, perception, or symbolic status. At the same time, the evidence examined in this paper suggests that ritual transformation cannot be reduced exclusively to hallucination or altered states of consciousness. Masks, dance, music, mythology, inherited ritual practices, communal beliefs, and cultural symbolism all contribute to the experience and interpretation of human-animal transformation. The therianthrope therefore emerges from the interaction between

psychological experience and cultural representation, rather than from a single universal mechanism. Rather than representing a simple survival of an ancient shamanic practice, therianthropy can therefore be understood as a continuing symbolic language through which human communities negotiate the boundaries between human and animal, body and spirit, consciousness and unconsciousness, and individual and cosmos.

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