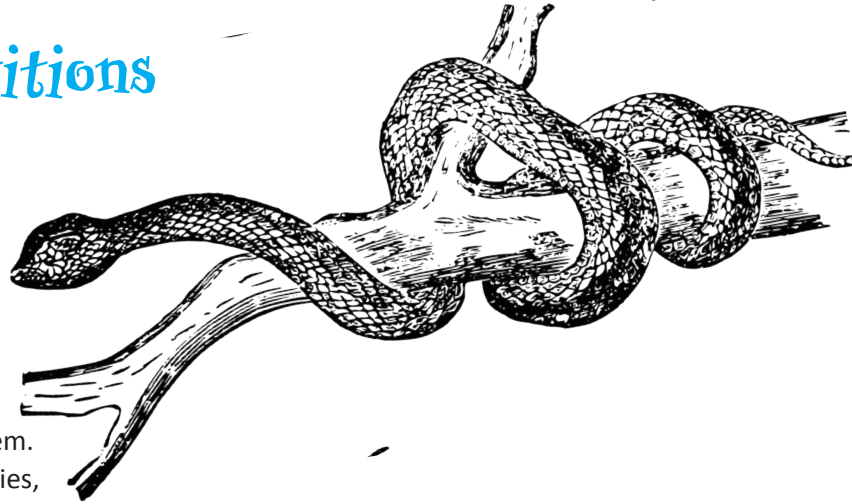


Scapegoats of Superstitions

Snakes have been integral part of mythology and culture all around the world. They have lived in our history as symbol representing a wide range of concepts from rebirth, healing, and wisdom to fertility, danger, and deception. Different beliefs and the myths around snakes have shaped our perceptions of them and our relationship with them. It also has been changing from different geographies, races, cultures throughout the times. Many such beliefs still exist, and they are changing the ways these animals live on the planet which is dominated by us humans. We know very little about snakes which serves as a great ground for the fears and myths to root easily.

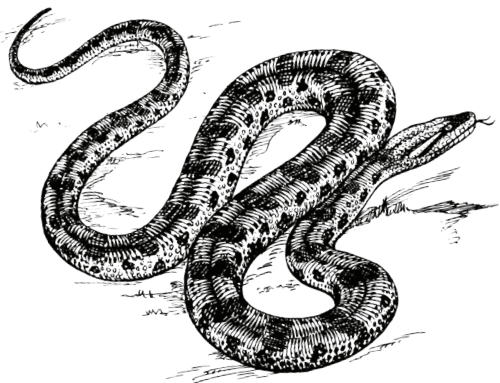
We will address two such myths from India in this article that have been turning detrimental to the species' existence for many decades. The infamous myth around the snake is that they take revenge of its partner's (mate) death. This belief, being so strong, has completely dominated how people perceived them in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. As a child I grew up listening to all the stories of their vengeance and atrocities. So, whenever a snake was spotted in the vicinity, two guys who knew how to kill them would be called with their gear. One person would pin the snake to the ground with a wreck-like strong metal instrument, and the other one would smash the head first so that the snake cannot see the killers. And then the rest of the body would be smashed at 2–3 places until it stopped wriggling. Such an unfortunately brutal way to die at the hands of an unlettered human! The idea of



venomous/non-venomous, harmless and deadly, was far behind the curtain of fear and superstitions, hence no species was spared from this cruelty. It's a proven fact that snakes cannot remember human faces, cannot perceive emotions as humans do, they are non-monogamous, and they are incapable of taking revenge; but it was driven redundant by the superstitions.

Another contradictory belief is that snakes are godly; they are worshiped on 'Nagpanchami' a designated festival for the snakes. It is commonly seen around in Maharashtra, snakes are fed milk as an offering on that day. As the times are changing and things are becoming commercial, this festival also capitalized on the lives of snakes. Most Shiva temples are the hub for this farce as Lord Shiva is portrayed wearing a Spectacled Cobra around his neck. Indian mythology represents it as the symbol of control over death, fear, ego, and other worldly desires.

They start catching the snakes a few days/month before the festival from their burrows and holes. This process doesn't show any mercy towards the species rather it gets torturous after this. They are kept in either earthen or woven bamboo pots and starved for food and water before the actual festival. On the festival day, there's a public display of these animals being handled by the snake charmers, other Shiva devotees and the visitors of the temple. Because of starvation and dehydration it tends to eat/drink whatever that's offered first, which portrays that they drink milk. Snakes being cold-blooded reptiles, do not possess enzymes to digest milk. Milk ends up poisoning them. Research has shown that they even develop pneumonia and eventually die. One in four



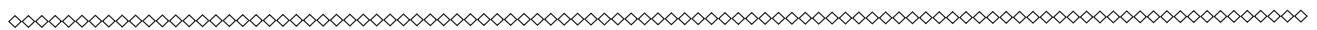
snakes die during catching, extraction, and keeping, while the venomous snakes may die while their fangs are being pulled out/or being burnt off before such public displays, few are injured/ traumatized and it reduces their survival chances. So, all in all 60,000–70,000 snakes die each year around this festival.

Superstitions are again one of the anthropogenic issues that has put a species under great threat. We need to debunk these myths that can potentially drive the population to extinction and disrupt the ecological balance. Strong education and awareness about the ecology and behavior of the species is crucial to dissolve these superstitions and increase peoples’ receptiveness towards the species. More

scientific knowledge about snakes needs to be simplified and shared around the occasions and festivals. Understanding the snakes in the bigger context of ecology is a great possibility for true coexistence.

M. Nishigandha
RHATC Fellow 2025–26, Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Of the Golden Jackal and Her Horn

If you’ve ever heard of black magic, you might know about voodoo dolls from movies, or noticed lemons and chillies on a string hung on new cars to counter the evil eye. But have you heard of magical superstitions that revolve around wild animals? In India, a biodiversity-rich country, we actually have quite a few. One of the most interesting of these is the myth of the jackal’s horn.

For those who’ve never encountered a jackal, let me describe them to you. Golden Jackals, the species native to India are about the size of a medium-sized dog, with a short muzzle, slightly rounded ears, a black saddle-shaped patch on their backs, and a black tip to their fluffy tails. They get their name from their golden-brown fur. They usually live in closely knit family groups of up to five individuals. They have a broad, omnivorous diet in the wild, and have been documented to scavenge from the kills of larger predators like wolves and tigers, sometimes eating right alongside these larger carnivores, who don’t seem to mind! These shy animals are also capable of coexisting with humans, as their flexible habits let them include garbage dumps in their foraging patches. However, this coexistence can lead to their death because of car accidents, or contracting diseases like rabies from street dogs, or

being poisoned by people for hunting small livestock or stealing fruits from plantations.

So, what do they have to do with black magic? Well, across southern Asia, the folklore of many communities includes the myth that jackals have a small ‘horn’ on the back of their skulls, usually hidden by their fur. This horn is supposed to have many magical properties, such as protecting the owner from evil spirits, bringing good luck and wealth, allowing the owner to see in the dark, granting the owner wishes, and reappearing magically if it’s lost. This makes them a popular item used and sold by black magic practitioners.

