

CELEBRATING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIPS

MONKEY SHRINES: DOCUMENTING THE PRACTICE AND ITS PREVALENCE IN AND AROUND THE CITY OF BENGALURU

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the prevalent yet overlooked practice of constructing monkey shrines in and around Bengaluru, India, shedding light on the intricate relationship between humans and primates. Drawing from multiple disciplines like wildlife biology, ethno-primatology, human ecology, and religion, this study documents the practice of honouring deceased monkeys through the construction of shrines.

Through a combination of secondary research and primary fieldwork, including interviews with caretakers, priests, and local residents, the study brings to light the multifaceted nature of this cultural tradition. A total of 19 sites were identified where deceased monkeys were honoured, with practices ranging from simple burials to elaborate temples.

Findings revealed that the construction of monkey shrines often stemmed from a deep-seated cultural reverence for monkeys, particularly as a symbol of Lord Hanuman, a prominent deity in Hindu mythology. These shrines serve as focal points for communal rituals, fostering a sense of connection and empathy toward primates within local communities. The evolution of these shrines, from makeshift idols to fully-fledged temples, reflects the dynamic interplay between religion, socio-economic factors, and urban development.

The study also reinforces the need and significance of documenting and understanding such cultural perspectives for conservation efforts and interdisciplinary research.

INTRODUCTION

“Anyone who took careful note of the everyday animals we see living among us would find them doing things just as astonishing as the examples we gather from far-off times and places. Nature is One and constant in her course.”

~ Montaigne, ‘An Apology for Raymond Sebond’

There is no denying that nature and culture happen to be the two banks of the river of life. And understanding the ever-changing relationship between the two may help answer a lot of questions about this unpredictable Anthropocene that we are all in. One need not necessarily picture a remote tribal community living amidst the Amazon forests or communities harmoniously living on isolated islands far away from mainstream civilisation. These stereotypical images are not only fed into minds but also reinforced by various institutions, including the market and the media.

One fails to recognise and appreciate the mundane interactions (with everyday aspects of nature) that people have in their daily lives. Something as simple as local names (in vernacular language) of animals and birds that develop because of specific characteristics. For instance, the Common Hawk Cuckoo is known as *Akka Kuyil* (*Akka* means elder sister in Tamil) in certain parts of Tamil Nadu (Jeganathan, 2016). Our thoughts, actions, and emotions (attitudes) affect nature and how nature in turn affects our process of culturalisation. Generation after generation we learn, unlearn, teach, and are taught how to interact with nature. This is universal.

Today, when we agree that most of the damage to the ecosystem is a result of unadministered industrialisation, and urbanisation, followed by migration into cities (Gopalan & Radhakrishna, 2022)- it is essential we study how people in these metropolitan cities interact with nature. Only when we can understand this can we hope to promote the positives and work towards minimising the negatives.

The present academia and social media are plagued with negative human-wildlife interactions, which is not a new phenomenon considering that we share (and later maybe monopolise) natural resources with other animals. It is the parameters of frequency, intensity and prevalence of these negative interactions that are alarming. And researchers are tirelessly collaborating with governments and communities to address it.

In this process we are neglecting the aspects of the relationship that need not necessarily be negative (or positive), or may not involve a charismatic species (like a tiger or an elephant)- but are still part of the nature-culture interface.

HUMAN-PRIMATE RELATIONSHIP

India is known for its abundant presence of primates, characterised by a high diversity of species and substantial population numbers. Within India, there are several distinct species of nonhuman primates, comprising of macaques, langurs, lorises, and one species of gibbon.

Monkeys have long held a very special place in different cultures across the world; Radhakrishna speaks on how the increasing role of religion in people's lives may have resulted in perceiving monkeys (or other animals) with human-like characteristics and qualities (Radhakrishna, 2018).

Anniina Jokinen's extensive work - 'Monkeys and Monkey Gods in Mythology, folklore, and Religion', provides a comprehensive picture and a chronological order of how monkeys have been considered in different cultures. The Hindu God Hanuman, is known for his strength, loyalty and bravery and is associated with the sun, wind, and thunder. Certain Chinese zodiacal beliefs link the monkey as the astrological sign for Leo and the monkey god (Sun-Wukong), whose festival is still celebrated in China and Hong Kong. In Japan, post the arrival of Buddhism, the monkey is seen as the messenger of the gods and protected from diseases and illness. They are also seen as patrons of fertility, harmonious marriages, and safe childbirth. The South Americans, particularly the Mayans, worshipped howler monkey Gods who were associated with different forms of art. The Aztecs, on the other hand, connected the monkey with the sun and notions of fertility (Jokinen, 2007).

Radhakrishna's work on the use of literary lens as a tool to understand the change in human attitude towards the primates over a period of time; brings to light how different periods in Tamil Literary History have different ideological designs - from seeing the monkey as a foolish and naïve animal to its sacred image and now as a mere forest dweller in the postmodern phase (Radhakrishna, 2018).

This change in attitude and perspective is all the more dynamic and unpredictable in urban settings.

While putting up *shradddhanjali* posters for loved ones is not very novel or rare, coming across a similar poster with a picture of a monkey was intriguing. The very act of praying tribute to a dead monkey was fascinating and has interesting implications for understanding human-primate relationships.

The aim of this study was thus to look deeper into the practice of constructing a shrine in honour of a deceased monkey.



Figure 1: A shraddhanjali poster for the monkeys in Yelchawadi

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To document the prevalence and practice of constructing monkey shrines in and around the city of Bengaluru.
- To identify and map the monkey shrines found in the city.



Figure 2: A monkey shrine with a Hanuman idol in Avalahalli

STUDY AREA

Bengaluru is the capital city of Karnataka and has a population of more than 10 million people. Located on the Deccan plateau at a considerable elevation, it is known for its pleasant weather, parks, lakes, and green spaces. The history and change in governing structures - from Kempe Gowda to the British (and their extensive plantation projects and home gardens), and post-independence transformations have largely affected the green spaces within the city. The old city consists of varieties of trees like mangoes, tamarinds, jackfruits, etc. The newer parts of the city has larger flowering canopies and *Casuarina*, which was a major source of fuelwood, was heavily promoted. Much of the wildlife like elephants, tigers, leopards, and bears were hunted down; today, the city is home to smaller species like snakes, primates, larger fruit bats, etc.



Figure 3: Map of India showing Karnataka and Bengaluru

BONNET MACAQUES

Bonnet macaques are native to the southern part of India and found in the peninsular states of Karnataka, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Kerala. They are highly adaptive with a wide range of climate types and habitats. They have an average lifespan of 20-30 years. Although omnivorous, they prefer fruits and are known for strategically dwelling in urban settings as they do in the city of Bengaluru.



Figure 4: Bonnet macaques playing in a temple complex

METHODOLOGY

Both secondary and primary methods of data collection were employed in this study. Existing research from various academic disciplines like wildlife biology, ethno-primateology, human ecology, and religion was used to help build a theoretical foundation for this human-wildlife interaction study.

The study initially started with just two sites (Bannerghatta and Austin town), snowballing was the main sampling technique used to identify additional sites and to reach out to more respondents. Newspaper articles also mentioned such stories in passing, additionally finding the site was very challenging given the dynamic crowd in the city. Google search helped find many general Hanuman temples in the city, the list was narrowed to temples that appeared like wayside shrines or had the typical block-like idol. These sites were then visited and verified.

Semi-structured interview schedules were used; which covered aspects like a brief history of shrines, the purpose of the practice, the presence of monkeys in the locality, the nature of interaction with them, etc. Interviews with caretakers or priests from different sites were conducted. Each site was visited at least twice and, on average, had about 1 detailed interview per site and 3 to 4 informal conversations with devotees and locals; to understand their views and experiences with respect to monkeys and monkey shrines.

Many respondents were more comfortable conversing in Kannada than English/Hindi; their experiences and stories were recorded (with consent) and then translated. The study duration was six months (from October 2023 to March 2024) including secondary research, reconnaissance, fieldwork, and documentation. The major output is developing a map with the identified sites, a database with a brief history for each site and a short documentary to help reach out to a wider audience.

OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

A total of 28 interviews were conducted with caretakers and priests from different sites, 10% of the respondents (3) were women. A total of 19 sites were identified with confirmed evidence of the dead and burial of a monkey(s).

NATURE OF THE PRACTICE

The practice of constructing 'shrines' in honour of a deceased monkey is common across India, for different species of primates. In Bengaluru, this custom is associated with Bonnet Macaques.

It was interesting that the very act of paying homage or conducting a *shraddhanjali*, which comes from the words *Shraddha* (devotion) and *Anjali* (offering), is done for family members (humans). The ritual, based on Hindu scriptures is performed to facilitate *moksha* (nirvana) and access to *svarga* (heaven).

While at some sites, a detailed *puja* with *annadanam* (food donation) was organised, in many smaller shrines a simple *puja* for Lord Hanuman was done and the deceased monkey was buried.

Major festivals like Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti are celebrated, while in very few places a year-on-year pooja is done to commemorate the exact date of the burial.



Figure 5: Shradhdhanjali poster for the monkeys in Somanahalli (left); and in Koramangala (right)

PURPOSE OF THE PRACTICE

While the act of burial might seem the same, the intention varied in each case. The most common reason for the practice was the fact that the monkey was seen as a representation of Lord Hanuman. One respondent said that in the scriptures Lord Hanuman is considered as *Chiranjeevi* (immortal), so giving a monkey a proper human-like burial was seen as one's duty. Another priest thought them to be our closest relatives in the animal kingdom and hence deserved a proper funeral. A respondent also said that Lord Hanuman was his *Kuldev* (family deity) so the honorary burial was necessary.

Many believed that monkeys tend to isolate themselves when they have an intuition of death and so it was impossible to witness the natural death of a monkey. The causes of death were mostly road accidents or electrocution, which was because of human beings. Hence, the practice can also be seen as a form of repentance, coming from a sense of guilt. A certain respondent said, "*Yeh humari wajah se mara hai*" (it has died as a result of our activities).

Some people shared a very close relationship with them. The Thubarahalli site is one such case where a woman owned a small grocery shop near a big banyan tree on which lived an old monkey who would come down to the shop every day to take a banana or biscuit and go back up. One day, unfortunately, it fell off the tree and died, and the woman used her own money to build a small shrine in memory of the monkey. Today, it is looked after by her son, who said that his mother felt as though she lost her neighbour.



Figure 6: Monkey shrine in Thubarahalli

The retirement corpus of the Gottigere respondent's grandfather was put into building the shrine for the monkey that died of electrocution near their house.



Figure 7: Monkey shrine in Gottigere

The respondents in some cases were very understanding and empathised with the monkeys; for instance, when asked, one was nearly in tears as he recollected the incident of how he carried the dead monkey in his arms around the entire village, asking for money, before burying it in Somanahalli about six years ago. A respondent from Yelahanka Old Town, Ram ji said *“Uss janam mein Hanuman ji ne Bhagwan Ram ki seva ki, iss janam mein main Ram, Hanuman ji ka seva karunga”* (in that lifetime, Hanuman served Lord Ram and, in this Lifetime, he (his name is Ram) must serve Lord Hanuman) - a monkey had entered his shop (shoe repair) when he first inaugurated it, taking some sweets and a juice bottle with it, Ram Ji considered this to be a blessing while many other would treat this a menace. He believed the monkeys to be humans who could not talk or ask for food, so one should be considerate.



Figure 8: Monkey shrine on Kanakapura road

The above site on Kanakapura road was the only shrine stone with a picture of a monkey unlike the usual others that had a picture of Lord Hanuman etched on it.

EVOLUTION OF THE SHRINES

It is also interesting to note the chronological transformation that most of the sites go through. Once a deceased monkey is found, the locals unanimously bury it along the roadside and place a small concrete block to mark the spot. The block is decorated with a garland, *kumkum* (red turmeric) powder and incense sticks. They may or may not have financial resources enough to organise and invite people for a *shraddhanjali*.

If the locals do not have enough time to place an order for an idol, in some places they take a stone block, etch the picture of Lord Hanuman, and paint it.

In the case of the Koli Farm site, more than 5 monkeys have been buried there, it is said that whenever anybody (usually an auto driver) finds a dead monkey in the surrounding locality they bring it there to simply bury it without performing a detailed *puja* or *shraadh*. A rectangular concrete block is placed to mark that spot, and flowers are offered during special occasions. Thus, while the shrine comes into existence with the death of a single monkey, over the years other monkeys are also buried there.



Figure 9: Concrete blocks are placed to mark the burial of monkeys near Koli Farm Gate

Slowly over the years, the locals will contribute money and build a small shed above it and then with the right backing (politico-economic), a new smaller temple is constructed which in turn gradually grows.

Soon the shrine gains recognition and importance, with people visiting it on Saturdays, making offerings and performing *pujas*. With certain politico-economic backing, the structure is rebuilt to resemble a small Hanuman temple with a proper idol. Over the years, this in turn grows into a full-fledged Hanuman temple.

This is not a set rule for the stages of transformation but a much-observed pattern. It is possible that certain shrines skip some stages and transform while others might stay put in the same stage for many years.

For instance, in Yelchawadi, although it has barely been five months since the *shraddhanjali*, the foundation for a considerably bigger temple is already underway.

It is important to note that this process of transformation is very complex with multiple factors of varying intensity playing out.



Figure 10: The process of etching and painting the image of Lord Hanuman on stone (Somanahalli)



Figure 11: Shrine in Whitefield



Figure 12: Elaborate burial for a monkey in Hulimavu



Figure 13: Monkey shrine built as a simple structure in Bangalore University



Figure 14: Monkey Shrine in Sulikunte Cross



Figure 15: Monkey shrine in Kengeri Satellite Town



Figure 16: Monkey Shrine in Shirke Layout



Figure 17: Old shrine in Yelahanka Old Town



Figure 18: New shrine in Yelahanka Old Town

The most recent transformation has been the monkey shrine in Yelahanka Old Town- December 2023 (Fig. 17) and February 2024 (Fig. 18).

MANAGEMENT OF THE SHRINE

Some sites do not have a caretaker or a priest and are accessible to all people to perform a *puja*. Others have a caretaker who maintains the premise by performing simple poojas, opening the temple doors, and bringing fresh flowers and prasad. Others yet have a full-time priest. Lastly, some sites also have a committee or group of trustees who manage the temple. This pattern may not always be in line with the physical transformation of the shrines.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

One can notice that the sites that have been identified and mapped fall majorly on the outskirts of the city. There could be many possible reasons for this: (a) there could be more sites that have not yet been discovered, (b) those that were present were razed down during infrastructural projects like road widening and metro constructions, or (c) over the years the locals identify the site and reinforce it as a Hanuman Temple (rather than a place where a monkey was buried). Another possible reason is that widespread urbanisation has also displaced a lot of monkeys pushing them towards the ever-expanding periphery of the city. For instance, the residents of a cooperative society in Koramangala conducted a *shraddhanjali* for two monkeys that died even though they were apparently a menace to the locals. But that was almost 10 years ago, and today there are hardly any monkeys there.



Figure 19: Monkey Shrine in Avalahalli

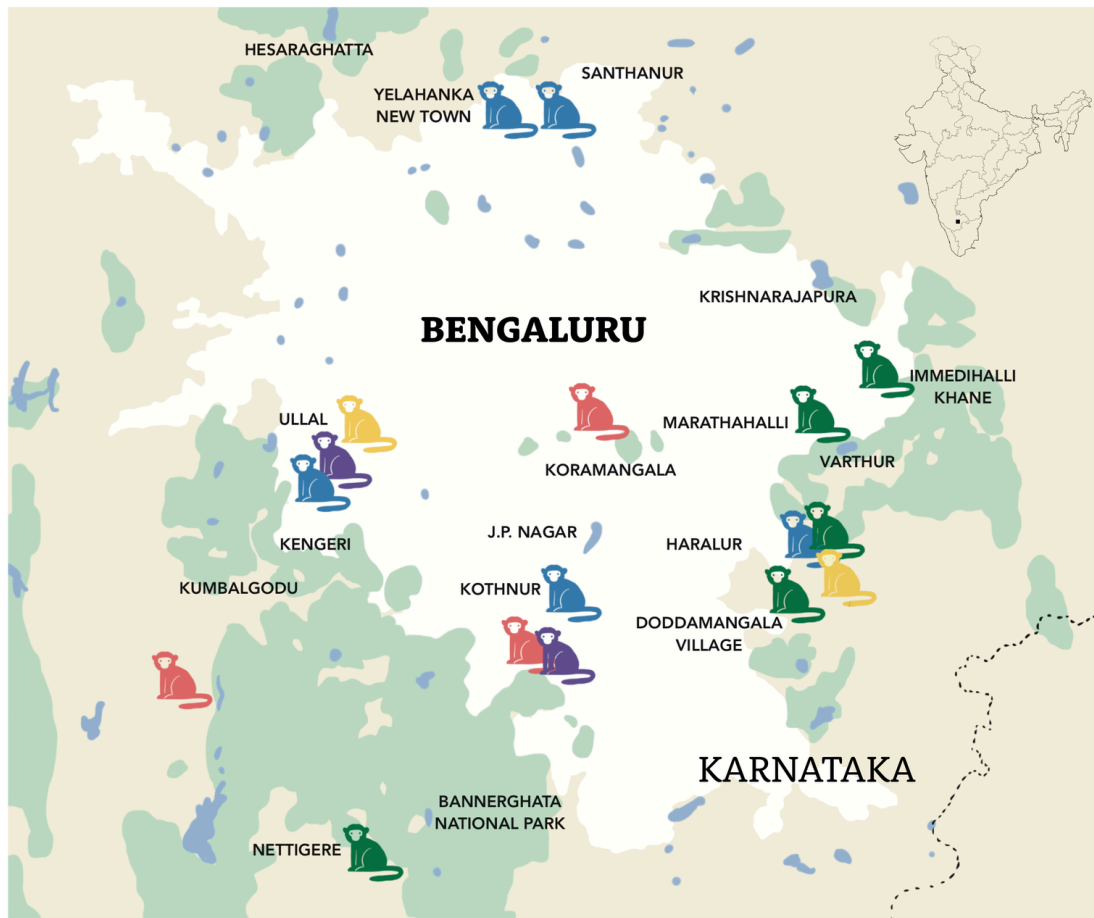
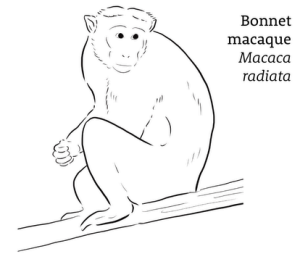
It was also observed that some priests were not only accepting but also proud of the fact that their culture promotes such a practice while in some sites the priests refuted such claims. Maybe it affected the sanctity of the place and in turn their authority.

Most of these are wayside shrines with no barrier to entry or timings, allowing anyone to come and pay their respects, though in most places detailed *pujas* are held on Saturday (considered auspicious for Hanuman in the southern parts of India); Over the years the site gains more public recognition and economic backing and is transformed into a Hanuman Temple.

MONKEY SHRINES IN AND AROUND BENGALURU

This map attempts to identify and map monkey shrines found in the city of Bengaluru. The practice of constructing 'shrines' in the honour of a deceased monkey is common across India, for different species of primates. In Bengaluru, this custom is associated with Bonnet Macaques.

The act of paying tribute to the macaques stems from their religio-cultural significance often perceived as a representation Lord Hanuman. Typically, their deaths result from road accidents or electrocution. Locals bury the monkey, perform pooja, build a shrine and place an idol or picture of Lord Hanuman.



FORMS OF SHRINES

- A small concrete block is placed to mark the monkey burial site, along with shradhanjali posters.
- A headstone is placed with a picture of Lord Hanuman etched on it.
- The stone block is covered with a simple tin roof or shed.
- An idol of Lord Hanuman is also placed, or replaces the stone block.
- A full-fledged Hanuman temple is constructed with a trustee or management committee.

Map of Monkey Shrines in and around Bengaluru

CHANGE IN NARRATIVES

Interestingly, over the years the significance of the burial sites also changed; for example, the Kothi Anjaneya temple, which also happens to be the oldest site, is full of devotees who come to seek blessings from Lord Hanuman whenever they buy a new car or plan to go abroad (visa and passports); the priest said, “*log dur-dur se aate hai - Mangalore, Dharwad aur Mysore se car aur bikes ke liye, ashirwaad ke liye*” (people come from far and wide from Mangalore, Dharwad, and Mysore to get their cars or bikes blessed). Slowly the very essence of the site (in memory of the monkey) evolves.



Figure 20: Monkey Shrine in Austin Town



Figure 21: Monkey shrine on Mysore Road

In some sites, the increased frequency of interaction with the monkeys resulted in the construction of many shrines or the burial of many monkeys (about four) that were soon neglected and did not have any regular *puja* or a caretaker.

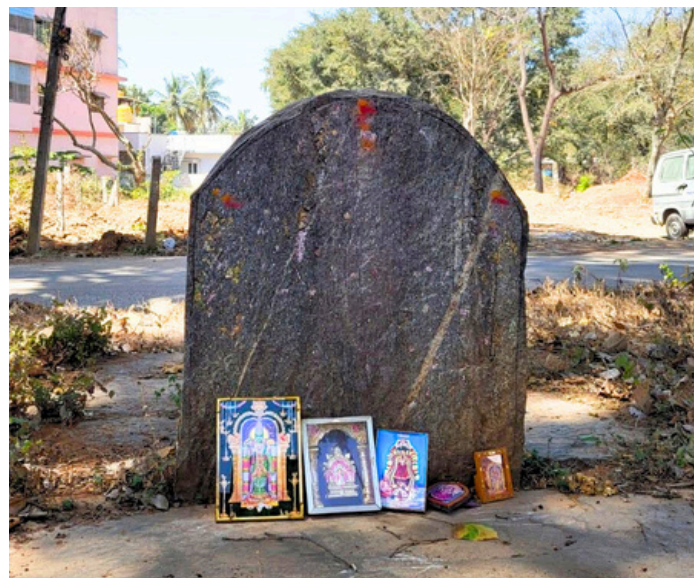


Figure 22: Monkey shrines in Sulikunte village

In some places, it was seen that despite many devotees coming to the site on Saturdays or special occasions like Hanuman Jayanti or Ram Navami, most did not know of the history of the site. Additionally, numerous other sites were identified but it was challenging to collect any information about the death of the monkey or the people associated with the site. Similarly, in many locations, the locals themselves were not very sure if the shrine was built to mark the burial of a monkey. Surprisingly, while some sites are located close to others, (<5kms) most people did not know of them. This reinforces the very need to document this practice before there is a lapse in knowledge that is lost forever.



Figure 23: Shrines in Kodathi Gate and Shreya Hospital with little or no information

INTERACTION WITH MONKEYS

Understanding human-wildlife interactions can be very complicated, with multiple layers to it - for instance, though most locals agreed that they associated the monkey with Lord Hanuman, in some cases if the monkey was seen as a source of trouble, it was shooed away. A certain shopkeeper was in a dilemma because the monkeys in the area kept stealing items from his shop. While he was busy shooing them away with a stick, he had customers buy biscuits and bananas from his shop to feed the same troop. Human behaviour can be difficult to comprehend given that one's behaviour and attitude may not always align. As a certain respondent said, "*Jab woh thanda hota hai, hum bhi thande hote hai, jab woh garam ho jata hai hum bhi garam hote hai*" (as long as the monkey is cool, we are cool; but when it gets agitated, we also react).



Figure 24: A priest conducting a *puja* at the Hulimavu shrine

SIMILAR IMAGES OF LORD HANUMAN

Many Anjaneya temples were visited for leads and while some of them did turn out to be shrines, some were *swayambhu* (self-manifested) temples and others that looked similar to the shrines, were composed of idols placed on roadsides to prevent accidents.



Figure 25: Image of Lord Hanuman in Krishnarajapura

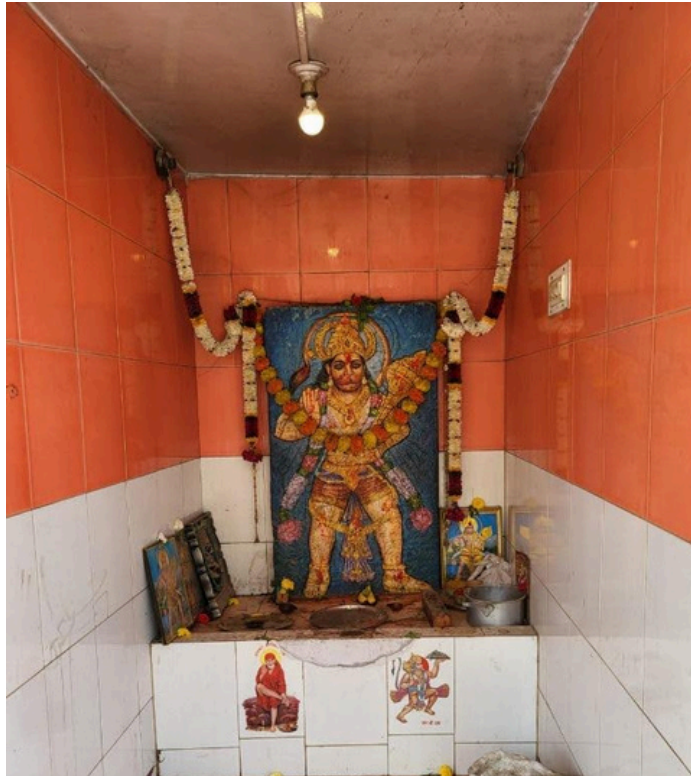


Figure 26: Image of Lord Hanuman in Horamavu

DISCUSSION

This study initially aimed at looking deeper into *shraddhanjali* posters for monkeys, but was able to identify and further understand the very practice of paying homage to a deceased monkey. It is intriguing to note how people usually do not construct shrines for other animals, pets, or livestock, although the animals may have references in mainstream Hindu culture. The fact that there may not be a personal relationship or sense of ownership with the monkey makes it an interesting phenomenon. The use of stone blocks with Lord Hanuman's image seemed quite standardised, maybe because it seems roughly similar to a human headstone. Given the limited time period of the study, questions like how prevalent this practice is in North India and whether they cremate the monkeys there, given that most southern Dravidian rituals are considered prevedic and have certain differences as compared to the northern Indo-Aryan practices, could not be answered.

These monkey shrines that start as wayside shrines, as Larios puts it, have three main parameters - emplacement, visibility, and accessibility. The size, as he says, is a subjective criterion and some makeshift shrines grow into institutional places of worship while some others disappear altogether (Larios & Voix, 2018). This holds true for these monkey shrines as well.

It would be noteworthy to view this practice from Ninian Smart's 7 dimensions of Religion (Smart, 1998):

Practice and Ritual - Most locals do *pujas* every Saturday (considered auspicious for Lord Hanuman) and celebrate Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti.

Experiential and Emotional - For many the act came from a sense of reverence, guilt, and empathy.

Doctrinal and Philosophical - Lord Hanuman is considered to be a *Chiranjeevi* (one of the 7 immortals in Hindu tradition) and at the same time, Hinduism believes in the concept of rebirth and the need for ritualistic burial.

Social and Institutional - In most places, the locals manifest collective behaviour by coming together to construct a shrine and gradually, with access to the appropriate socioeconomic capital, the shrine transforms into a temple with institutional backing.

Ethical and Legal - In the case of a certain shrine, legend has it a person poisoned the monkeys and his family soon met with the same fate. In another, a man ended up running over a monkey while driving his new car and it was only after he built the shrine that his business began to flourish. Although religion has an ethical component to it, people's behaviour has more to it than just the binary of legality.

Material and Artistic - The shrines and the images by themselves exhibit art as they are painted and sculpted, while some are meticulously constructed.

There is a need for more interdisciplinary studies to understand people's attitudes and perspectives towards the animal. As Erin Riley says - "There is a need to become hybrid, bringing together different disciplines and sciences to make more informed and effective strategies when it comes to conservation". Parathian et al. in their work - 'Breaking Through Disciplinary Barriers: Human-Wildlife Interactions and Multispecies Ethnography', admit that interdisciplinary studies can be very challenging but also provide us with a richer and deeper understanding of the shared landscape. (Parathian et al., 2018).

"Ecological interactions are incorporated alongside social, historical, political, and economic drivers demonstrating that the inclusion of anthropological elements is core to primatological inquiry." (Parathian et al., 2018)

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PHOTO CREDITS

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