

Over-religious Activity, A Threat to Biodiversity - A Case Study (4): The Indian National Bird Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) is in Danger

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ABSTRACT Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) is the National Bird of India. It has rich religious and legendary involvement in Indian traditions. The bird's feathers are inordinately used for religious purpose with good commercial income. The procurement of the feathers in huge number is questionable. This may cause in a setback of peacock population in the natural biodiversity, an apprehension of negative National interest.

INTRODUCTION

"Biodiversity suffers from human religious activity" (Padhy and Mohapatro 2016; Padhy 2016a, 2017). In social environment, people are not ready to accept the above statement easily. Everyone feels that, religion is at a broader sphere and is meant to render protection to the surrounding plants, animals and human beings instead of causing any injury to them. All the above expression of feelings are the outcome of interactions of the author with different religiously adorned persons. Broadly, religion consciousness overrides eco-consciousness and persons with the former, consider the later as a matter of ridiculous.

Peacock is regarded as the National Bird of India. Every country is proud of their Nationality. As someone respects his National Flag and National Anthem; similarly the National Tree, Flower, Fruit, Bird, Animal etc. are to be regarded and taken care. But, the over use of peacock feathers in religious functions and its overwhelming business is a matter of concern. This communication is aimed to focus on such activity in the home town and district of the author with an apprehension of a national biodiversity problem.

THE NATIONAL BIRD

Peacock, with a biological name *Pavo cristatus* of family 'Phasianidae' is the National Bird of

India (Fig. 1). It is a large and majestic bird; symbol of grace, joy, beauty and love. It is an indigenous bird of our country, the biggest democracy of the world. In 1963 peacock was declared as the National Bird of India because of its rich religious and legendary involvement in Indian traditions. The iridescent feathers and dancing of the bird with spreading of the tail before commencement of the rain is a unique feature, not found with any other bird. It is one of the most spectacular natural sight. The male bird spreads its feathers during the breeding season to attract several females. But as soon as any female approaches, it turns its back. This is a peculiar behaviour of the male bird which is repeated

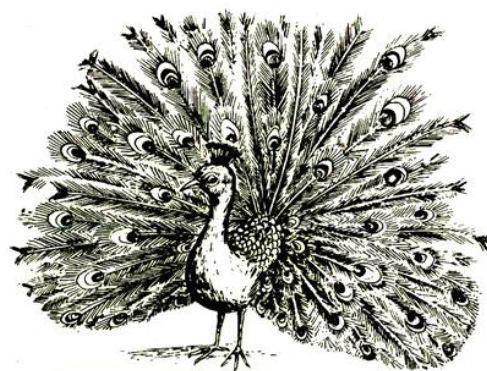


Fig. 1. Artistic presentation of feather display by peacock - The structure of the *Kutasthah* can be marked on every feather

again and again to woo the female. The peacock is very much associated with Indian myths and legends which has boosted the bird at the National level.

RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

Bhagawan Srikrishna is named as ‘*Yogaswara*’ - the highest master of yoga. His narrations of Gita is regarded as *Yogasastra*’ - an epic on yoga. In the science of yoga (Padhy 2016b) among the six spiritual energy centres of the human body (the vortex points), the *Aajnyaan Chakra* situated in between the two eye brows is the point of unlimited energy. This point is regarded as the substratum of the divinity, where the yogi ultimately focuses his concentration. In yogic language this point is named as *Kutasthah*. There is a yoga technique called *Yoni Mudra*, through which the yogi realises and visualises the spectacular sight of the *Kutasthah*. It is described that, the brilliant sight of the *Kutasthah* is similar with the natural decoration of the centre of peacock feather. This was the reason why, Srikrishna had adorned his head with a peacock feather. One cannot witness a picture of Srikrishna anywhere without a decorated peacock feather.

The Sanskrit word *Kutasthah* has a special meaning: *Kut* means secret and *Asthah* means existence - secret existence of the divinity. *Kutasthah* is not only restricted to human beings, rather every living being from Bacteria to whale has the secret existence of God - Almighty. In Bhagavad Gita *Kutasthah* is discussed thrice as follows:

- “The unshaken, spiritually situated, Unmoved under all circumstances”. (6/8)
- “The unchangeable” (12/3)
- “The immutable and imperishable” (15/16)

All the above three definitions point *Kutasthah* towards the *Aatman*. The peacock feather on the crown of Srikrishna is exposed to make the human community to be conscious of the *Kutasthah*. In fact Srikrishna Himself is the universal *Kutasthah*, exist everywhere as *Paramaatman*. This is the great importance of the peacock feather as a symbolic representation of the divinity.

Sri Kartikaya is the son of Sri Siva and Mother Parvati. He has six heads and twelve hands, considered to be the most powerful *Devataa*. He is regarded as the commander of the *De-*

vataas. Peacock is His vehiculum (*Vaahana*). In Hindu religious mythology the structure of the *Devataas* are designed scientifically holding different weapons in their arms and provided with a suitable *Vaahana*. The weapons represent the modus operandi of their powers, while the vehiculum is nothing but the expression of the God’s personality in animal form (Vitasaxis 1977). From this point of view, the peacock enjoys a commander personality in the animal diversity and the right choice as the National Bird of India.

Goddess Durga and Kaali represent the universal cosmic energy in female form. In fact the peacock feather is practically used in the worship procedure of these two motherly images. The feathers are used for the decoration of the idols. The *Pujari* (worshiper) uses a bundle of peacock feather to exorcize a person (specially children) to remove the negative effect of wicked sight or black magic on him. He also uses the feather bundle to thrust the blessings of goddess mother on the fellow worshipers by touching smoothly through it. In this context the power of peacock feather is comparable with the Kusha (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) of Vedic Indians (Padhy 2017). My be, like Kusha the peacock feather is over used in religious activity and likely to incur negative impact on the diversity of the National Bird, discussed further.

CASE STUDY

1st Event

In the Ganjam district of south Odisha a special function is celebrated every year for 21 days known as ‘*Danda Yatra*’. This is a penance of punishment. The function starts from a Kaali temple of any village / town. In this function Mother Kaali and God Siva are worshiped. The participants of the function are called ‘*Dandua*’. During the period of the function, the participant *Danduas* remain in bare body with simple cloth, take simple food once in night with light tiffin during day time, do not use an umbrella for protection from sun light, do not use oil, medicine or any type of cosmetics, sleep on the soil without a bed and walk miles together daily in bare foot from place to place as per requirement or invitation. Researchers have concluded that, the *Danda Yatra* is a combination of Buddha

and Jain philosophy with Hindu tradition, a matter of anthropological interest.

The “*Yatra*” is above caste and creed. The batch of participants are headed by a leader called Patta Dandua who guides them. The whole motive of the function is to worship Mother Kaali and God Siva and develop internal potency to tolerate adverse environment and surrounding. This helps the rural participants to maintain their fitness for the ensuing cultivation season. The function ends on ‘*Bisubha Sankranti*’ comes in the mid of month of April. More facts about *Danda Yatra* in the whole Ganjam District can be summarized as follows:

1. History says that this tradition of worship started from a village named ‘Galleri’ of Bhanjanagar Sub-Division, Ganjam, Odisha.
2. There are more than two hundred units performing this puja in the month of Chaitra in different villages where there is a temple of Kaali.
3. In some villages there are more than one batch (upto five) perform the function with competition.
4. In each batch the Dandua participants range from 50 to 150 and more.
5. At a place ‘Kullagada’ the biggest batch is available where the membership reaches upto 1500.
6. People perform this puja because of previous commitment in order to fulfil their worldly wishes. They contact a party beforehand for the function at their door step.
7. The expenditure for one function for one day/night reaches upto 1 to 1.5 lakhs or more.
8. This function is restricted to south part of Ganjam district of Odisha only. In other districts it can be observed in modified form, not of importance to be counted. More details about the Yatra is out of the scope of this communication.
9. The most important aspect of the function relevant to this project is that, each participant (Dandua) is expected to hold a bundle of peacock feathers (may contain more than 10 feathers) during the course of the worshipping period 13 or 21 days. The minimum number of peacock feathers used throughout the district per year can be calculated as follow:

One participant	Use 10 feathers
For a batch of 100 participants	$100 \times 10 = 1000$
For 200 batches in the district	$1000 \times 200 = 2 \text{ Lakhs}$

The figure given of feather consumption is hypothetical only. The expected participant members and feather consumption throughout the district is for above the hypothetical structure.

2nd Event

Berhampur City is situated in the Ganjam district, Odisha. The famous temple of mother Durga named ‘Budhi Thakurani’ (Old Goddess) is established here. The revered Goddess mother comes out of her temple every alternate year to a temporary shed situated in a specific street to a specific person’s house called ‘Dashi Behera’. This is regarded as home coming of the mother. The whole event occurs in the month of Chaitra and the whole city along with the whole district celebrates a joyful function for one month.

The most important custom that is followed during this time is that, the worshippers offer bundles of peacock plume to the mother as a favourite gift. In the same month Chaitra the earlier first event celebrated every year and the second event comes in alternate year. In 2017, both the events coincided and the study of peacock feather business was conducted which is reflected further in this communication.

PEACOCK FEATHER BUSINESS

Based on the publications of a leading daily newspaper ‘Pramaya’ (Anonymous 2017) and self-study by the author the following points are highlighted on the peacock feather business of Ganjam district are as follows:

1. The whole Berhampur city is spread with many batches of *Danda Yatra* along with worshipers of local ‘Old goddess’, the floating population reaches upto 50,000 to one lakh during the function month Chaitra.
2. There is business of peacock feather throughout the year, but the trade gears up during the *Chaitra* month upto Rs. 50 Lakhs per season with an average of Rs. 1.5 to 2 Lakhs per shop.
3. The peacock feather are supplied mostly from Jodhpur of Rajasthan and Agra of Uttar Pradesh comes through business cen-

tres of Kolkata by online payment basis. Agra is famous as the worst place in India in terms of owl trade, reported earlier (Padhy 2016a).

4. The purchase price of each feather is Rs. 2/- and sold for Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 3.00 in the wholesale shop and retailers in the town sell it for Rs. 4.00. The feather bundles are supplied to different villages and small towns of Ganjam from Berhampur centre and the price of each feather is still enhanced there.
5. The feathers are sold in the form of bundles containing 7, 10, 15, 20 numbers tied with rubber bands, plastic stickers. The cost for preparation of each bundle is 20 paisa and a good engagement and earning for some people.
6. Throughout the country the choice for peacock feathers is highest in Ganjam district, Odisha as revealed by different business people and researches.
7. People in this trade had confessed that, the feathers are collected during the shedding season of the birds and not by killing them. They have strong opinion (belief?) that, killing peacock is a great sin and they have no involvement in it. However, some years ago a person from a nearby village 'Lochapada' was caught hold due to illegal business and court cases are pending with him as the news revealed.

The whole scenario of fifty lakhs of business and use of two lakhs of peacock feathers for various functions in one season raises a question of their procurement. The point of legal or illegal business is not the matter of discussion; it is the pressure that is incurred on the biodiversity is certainly a matter of anxiousness. Slowly the population of different birds in the environment are degrading. Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*, *P. montanus*, *P.iformes*) are at the verge of disappearance. Crows (*Corvus cocone*) and Indian kites (*Haliastur indicus*, *Milvus govinda*) are not seen frequently in nature as earlier. Comparatively peacock is a rare bird, not

found everywhere and restricted to certain forest areas only. The feather business should be taken as an index of negative impact on the peacock population for commercial interest. The biodiversity conservation interest of the country should be safe guarded first against any other interest, may be religious or commercial. More to add here that, peacock feather has taken an entrance into fashion technology as reported by "The Hindu", the national newspaper on May 15th, 2017 with a caption 'Women in Blue'. The fashion show was organised by the International Institute of Fashion Technology, Bhopal on 14.05.2017.

Let us pray Srikrishna, Sri Kartikaya, Sri Durga and Sri Kalli along with our positive motive to save their favourite bird through creation of eco-consciousness among the religious craze Indians.

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