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## Animals in the Indian Epics: Beyond Hanuman and Jatayu

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### Abstract

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two of the greatest epics of Indian literature, are vast and complex, filled with not just towering heroes and antagonists but also a host of minor characters who play pivotal roles in shaping their narratives. While characters like Rama, Krishna, Sita, and Arjuna dominate the forefront, the contributions of lesser-known figures such as Sampati, Takshaka, and even the dogs that appear in various episodes are equally profound, offering deeper insights into the epics' themes of dharma, loyalty, and morality. This article explores the roles and significance of these minor characters, shedding light on their underappreciated yet crucial contributions.

**Keywords:** Indian epics, The *Ramayana*, The *Mahabharata*, Animals, Sampati, Takshaka, Dogs

### Introduction

The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, India's timeless epics, are not merely stories of gods, kings, and epic battles. They are intricate explorations of dharma, karma, and the cosmic balance, woven into the



lives of their richly drawn characters. Among these are not only the celebrated protagonists Rama, Sita, Arjuna, Krishna but also an extraordinary array of animal characters who play pivotal roles. From revered figures like Hanuman and Garuda to lesser-known beings like Jambavan the bear and the humble squirrel who aided in building the bridge to Lanka, animals are deeply embedded in the narrative fabric of these epics. While major animal characters such as Hanuman, the epitome of devotion, and Jatayu, the self-sacrificing vulture, are widely revered and celebrated, minor animal characters often inhabit the margins of the stories, leaving subtle yet profound impressions. These seemingly peripheral characters often act as symbols, catalysts, or silent commentators, reflecting the moral and spiritual undercurrents of the epics. For example, the crow Kaakasura in the *Ramayana* teaches lessons about repentance and forgiveness, while the serpent Nahusha in the *Mahabharata* is a cautionary figure, representing the pitfalls of arrogance and misplaced ambition. This contrast between major and minor animal characters offers a fascinating lens to explore the epics' nuanced storytelling. The major characters, often elevated to divine or heroic stature, inspire awe and reverence. In contrast, the minor characters, though fleeting, bring attention to the subtleties of human behavior, moral dilemmas, and the interconnectedness of all beings within the cosmos. They remind us that even the smallest creatures can possess wisdom and play indispensable roles in the grand narrative. However, woven into the fabric of these epics are minor animal characters whose contributions, though often overshadowed by the grandeur of their human counterparts, are pivotal and layered with symbolic depth. Figures like Sampati, the aged vulture who aids Hanuman in locating Sita in the *Ramayana*, or Takshaka, the serpent king whose actions catalyze key events in the *Mahabharata*, carry narratives that transcend their apparent roles. Even the nameless dogs who loyally accompany Yudhishtira on his final journey offer profound lessons on dharma and fidelity. These creatures are not mere embellishments; they embody virtues, provoke reflection, and occasionally serve as agents of divine will. Sampati, the old vulture in the *Ramayana* who directs Hanuman toward Sita's whereabouts, or Takshaka, the serpent king in the *Mahabharata*, whose venomous strike becomes a symbol of retribution and fate. Even the nameless dog that follows Yudhishtira to the gates of heaven symbolizes loyalty and dharma, standing as a quiet counterpoint to the grandeur of human drama. These characters are far from incidental; they serve as messengers, protectors, and catalysts, subtly guiding the epics' trajectories.

This article also seeks to uncover the significance of these minor animal characters by contrasting them with their more prominent counterparts. Through their stories, it examines how the epics transcend the anthropocentric lens, offering a holistic view of existence where animals are not merely supporting cast members but integral voices in the moral and spiritual discourse. By highlighting their roles, we aim to understand the deeper message of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* a message that celebrates the interconnected web of life, the value of every being, and the profound truths that can emerge from the unlikeliest of sources. By highlighting their symbolic, moral, and narrative importance, we aim to uncover how the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* seamlessly integrate human and non-human dimensions to offer a profound commentary on the interconnectedness of all beings and the nature of dharma itself.

Animals are spiritually important in India. Evidence from the earliest known Indian civilization indicates that animals had religious significance. Excavations have unearthed images of bulls, unicorns, elephants, and tigers on clay seals. The titles of many Vedic hymns are named after animals, including



“The Frogs,” “The Cows,” and “The Bird.” “The Frogs” presents the croaking of frogs as equivalent to the religious chanting of priests; both were viewed as critical to bringing rain in the proper season, and rain was understood to be essential to all living things (Maurer 208). Animals hold “something of the divine” in India (Coomaraswamy15–16). Indian literature teaches Hindus to love nature and wild animals. Animal life and the wilderness shine in the *Mahabharata* (an epic composed between 400 BCE and 400 ACE). The storyline describes lakes “where elephants bathed and flocks of swans and wild red geese rested”; deserts, mountains, and deep forests form the setting for this engaging epic that so warmly describes the rich, varied, and beautiful animals living in the forests of India (*Mahabharata* 155): The rain began to fall and all the Earth was peaceful. Animals are individuals and persons in Indian sacred literature. Some animal characters are noble and heroic, or holy, while others are lowly and evil—just like their human counterparts. Hindu readers think nothing of a swan or a deer, a character in their sacred texts, who is preaching or who lives in an organized community, complete with rulers and nuclear family units, just like a human community. A contemporary Indian scholar comments: “And who could tell what was the store of wisdom garnered behind the little old face of the grey ape out of the forest, or hoarded by the coiled snake in her hole beside the tree?” (Coomaraswamy 16). In the Hindu tradition, animals are given the benefit of any doubt and assumed to be persons not unlike ourselves. In the *Mahabharata*, animals are insightful and generally stand on the side of the good. For example, animal cries alert the main characters, the Pandavas (five brothers), when enemies enter the forest. A fawn reports that their mutual wife has been stolen, allowing them to pursue the thief in a timely manner (*Mahabharata* 176–77). It is through listening to the “deer and bear among the trees” that one brother learns that he is not under a spell, but is in his right mind. And when a snake bites, the bite is for the “victim’s” own good, allowing a pursued man to become deformed, twisted, and ugly so that his enemies will not find him. The Naga that bites even provides two pieces of silk to don when the man is ready to assume his normal appearance (*Mahabharata* 131). Snakes are often spiritually powerful and benevolent in the Hindu tradition. Hindu myths teach that animals and humans were once closer and communicated on equal terms. For example, the equally popular epic, the *Ramayana* (composed between 300 BCE and 300 CE), has primary animal characters such as Jambavan the bear and Jatayu the eagle. Lakshman, Rama’s brother and a key character in the epic was himself a human incarnation of the Great Serpent Adishesha in whose coils Vishnu rested. For these characters, whatever their form or shape, when they spoke and acted, “their physical appearance passed unnoticed” (*Ramayana* 98). The eagle Jatayu “nobly” fights for the good, and loses his life in the process (*Ramayana* 128). By an “effort of will” he stays alive long enough to inform Rama of what has happened, which begins the main storyline, the all-important search for Sita (*Ramayana* 95). Jatayu’s older brother also a gigantic and noble bird, later joins the search and battle to recover Sita (*Ramayana* 129). Family relations are no less important for an eagle than they are for a human. The bear community also comes forward to fight for the good. Jambavan the bear is “full of knowledge and wisdom” and provides important council as the tale unfolds. Each animal is intelligent, cultured, and sports her or his own spirit, achievements, and physique (*Ramayana*128). Animals are individuals, and many are primary characters in this sacred story that is central to Indian religion.

Animals in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* hold a profound place, often acting as catalysts, guides, and symbolic figures in the grand narrative of these epics. They may not occupy center stage



like Rama, Krishna, or Arjuna, but their contributions are indispensable to the unfolding of key events. These creatures bridge the human and natural worlds, embodying virtues such as loyalty, sacrifice, and wisdom, while also serving as agents of fate and moral reflection.

Sampati, the vulture from the *Ramayana*, exemplifies this. Once a powerful bird who protected his younger brother Jatayu, Sampati's wings were burned in the process, leaving him grounded and diminished. Yet, his sharp sight and deep knowledge become crucial in Rama's quest to rescue Sita. By guiding Hanuman to locate Sita in Lanka, Sampati underscores the idea that even those perceived as powerless can alter the course of destiny through their unique strengths and resilience. In the *Mahabharata*, Takshaka, the serpent king, plays a more morally ambiguous role. His bite causes the death of King Parikshit, triggering the Sarpa Satra, a massive snake-sacrifice ritual initiated by Parikshit's son, Janamejaya. Takshaka's actions highlight themes of vengeance, karma, and humanity's strained relationship with the natural world. As an agent of fate, Takshaka embodies the cyclical nature of justice and retribution, reflecting the moral complexity that permeates the *Mahabharata*. Perhaps one of the most symbolic animal characters is the nameless dog that accompanies Yudhishtira on his final journey in the *Mahabharata*. The dog's unwavering loyalty becomes a test of Yudhishtira's virtue when he refuses entry into heaven if it means abandoning his faithful companion. The dog, later revealed to be an incarnation of Dharma, underscores the values of loyalty, compassion, and adherence to righteousness even in the face of personal loss.

Other animals, such as Jatayu, the golden deer (Maricha), and Hanuman, contribute equally significant layers to these epics. Jatayu's sacrificial battle with Ravana in the *Ramayana* exemplifies courage and duty. The golden deer lures Rama away, representing illusion and the dangers of attachment. Hanuman and the Banaras embody collective effort and devotion, showing how animal characters often transcend their earthly forms to serve divine will. In these epics, animals are not mere background figures; they are integral to the moral and philosophical fabric of the stories. Their presence emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of recognizing virtues and lessons in the most unexpected forms. Through their actions, they remind readers that wisdom, sacrifice, and loyalty are universal values that transcend species, resonating deeply in the cosmic order of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

To delve deep into their roles, some of the minor animal characters are analysed below:

### **Sampati in the *Ramayana*: The Power of Redemption and Aid**

Sampati, the elder brother of Jatayu, emerges as a minor but essential character in the *Ramayana*. A vulture by species, Sampati is introduced during the Sundara Kanda when Hanuman and the Banaras search for Sita. Sampati and Jatayu, once mighty and proud, were known for their flying prowess. According to the narrative, the brothers competed to reach the sun. In his attempt to protect Jatayu from being scorched, Sampati spread his wings and was severely burned. This act of sacrifice left him grounded, his wings charred, and his life filled with suffering. His tale mirrors the motif of sacrifice and redemption, reflecting how acts of selflessness align with dharma, even if they lead to personal loss. Sampati's pivotal moment comes when he aids the Banaras by revealing Sita's location in Lanka. His heightened vision, despite his physical limitations, symbolizes how inner wisdom and perspective can transcend physical constraints. Sampati's assistance demonstrates that even those who may appear weak or sidelined can play instrumental roles in fulfilling a greater cause. Through Sampati, the



*Ramayana* conveys themes of sacrifice, redemption, and the interconnectedness of all beings. His transformation from a proud and mighty bird to a humbled guide underscores the importance of seeking redemption and aiding others in the path of righteousness.

### **Takshaka in the *Mahabharata*: The Cycle of Revenge and Dharma**

Takshaka, the serpent king, is a minor character whose presence in the *Mahabharata* highlight themes of revenge, karma, and the intricate web of dharma. Takshaka's most notable role arises in the context of King Parikshit, the grandson of Arjuna. After Parikshit insults the sage Samika by placing a dead snake around his neck, the sage's son, Shringin, curses the king to be killed by a serpent within seven days. Takshaka fulfills this curses by biting Parikshit, leading to his death. Takshaka's involvement doesn't end with Parikshit's death. His actions spark a chain of events leading to the Sarpa Satra (Snake Sacrifice) conducted by Parikshit's son, Janamejaya, to annihilate the serpent race. However, the sacrifice is halted by the intervention of the sage Astika, emphasizing the need for balance and forgiveness. Takshaka symbolizes the cyclical nature of revenge and the consequences of unchecked emotions. His actions and the subsequent events reinforce the *Mahabharata*'s central theme: the complexity of dharma. By showing how even seemingly justified actions can lead to destructive consequences, the narrative urges readers to consider the broader implications of their choices.

### **The Role of Dogs: Symbols of Loyalty and Dharma**

Dogs, though minor characters, make significant appearances in both epics, serving as symbols of loyalty, morality, and spiritual guidance.

#### **In the *Ramayana***

Dogs play a brief but poignant role in the Uttara Kanda. When Lord Rama establishes his rule in Ayodhya, a dog approaches his court seeking justice against a Brahmin who has wronged it. Rama listens to the dog's grievance and provides a fair resolution, demonstrating his commitment to upholding justice for all beings, regardless of their status. This episode highlights the inclusiveness of Rama's rule and his unwavering commitment to dharma. The dog's appeal signifies the universality of justice, suggesting that even the voiceless deserve fairness and compassion.

#### **In the *Mahabharata***

The role of dogs is most prominent in the Mahaprasthanika Parva, during the Pandavas' final journey toward the Himalayas. A dog follows Yudhishtira throughout the journey, symbolizing unwavering loyalty. When the god Indra invites Yudhishtira to ascend to heaven, the king refuses unless the dog is allowed to accompany him. Yudhishtira's insistence reflects his steadfast adherence to dharma and loyalty. Eventually, the dog is revealed to be the god Dharma in disguise, testing Yudhishtira's virtue. This episode reinforces the *Mahabharata*'s message that true dharma lies in compassion, loyalty, and righteousness, even in the face of personal loss or temptation.

### **Significance of Minor Characters**

While figures like Sampati, Takshaka, and the dogs may appear peripheral, their roles are integral to the epics' moral and philosophical fabric.

### **Catalysts of Action**

These characters often serve as catalysts for major events. Sampati's revelation leads to Hanuman's leap to Lanka, a turning point in the *Ramayana*. Takshaka's revenge triggers the Sarpa Satra, exploring themes of forgiveness and reconciliation in the *Mahabharata*.



### Moral Lessons

Minor characters embody essential moral and ethical lessons. Sampati teaches the value of redemption and perspective, Takshaka warns of the dangers of vengeance, and the dogs underscore loyalty and compassion.

### Universality of Dharma

By highlighting the experiences of animals and non-human beings, the epics emphasize the universal applicability of dharma. Justice, loyalty, and morality transcend species and status, reminding readers of their interconnectedness with all living beings.

### Complexity of Human Nature

Characters like Takshaka reflect the complexity of human emotions and actions. His role blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator, encouraging readers to consider multiple perspectives before passing judgment.

### Conclusion:

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not just tales of heroism and divinity; they are intricate tapestries woven with the threads of countless lives, each contributing to the greater narrative. Minor characters like Sampati, Takshaka, and the dogs offer profound insights into the epics' themes, enriching their moral and philosophical depth. Through their stories, the epics remind us that even the smallest actors in the grand play of life can have significant roles, teaching timeless lessons about sacrifice, redemption, loyalty, and the complexities of dharma. By recognizing and appreciating these minor characters, we gain a fuller understanding of the epics' enduring relevance and the universal truths they seek to convey. Animal characters in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not mere literary devices but carriers of profound symbolism. They often personify virtues like loyalty, sacrifice, and wisdom while serving as mirrors to human behavior. These animals challenge human characters, provoke reflection, and remind readers of the interconnectedness of all life forms. By integrating animals so deeply into their narratives, the epics underscore the moral and spiritual lessons that transcend species, reflecting a worldview where every being no matter how small or overlooked has a role in the grand cosmic order. The animals in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, though often relegated to supporting roles, serve as vital threads in the intricate tapestry of these timeless epics. Characters like Sampati, Takshaka, and the loyal dog accompanying Yudhishtira remind us that wisdom, courage, and dharma are not confined to human protagonists. These animals often embody virtues that even the mightiest heroes strive to uphold—loyalty, selflessness, and an innate connection to cosmic justice. Through their actions and symbolism, these creatures transcend their minor roles, enriching the narratives and offering profound moral insights. Sampati's guidance, Takshaka's retributive act, and the dog's unwavering loyalty illustrate that even the smallest beings in the cosmic order have their place and purpose. In recognizing their significance, the epics teach us to see beyond the obvious, to value the interconnectedness of life, and to learn from all beings, no matter how seemingly insignificant. In the end, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are not merely stories of human triumph and tragedy but universal epics that embrace the contributions of every creature. These animals remind us that dharma is not the exclusive domain of humans; it is a shared principle that binds all living beings, urging us toward harmony, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the world.



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