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# Monsters or Gods? Narratives of large cat worship in western India

**In this article we describe the belief in the presence of a large cat deity, Waghoba, which appears to be geographically widespread in western India and is still revered today. It is a very old cultural institution which according to many interviewees was at least many centuries old. The people had a deep belief that the large cat, a leopard *Panthera pardus* or a tiger *Panthera tigris* or both, protected them. This ancient cultural connection between people and large cats is little studied or understood. Believers also have an understanding of the ecology of the animal as well as their own myths surrounding the animals. We address the rarely acknowledged, but probably deeply relevant, cultural context where groups of people have a radically different relationship with large cats which is largely ignored by conservationists. These relationships could provide the basis for co-adaptations that allow for coexistence in shared landscapes, therefore, it is very important that we document and study these institutions before they die out.**

The narratives concerning large cats and humans all too often focus on conflicts (Inskipp & Zimmermann 2009). The term “conflict” takes on various definitions for different people; ranging from the mere presence of species in a shared landscape, a perception of threat, damages to livestock, to injuries and loss of human lives (Redpath et al. 2014). The media often portray the most negative narrative of conflict when dealing with human-large cat interactions with the term “man-eating” commonly being used. This sensationalism and portrayal of large cats with a negative spin is pervasive across popular literature (Hathaway et al. 2017). One reason why the predominant narrative is one of fear and extreme conflict could be that a more peaceful interaction is a rarity rather than the norm, not in reality but in the dominant cultural contexts. Another reason could be that, studies on large cats are largely set within wilderness landscapes where the effect of humans and any potential co-adaptation is absent and/or most studies on large cats focus predominantly on the biological and not the human dimensions or the interaction between the two (Ghosal et al. 2013, Carter & Linnell 2016). However, recent studies from many parts of the world are now showing that large carnivores, including large cats do, and can, share space with humans without the kind of “conflict” we expect them to create (Athreya et al. 2013, Chapron et al. 2014, Yirga et al. 2014).

In this article we describe a little known, yet powerful, narrative where large cats are revered and respected in India, even today. Specifically, we provide documentary evidence of the worship of “Waghoba”, a large cat deity, by many communities across a large landscape. We also discuss how this deity might affect how people respond to the presence of large cats in their areas.

## Methods

Although we had encountered Waghoba shrines since 2007, the first formal survey for Waghoba sites was started in 2013 in the state of Goa. In 2015 and 2016 we surveyed areas in Maharashtra focussing on the Mumbai region (Supproting Online Material SOM Table T1). The GPS locations of shrines were



**Fig. 1.** The Waghoba shrine at Ughem, Goa. The flowers indicate it is still being worshipped (Photo A. Borkar).

recorded and local people were interviewed to obtain information about the shrine as well as their relationship with the deity and interactions with the large cats that the shrines represented. Respondents were selected on the basis of targeted (where a specific group of people is targeted) and snowball (wherein one respondent leads to another one and then the chain continues) sampling. The respondents included priests and village elders. In total we interviewed 150 people.

Goa has a geographical area of 3,702 km<sup>2</sup> out of which 1,224 km<sup>2</sup> comprises of the total forest area, 237 km<sup>2</sup> and 822 km<sup>2</sup> has been declared as reserved forest and protected forest respectively. The forests of Goa are typical of the Western Ghats (Southern Maharashtra and Karnataka). The forests are diverse including Estuarine vegetation, Strand vegetation, Plateau vegetation comprising open scrub, moist mixed deciduous forests and sub-tropical hill forests and semi-evergreen and evergreen forests (State of forest report 2003).

Maharashtra has a geographical area of 307,713 km<sup>2</sup> out of which 61,939 km<sup>2</sup> comprises of the total forest area, 49,217 km<sup>2</sup> and 8,196 km<sup>2</sup> has been declared as reserved forest and protected forest respectively. Maharashtra's forests are varied, from the moist areas in the Konkan to the dry areas of Vidarbha in the east. These diverse habitats support a rich variety of flora and fauna. Today, the only large continuous forest patches are found along the Satpuras in northeastern Maharashtra, in Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts and along the Western Ghats.

In Mumbai we visited the Warli and Mahadeo communities living in and around the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai, Tungreshwar Wildlife Sanctuary and Vasai.



**Fig. 2.** The Waghoba shrine at Choukunde Goa where the idol is believed to be more than 1000 years old (Photo A. Borkar).

**Results**

*Goa*

In the state of Goa, we visited nine villages where Waghoba shrines (the deity is referred to as Waghro in this state) were present (SOM T1). The priests indicated that the deity is worshipped twice a year with the rituals starting at the time of day when the large cat becomes active (around 8 pm) and lasting for about an hour. The Waghro statues, many of which are over 700 years old, are oiled during each ritual which is attended by all the people in the village. They also mentioned that the tiger or the leopard often calls during the ritual and until about 20 years ago a tiger would accompany them home from the temple as they would hear the calls all the way back to their houses. The people who revered the deity were largely from the Velip community.

From our interviews with the people it appears that there is a very strong belief that the deity takes care of them. In Ughem (Fig. 1), for instance, they believe that a leopard sometimes sits near the idol. In Choukunde (Fig. 2), it is believed that the statue is more than a 1000 years old, rituals are carried out for this idol, and it is believed that the deity takes care of the people.

*Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra*

Respondents claim that Waghoba is worshipped due to both fear (ghabra watto) and respect. For the forest communities, the forests are an important resource and people frequently venture into them to collect firewood. They believe that the forest, however, is the realm of the Wagh (tiger or leopard) and worship along with sacrificial offerings is conducted to appease the big cats so that they do not attack humans within the forest, and also to prevent them from coming into villages. Waghoba priests claim that at night, Waghoba comes near the temple as

is evident from pug marks which they find the next day. In order to appease the cats, villagers offer sacrificial offering of meat (chicken or goat) in mid-April and in October. Waghoba is viewed as the *Junglacha Rakhandar*, or Protector of the Forest (Fig. 3 & 4).

*Peoples' views about the large cats in their shared landscapes*

The respondents in the Mumbai landscape stated that female leopard's breed once in two years and move with their cubs, that they are mostly nocturnal, with each individual having its own territory which it guards and protects, that they scent mark their territories, they hunt only when they are hungry and that they can climb trees. They said that the source of this knowledge and understanding of leopards is from cultural transmission of knowledge, and through regular personal observations. On the other hand, there were many myths, including; that leopards possess powers to destroy bad omen, once a leopard tastes human blood it becomes a man eater, and that these leopards are huge in size (even bigger than a tiger based on people's description). The people also described a belief in two "types" of leopards. The first are leopards which live in their forests and originally belong there, and which understand people and are scared of them. These leopards run away from the people when they occasionally cross paths while in the forest. But the other "type" is exactly the opposite as they believe that they have been released in the forests (by the forest department) and are too bold to be scared of villagers and sometimes come very close to them. They also mentioned that leopards are by and large scared of humans but also mention that these animals have individual specific traits, such as boldness or shyness, and understand that every leopard which has its territory close to a human settlement definitely comes close to the houses

during the night in the search for easy domestic prey.

At a Waghoba temple in Dahibao, South Maharashtra (Fig. 5), the villager we spoke to said that once a year the leopard visits the temple and roars. The wooden hands and legs kept by people at the temple (Fig. 6) were to cure their ailments related to their hands and legs, believing that the large cat deity would cure them.

We have seen evidence of the presence of the large cat deity in the states of Maharashtra and Goa. The large cat deity is assigned to both tigers and leopards, although in some areas only the tigers are regarded as the deity and in other places only the leopard. In Maharashtra, both tigers and leopards are worshipped as "Waghoba/Waghya dev" (Ghosal 2013). The name Waghoba is derived from Marathi with "Wagh" meaning tiger and "Ba" referring to a common Marathi suffix used to indicate respect. The appearances of the Waghoba shrines vary and are made up of wood or rock that are covered with vermilion paste, or stones carved out in the shape of a large cat. In some other places the large cat is also drawn or carved with other features like the cobra, moon and the sun (Fig. 7 & 8).

**Discussion**

Although we documented some of the large cat shrines in Goa and Maharashtra, there is literature from the neighbouring state of Gujarat, in the Dang region, where the indigenous people collectively referred to as Dangis revere Waghoba with each village having a wooden statue of the large cat. Shull (1968) "spent some time hunting the man-eating and cattle-killing tigers and leopards which were so greatly upsetting village life." His use of words in the article is very illuminating with respect to what happened "After one of these dangerous and destructive cats



**Fig. 3.** Waghoba from the Mumbai landscape (Photo V. Athreya).



**Fig. 4.** Waghoba from the Mumbai landscape (Photo M. Ghosalkar).

was shot... The villagers would come by the dozens or even by the hundreds, to pay respects to the dead leopard or tiger, as the case might be. Many of the Dangis would fold their hands in a gesture of typical Hindu worship, touch the animal,..."

This underscores how the same animal can be viewed in different ways by different groups of people depending on their cultural antecedents and has implications for the enablement of shared spaces. In the above, Shull with his colonial view point looks at these animals as 'man-eating and cattle-killing... that upset the village life' whereas the locals revered the same animal, even after its death.

Earlier research has documented how other communities that share space with these large cats often view the animals as "protectors", "owners", "family" or as "vehicles of the gods". The tigers of the Sunderbans are believed to be the owners of the forest and are worshiped as "Banobibi/Dakshinrai" by both Hindus and Muslims (Jalais 2008). Similarly, the Santhals and the Kisans of Orissa also believe the tiger to be the king of the jungle and worship it as "Bagheshwar" and "Banjara" (Kanungo & Kanungo 1998). Tigers have also been documented to play the role of a protector among Garo tribes of Meghalaya, Gonds of Madhya Pradesh and Tulunadu tribe of South Kanara district of Karnataka. The Garos wear tiger claws in gold or silver as a necklace for protection, and the Gonds carry the shoulder bone of the tiger in the belief that it will bring them strength. The Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu also worship the tiger who is believed to offer protection from evil spirits (Zvelebil 2000). However, these studies have not drawn attention to Waghoba with the exception of a few mentions. In Maharashtra, the Dhangars who are pastoralists, and whose livestock often fall prey to the tiger also view the tiger as a protector of their livestock. Besides Biroba, a younger brother of Vithoba the Dhangar's main God, this group also worships "Waghdev/Waghjai", believing that worshipping Waghdev will protect their sheep from the tigers and leopards (Sonthheimer 1947, Gadgil & Malhotra 1979). There is recent evidence from northeast India where the Mishmi tribes regard the tiger as their brother and have a relationship with the animal that is different than the commonly known legal or scientific way of looking at the tiger (Aiyadurai 2016).

These beliefs and practices are not unique to India. Traditional folklore of many cultures considers these animals as benevolent gods

or malevolent agents, and large cats are often incorporated into the culture of people via rituals, taboos and practices (Newman 1961, Saunders 1998). For instance, the Tiger Compendium of 16<sup>th</sup> century China states that tigers were both feared and revered (Coggins 2003). Most of these relationships have associated superstitious beliefs (Saunders 1998) and it is not our intention here to judge as to whose perception of the large cats are better or worse. Our interviews with people who share space with these cats in the landscapes where these shrines are present indicate that they also have a basic knowledge of the natural history of the leopards which reflects both an understanding of their basic biology as well as the precautions they need to take with respect to the leopards.

Such relationships are rarely explored especially in the domain of wildlife conservation which focuses to a large extent on economic aspects of "conflict". The media also highlights sensational events and could contribute to increasing fear of these predators among the public with serious ramifications on how policy is framed to deal with these otherwise complex interactions (Hathaway et al. 2017). The recent studies that deal with the social and cultural dimension of the issue (Ghosal & Kjosavik 2015, Govindrajan 2015, Landy 2017) are allowing us to look beyond studies of damages and conflict and explore other kinds of interactions that exist between people and large carnivores, including large cats.

Due to various reasons, large carnivores are increasing their ranges into human-dominated landscapes but conservationists and managers are only poorly equipped to deal with the human-dimension of the issue because of the predominance of the negative narrative that is present in the ecological sciences related to human-large cat interactions (Carter & Linnell 2016). Our work shows that there are many instances of positive interactions which are much older than the field of wildlife conservation, but which are currently ignored. As conservation seeks to promote strategies of coexistence and land-sharing it is essential that we look beyond the negativity of the conflict component of our interactions with large felids and look at the co-adaptation strategies that humans have developed over the centuries to facilitate their relationships with these predators. The institution of Waghoba, that we describe here, is a religious and cultural adaptation to living with the uncertainty that follows from living in proximity to these species.



**Fig. 5.** The Waghoba temple at Dahibao, South Maharashtra (Photo V. Athreya).



**Fig. 6.** The wooden hands and legs kept near the diety in the belief that people's ailments would be cured by Waghoba (Photo V. Athreya).



**Fig. 7.** Waghoba from the Dang forests of Gujarat (the first one seen by us in 2007) (Photo V. Athreya).



**Fig. 8.** A person praying to a Waghoba shrine where the sun and moon are also depicted (Photo S. Pimpale).

Expanding on these preliminary studies requires us to obtain information that is not limited by our own disciplinary fields of expertise. Although social psychology and sociology have recently begun to be more active in conservation, exploring institutions like Waghoba requires tools drawn from ethnography and anthropology. We must also move our studies from protected areas to look at societies where people are already used to share space with what are potentially dangerous large wildlife and use that knowledge to reduce negative interactions in other landscapes and other situations. This will mean greater openness to knowledge that is outside the realm of wildlife biology and greater collaboration between scientists studying the human dimensions.

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Supporting Online Material Table T1 is available at [www.catsg.org](http://www.catsg.org).

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**SOM T1.** The locations of the waghoba shrines we encountered as part of our work.

Sr No	Name	Latitude	Longitude	Region
1	Kharbav	19°18'8.76"	72°59'28.56"	Mumbai
2	Khadipada. Devkundi, Kaman	19°21'33.96"	72°53'51.24"	Mumbai
3	Malodi	19°22'49.86"	72°54'5.64"	Mumbai
4	Jabarpada, Pelhar	19°26'43.56"	72°53'10.02"	Mumbai
5	Bavkhal	19°27'38.88"	72°53'9.36"	Mumbai
6	Shramjiv, Usgaon	19°27'56.34"	72°56'2.64"	Mumbai
7	Keltipada, Aarey colony	19°8'37.80"	72°51'59.34"	Mumbai
8	Khandyacha pada	19°8'24.42"	72°53'1.62"	Mumbai
9	Aarey colony	19°9'46.98"	72°53'19.50"	Mumbai
10	Malad	19°11'14.34"	72°52'57.66"	Mumbai
11	Nimbuni pada gavthan, Malad	19°11'7.08"	72°52'57.66"	Mumbai
12	Tulasi lake	19°11'36.80"	72°54'34.70"	Mumbai
13	Trimurthi	19°13'23.46"	72°52'16.14"	Mumbai
14	Chinchpada	19°13'17.04"	72°52'35.64"	Mumbai
15	MAFCO	19°13'18.22"	72°52'55.74"	Mumbai
16	Tumnipada	19°13'14.22"	72°53'14.22"	Mumbai
17	Chunapada	19°12'32.88"	72°53'35.70"	Mumbai
18	Wadyacha pada	19°16'22.86"	72°55'4.02"	Mumbai
19	Vangani	19°5'7.93"	73°17'30.87"	Mumbai
20	Koknipada	19°13'59.8"	72°57'40.6"	Mumbai
21	Pimpargane	19°10'38.2"	73°35'51.7"	Pune
22	Tondavali	16°08'42.8"	73°27'25.4"	S. Maharashtra
23	Asaniye	15°51'31.8"	73°56'53.8"	S. Maharashtra



24	Hewale	15°47'19.3"	74°06'44.2"	S. Maharashtra
25	Dahibao	16°18'52.44"	73°27'17.6"	S. Maharashtra
26	Vaghregal	15°18'11.9"	74°10'33.3"	Goa
27	Gadongrem	15°02'14.5"	74°07'07.2"	Goa
28	Colomba rivan	15°09'20.7"	74°07'58.8"	Goa
29	Malkarni	15°11'11.3"	74°07'35.1"	Goa
30	Awachitvada	15°35'08.8"	73°56'50.1"	Goa
31	Ughem	15°15'09.67"	74°12'00.79"	Goa
32	Choukunde	15°17'47.89"	74°13'22.74"	Goa
33	Gavthan	15°32'55.10"	74°01'01.30"	Goa