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## MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM AND ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION OF DOGS IN HINDU TRADITION

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### Abstract

Dogs occupy a distinctive yet often overlooked place within Hindu mythology, ritual practice, and sacred architecture. This paper aims to examine the mythological significance, symbolic roles, and architectural representations of dogs in Hindu tradition and regional cultural practices. The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on textual analysis of Hindu scriptures and folklore, along with visual and architectural documentation of temple sculptures, iconography, and memorial structures across selected sites in India. The findings reveal that dogs are symbolically associated with protection, loyalty, and liminality, often appearing as companions or *vahana* of deities such as *Bhairava*, *Dattatreya*, and *Khandoba*, and are represented through diverse sculptural and architectural forms in temples and memorials. The study concludes that these representations demonstrate how mythological symbolism is embedded within built heritage, reflecting the cultural relationship between animals, belief systems, and sacred spaces in Hindu tradition.

**Keywords:** Dogs, *Shvan*, *Bhairava*, *Dattatreya*, *Khandoba*, Temple Iconography, *Vahana*, Sacred Architecture, *Kukurdev*, *Svana Vyala*

### Introduction

As per the *Uttar Kanda* of the Ramayan, a dog gets beaten up by a brahmin. The dog approaches Lord Rama in search of justice. The dog reveals that he was a corrupt temple priest in his previous birth. The dog requested Lord Rama to appoint the brahmin as the head of temple instead of giving him any physical punishment (Patnaik, 2013).

Another interpretation is based on the ancient protective duty of dogs. Dogs are occasionally called upon as gatekeepers even in Vedic hymns. The *Rigveda* mentions Sarama as the first dog in history. Sarama is the female dog who assists Indra in recovering his stolen cows. All dogs are blessed by Indra as a result of her service. The twin Sarameyas, the offspring of the divine female dog Sarama, are described in the Rig Veda as the hounds of Yama, the deity of death. They guard the paths to the other world, ensuring only the rightful dead pass (Patnaik, 2020).

Due to the dog's association with death, it is also linked to Bhairava, Shiva's ferocious form, who is referred to as Kashi's defender or guardian. He is seen riding dogs as the kotwal of Kashi, which is another allusion to the dog's role as a watchdog that guards the inner world from outside threats.

The *Atharvaveda* mentions *Rudra* to be the Lord of dogs. *Shiva* was considered as an outcast God in that period. Until he changes into the fortunate *Shiva* of *Puranas*, he is dreaded and kept at a distance. As per Mahabharat, a dog accompanies *Yudhishthira* to heaven. *Yudhishthira* refuses to enter heaven unless the dogs join him. The dog is not allowed to enter heaven since dogs are considered unauspicious. However, *Yudhishthira* insists on taking the dog along (Chhabra, 2026).

Dogs are revered and connected to divine beings in Hinduism, particularly as the *vahan* (vehicle) of *Kal Bhairav*, a ferocious incarnation of Lord Shiva. This dog, called *Shvan*, represents protection, loyalty, and conquering fear. Dogs are revered at Bhairava temples all across India, particularly in Varanasi, Tamil Nadu, and Nepal. They are nourished, nurtured, and regarded as living embodiments of God. Devotees feed dogs as a form of worship during *Bhairava Ashtami* because they think that taking care of a dog is the same as serving *Bhairava* (Chhabra, 2026).

*Pashupatinath* is one of the most exquisite and well-known titles given to Lord Shiva. It literally translates to "master of animals." But this term "animal" refers to all living things. *Chaturpaada*, *bahupaada*, *dwi pada*. refers to people with two, four, or many legs.

The Sanskrit term "*pashupati*" comes from the words "*pashu*," which means "animal," and "*pati*," which means "protector." Therefore, *Pashupati* literally translates to "the Lord who guards the animals." Although *Pashupatinath* is worshiped by all Hindus worldwide, Nepal is where his significance is greatest. In Nepal, *Pashupatinath* is considered the national deity. Situated on the banks of the Bagmati River, the *Pashupatinath* temple is regarded as the most holy location in Nepal (Anand, 2025).

The association between Jejuri's *Khandoba* and dogs stems from his identification with Shiva. As an incarnation of Shiva—who is venerated as *Bhairava*—*Khandoba* inherits this connection, since Bhairava is frequently portrayed with a dog as his companion or vehicle. In certain visual depictions, the dog actively aids *Khandoba* in battle, such as attacking the demon Malla, and symbolizes the deity's fierce, vigilant, and protective qualities.

The ancient Vedic tradition that regarded dogs as unlucky was contested by Dattatreya, the first teacher of the Nath Jogis. In the later literature, the ferocious dogs of Bhairava transform into 4 gentle puppies. These four puppies following Lord *Dattatreya* are embodying the four *vedas* viz *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Samveda*. They are "hounds of heaven, watchdogs of the ultimate Truth" who obey the Lord. No matter where they may be born, they aid the Lord in "hunting" and locating pure souls. These tales help us understand that animals have great symbolic meaning in Hinduism and are more than just companions. Dogs are included into divine narratives, just as each deity has a *vahana* (Patnaik, 2019).

Dogs are frequently mentioned in Hindu sacred texts. A *Chandala* (low caste) who arrived with four dogs was rejected by Adi Shankara. He then discovered that the four canines represented the four Vedas, and the Chandala represented Lord *Parameswara*. The four hounds of Lord Dattatreya were four Vedas. *Vahana*, Lord Bhairava's conveyance, is a dog. When a dog stole some of his meal, Saint Namdev gave it all back (Swaminathan, 2013).

In Hindu temple architecture, *Yali* (*Vyala*) is a well-known character made from a variety of animal parts. *Vyalas* are considered to be protectors of the temples. The Samaradgana Sutradhara of Bhoja (11th century A.D.) includes 16 *Vyalas*, which are known as leographs *Vyala* because of the moulding used above the cornice, which gets its name from being typically decorated with the representations of the animal named *Vyala*. These are as *Harina* (Deer), *Gridhraka* (Vulture), *Mtsuka* (Parrot), *Kukkuta* (Cock), *Simha* (Lion), *Sardula* (Tiger), *Vrika* (Wolf), *Aja* (Goat), *Gandaki* (Rhinoceros Female), *Gajah* (Elephant), *Kroda* (bear), *Asva* (horse), *Mahisha* (Buffalo), *Svana* (Dog), *Markata* (Monkey), And *Khara* (Donkey) (Kumar, 2018). The Svan Yali represents loyalty and protection (Figure 1). Standing on top of an elephant, the *svan yali* has the face of a dog and body of a lion (Bangera, n.d.).

### **Objectives:**

- To examine the mythological significance of dogs in Hindu scriptures and regional traditions.
- To analyse the symbolic roles of dogs as guardians, companions, messengers, and liminal beings in association with deities such as *Khandoba*, *Dattatreya* and *Bhairava*.
- To document and study architectural representations of dogs in Hindu temple sculpture, iconography, and sacred art.
- To investigate the cultural and historical context of dogs in Hindu temples and memorials, particularly in Maharashtra and other regions of India.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach to examine the mythological, ritual, and architectural significance of dogs in Hindu traditions. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including mythological texts, folklore narratives, historical records, scholarly articles, books, and documented reports. These sources were analysed to trace scriptural references and interpret symbolic associations between dogs and deities such as Shiva, Bhairava, Dattatreya, Khandoba, and Muthappan.

A case study method was employed to investigate selected temples, shrines, memorials, and sculptural representations across different regions of India. Sites were chosen based on their ritual practices, architectural features, and continuity of canine veneration. An iconographic and thematic analysis was conducted to decode recurring motifs such as loyalty, protection, guardianship, and sacrifice.

**Results**

**Maharashtra & Goa**

At the Siddhivinayak Temple in Siddhatek, there is a calm and approachable dog seated on the stone steps just outside the main entrance of the Ganapati shrine. Observers note that the animal appears to interact gently with devotees, at times extending its paw in a gesture interpreted as a handshake and seemingly “blessing” visitors (Fig 2). This incident illustrates a contemporary instance in which a stray dog becomes symbolically integrated into the ritual environment of a sacred space, reflecting the continuing cultural resonance of canine sanctity in lived religious practice (Times of India,2021).

The Ram Mandir in Phaltan, also features a statue of a dog near its doors (Fig 3). Shree Mhalsakant Khandoba Temple in Dhamani also has a dog statue at its entrance.

		
<p>Fig 1: Svana Yali Source: Artist V. Senthilkumaran</p>	<p>Fig 2: Dog blessing devotees outside Siddhivinayak temple in Siddhatek, Maharashtra. Source: Pallavi, 2021</p>	<p>Fig 3: Ram Mandir in Phaltan Source: author</p>

Several historical and literary sources refer to the presence of Waghya, the loyal dog of Shivaji Maharaj. A German publication titled *Negotiations: Authors and Subjects of Books I–X (1834–1852)*, released in 1930, notes that following Shivaji Maharaj’s death in 1680, a memorial shrine was established at his cremation site. The account further recounts that a dog identified as Waghya leapt into the funeral pyre, an act interpreted as the ultimate expression of devotion to his master.

Researcher Sonawani also draws attention to a 1678 sculpture commissioned by Rani Mallabai of the Belwadi Sansthan in Karnataka, which portrays Shivaji Maharaj accompanied by his dog, suggesting the animal’s recognized presence during his lifetime. Additionally, C. G. Gogate’s 1905 work *Maharashtratil Kille* mentions Waghya, reinforcing the dog’s enduring place in regional memory. The theme is further explored in *Rajsanyas* (1919), a Marathi play by Ram Ganesh Gadkari, which dramatizes the bond between the Chhatrapati and his faithful companion. In the play’s dedicatory note, Gadkari refers to a statue of Waghya erected before Shivaji Maharaj’s samadhi, underscoring the symbolic memorialisation of canine loyalty (Deshpande, 2025).

	
<p>Fig 4: Shree Mhalsakant Khandoba Temple, Dhamani, Dist- Pune Source: author</p>	<p>Fig 5: The memorial of Waghya on Raigad Fort. Source: Yuvraj Sambhaji</p>

The Datta temple in Mapusa, Goa features a bronze statue of Lord Dattatreya with four dogs (Fig 6.1, 6.2). The temple priests allow the dogs to attend the prayers.

		
<p>Fig 6.1: Datta temple Mapusa Cuncholim, Goa Source: Atul Sarin</p>	<p>Fig 6.2: Datta temple Mapusa Cuncholim, Goa Source: Atul Sarin</p>	<p>Fig 7: Channapattana Dog temple Source: ETV bhara, 2023</p>

## **Karnataka**

In the Channapattana taluk of Ramanagara district, Karnataka, the village of Agrahara Valagerhalli is home to a distinctive shrine dedicated to dogs. The community venerates these animals as divine protectors and has constructed a modest Dog Temple within the village (Fig 7). Local belief holds that the dogs safeguard the settlement from malevolent forces and act as spiritual guardians. According to oral narratives shared by villagers, the temple's origin traces back several decades, when two dogs from the village reportedly disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Subsequently, the presiding village deity, Goddess Kempamma, is said to have appeared in a dream to a resident, instructing the community to build a shrine for the two lost dogs beside her own temple. The goddess reportedly assured the villagers that the dogs would serve as "gatekeepers," protecting both the deity and the settlement. Following this vision, the villagers installed two canine idols within a simple marble structure adjacent to the temple of Goddess

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Kempamma. Since then, the dogs have been ritually worshipped as guardian figures. Significantly, it has become customary to offer puja to the dog deities before performing worship for the principal village goddess, symbolically affirming their role as protectors and intermediaries within the sacred hierarchy of the village (ETV Bharat news, 2023).

### **Tamil Nadu**

A finely carved pillar sculpture of Dattatreya is situated within the Shri Jambukeswarar Akilandeswari Temple in Trichy (Fig 8). The iconography portrays Dattatreya in his traditional three-faced form, holding a *kamandalu* and wearing *padukas*. Accompanying him are four dogs, conventionally understood to represent the four *Vedas*. In this sculptural composition, the dogs function not merely as attendants but as symbolic embodiments of sacred knowledge and steadfast devotion, reinforcing Dattatreya's role as a spiritual teacher and synthesizing figure within Hindu philosophy.

### **Chhattisgarh**

The Kukurdev Temple of Khapri Balod, Chhattisgarh represents a distinctive example of canine veneration within a Shaiva context (Fig 9). At this shrine, a dog is worshipped alongside a Shivalinga, symbolically integrating the animal into mainstream Hindu devotional practice. Local belief maintains that visiting the temple protects devotees from ailments such as whooping cough and from dog bites, reinforcing the dog's perceived protective power. According to regional folklore, the temple's origin is linked to a nomadic Banjara family who once settled in the area. During a severe famine, the head of the family reportedly borrowed money from a local moneylender but was unable to repay the debt. As collateral, he left his loyal dog with the moneylender. Shortly thereafter, the moneylender's house was robbed; however, the dog traced the stolen goods and led him to their location. Grateful for the animal's fidelity, the moneylender tied a note around the dog's neck and sent it back to its owner. Misinterpreting the dog's return as an act of escape, the nomad killed the animal in anger, only to discover the explanatory note afterward. Filled with remorse, he buried the dog at the site and erected a memorial, which gradually evolved into a temple. The structure was later renovated under the *Naga* dynasty. The surrounding settlement also preserves this memory. A nearby village is said to be named after the original Banjara owner, who eventually settled there after failing to repay his loan. The temple continues to attract large numbers of devotees, particularly during *Navratri* and *Mahashivratri*. During Navratri, worshippers light the *Jyotikalasha* (sacred lamp), often interpreted locally as a symbol of loyalty and fulfilled wishes. Special prayers are offered during Mahashivratri, and in the month of Sawan, the shrine becomes a focal point for Shiva worship, creating a festive atmosphere throughout the village (Rathore, 2021).

		
<p>Fig 8: Dattatreya - Thiruvanaikoil Jambukeswarar Temple Source: Valli Nayagam</p>	<p>Fig 9: Kukurdev Temple of Khapri Balod, Chhattisgarh Source: Chaturvedi, 2022</p>	<p>Fig 10: Bhairav Baba Temple, Chipyana Source: Singh, 2025</p>

## Uttar Pradesh

The Bhairav Baba Temple, located in Chipyana Buzurg village in Greater Noida West, features a dog statue within its courtyard that has long been an object of local devotion (Fig 10). The shrine is closely associated with beliefs in healing and protection, particularly in cases of dog bites. A pond situated near the temple complex is considered sacred, and it is widely believed that bathing in its waters after a dog bite mitigates the effects of the injury, including fears related to rabies. Oral tradition attributes the origin of the shrine to a local resident named Lakha Banjare, who is said to have buried his dog at this site following its death. Over time, villagers constructed a temple over the animal's grave, gradually elevating it to the status of a revered local deity. The grave and the adjoining pond together form the focal point of ritual practice. Devotees from surrounding regions visit the temple to offer prayers and make offerings to the dog's statue. Saturdays, in particular, witness large gatherings of worshippers. The presence of both an internal pond within the temple complex and another outside the premises further reinforces the ritual significance of sacred bathing as part of the healing belief system associated with this shrine (Khan, 2025).

The Dog Queen Temple in Jhansi represents a unique example of canine memorialisation elevated to ritual worship (Fig 11). Located in Mauranipur town, the shrine is dedicated to a deceased female dog and attracts a steady flow of devotees. Regular worship is conducted by the temple priest, Kishori Lala Yadav, who notes that while faith in the canine figure existed earlier, the construction of a formal temple institutionalised and regularised her worship. According to local oral tradition, the female dog once roamed along the boundary between the villages of Revan and Kakwara. On one occasion, both villages were preparing for community feasts. The dog first ran to Revan in search of food, but the meal was not yet ready. She then proceeded to Kakwara, only to encounter the same situation. Exhausted and hungry, she positioned herself midway between the two settlements, intending to run toward whichever village first sounded the bell announcing that food had been served. As the story goes, both villages rang their gongs simultaneously, and in that very moment, the dog collapsed and died. In remembrance, villagers erected a memorial at

the site of her death, which gradually evolved into a temple. Today, the female dog is venerated as a local deity, embodying themes of longing, fate, and communal memory within the sacred landscape (Chaturvedi, 2016).

			
<p>Fig 11: The Dog Queen Temple in Jhansi. Source: India Today, 2016</p>	<p>Fig 12: Shrine for a dog at Laturia Baba Temple Source: Singh, 2025</p>	<p>Fig 13: Parassini Madappura Sree Muthappan Temple in Kannur district of Kerala Source: Khan, 2024</p>	<p>Fig 14: Celebration of kukur Tihar Source: Jinit Parmar</p>

A shrine dedicated to a dog is located in Sikandrabad, near Delhi in Bulandshahr district (Fig 12). The site is regarded as a place of protective power, where devotees believe that offering prayers to the canine figure safeguards them from the evil eye and other adverse influences. The shrine witnesses significant gatherings during major Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Navratri, when special observances are held in honour of the dog. During these occasions, pilgrims travel from neighbouring regions including Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and various parts of Uttar Pradesh. Local tradition connects the temple to the dog of Baba Laturia, a blind saint who is believed to have lived in the area approximately a century ago. Over time, the animal came to be venerated in its own right, and the shrine now stands as a testament to the enduring association between canine devotion and spiritual protection within regional religious practice (Singh, 2025).

### **Kerala**

The Parassini Madappura Sree Muthappan Temple is located along the banks of the Valapattanam River in Parassinikadavu, approximately 20 kilometres from Kannur in Kerala (Fig 13). The shrine is dedicated to Sree Muthappan, a deity understood in local belief as a syncretic manifestation combining aspects of Vishnu (Thiruvappana) and Shiva (Vellattam). Folklore maintains that Muthappan was invariably accompanied by a dog, and this association remains central to the temple's ritual identity. At the entrance, bronze statues of dogs stand as symbolic guardians, representing the deity's eternal companions. A distinctive daily ritual known as *Nayoottu* involves feeding the temple dogs every morning and evening. Offerings typically include dried fish, boiled black beans, and tea, and significantly, the first portion of *prasadam* is always given to a dog before it is distributed to devotees. Dogs move freely within the temple premises, and certain

regular canine presences—such as Sundari and her late mother Meenu—have become affectionately recognised figures among temple staff and visitors. This integration of living animals into formal ritual practice exemplifies the enduring sacred bond between the deity and his canine companions (Saha, 2022).

### **Nepal & Himalayan Regions**

Kukur Tihar is mostly held in Nepal but has origins in the same Hindu customs that are practiced throughout the subcontinent (Fig 14). It is also observed in sections of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and other areas with a Nepali influence. The second day of the five-day Tihar celebration, which is the Nepali version of Diwali, is Kukur Tihar. Dogs, both pets and strays, are revered on this day. They are given special delicacies and gifts, covered in malas (flower garlands), and have tikas (red vermilion markings) on their foreheads. The celebration recognises dogs as protectors of the house and messengers of Yama. It's an official, yearly acknowledgement that dogs should be respected and appreciated by society as a whole, not just by their owners (Shingari, 2025).

The architectural representations of dogs identified in this study can be categorised into distinct typologies based on their form, spatial placement, and symbolic function within sacred environments, as summarised in Table 1.

<b>Architectural Form</b>	<b>Physical Description</b>	<b>Spatial Placement</b>	<b>Example Sites</b>	<b>Functional Meaning</b>
<b>Standalone Dog Sculpture</b>	Independent statue of dog	Temple courtyard / entrance	Kukurdev Temple (Chhattisgarh), Bhairav Baba Temple (UP)	Object of direct worship
<b>Dog as Vahana Sculpture</b>	Dog seated or standing beside deity	Adjacent to main deity	Bhairava temples, Khandoba temples	Symbolic extension of divine power
<b>Composite Form (Svana Vyala)</b>	Lion body + dog head	Above cornices, pillars	Khandoba Temple (Deolali)	Protective ornamental guardian
<b>Memorial Shrine</b>	Samadhi-like structure	Forts / public memorial zones	Waghya Memorial, Raigad Fort	Commemorative sacred memory
<b>Ritual Living Presence</b>	Non-sculptural (living dogs integrated)	Temple precinct	Parassinikadavu Muthappan Temple (Kerala)	Living embodiment of deity's companion

Table 1: Categorisation of architectural representations of dogs

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## Discussion

The contemporary presence of canine symbolism in sacred and public spaces demonstrates that the architectural representation of dogs in Hindu tradition is neither static nor merely ornamental, but actively negotiated within present-day cultural discourse. A notable example is the debate surrounding the memorial of Waghya at Raigad Fort. The controversy over the historical authenticity and proposed removal of the statue reveals how memorial architecture operates at the intersection of folklore, regional identity, and heritage politics.

Simultaneously, living ritual practices—such as the continued veneration of dogs at Parassini Madappura Sree Muthappan Temple and the celebration of Kukur Tihar in Nepal—demonstrate that canine sanctity remains embedded in contemporary devotional life. These practices reinforce the dog's enduring role as guardian, intermediary, and divine companion, extending scriptural symbolism into everyday spatial practice.

However, modern urban debates surrounding stray dogs and their regulation introduce a contrasting dimension. Legal and civic conflicts over territoriality, safety, and animal rights reveal tensions between inherited sacred symbolism and contemporary governance frameworks (Bhaumik, 2025). The dog thus occupies a paradoxical position: venerated within temple precincts yet contested within urban landscapes.

## Conclusion

The study establishes that dogs hold significant mythological importance in Hindu scriptures and regional traditions, where they are frequently depicted as loyal companions, divine attendants, and spiritually symbolic beings.

The analysis further reveals that dogs function symbolically as guardians, companions, messengers, and liminal figures associated with deities such as *Khandoba*, *Dattatreya* and *Bhairava*, reflecting themes of protection, devotion, and mediation between worlds.

The documentation of temple architecture and sacred art demonstrates that canine symbolism is materially expressed through multiple architectural forms, including standalone sculptures, *vahana* representations, composite motifs, memorial shrines, and ritual presence within temple precincts.

However, despite the deep-rooted reverence for dogs within Hindu culture, contemporary civic debates surrounding stray dog management and judicial interventions by the Supreme Court of India reveal a growing tension between traditional religious symbolism and modern urban governance, where animals revered in sacred contexts are often simultaneously perceived as a public concern in everyday civic life.

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