

Ethos of Friendship, Compassion and Reverence towards Animals in Classical Indian Philosophical and Cultural Tradition

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Abstract: *The paper has been drawn from the Classical Indian philosophy, traditional Indian mythology and literature that celebrated a human-animal companionship in pursuit of a well regulated social, cultural and natural/cosmic order. The paper explicates that this symbiosis between humans and other species in the biosphere was based upon the principles of respect and compassion. There will be a detailed exposition of Jaina Philosophical tradition of propagating non-violence and treating even the microbes and other such organisms as possessors of consciousness, and hence recipients of a non-violent disposition from human beings. The early Buddhist ethical precepts focussed on cultivating virtues of empathy, friendship and compassion towards animals. The righteous karma according to early Buddhism an act which was done with love and was free from hatred, and was thereby fostered towards expansion of moral space, which included the human- animal friendship. The paper also discusses, at length, the ethos of Hindus worshipping some animal forms as divine besides citing an analysis of it. The traditional orthodox and metaphysical philosophy of Vedanta in the Brahmanical tradition did not overtly seek such a union but the primary thesis constructed a unified denotation of a cosmos divested of biases of species and gender. An analysis of Hindu mythologies and religious theories indicates that a reverence towards animals like Bull, Snake, Monkey et el not only established a human-animal companionship but also empowered these non-human species with divine attributes and made them an equal recipient of worship. In some cases, the animals and trees have been worshipped in their primary form, and in some other case a hybridised, rather an anthropomorphised, form has been made an object or symbol of reverence.*

Key words: *animals, compassion, cosmic, humans, philosophy, respect.*

I. Introduction

Bio-centrism, an off shoot of Ecological Ethics which started around 1970s has always lamented about the Cartesian dualism between human persons and other natural species and about the environmental degradation thereof. Paul W. Taylor highlights on this by referring to distinction between a 'life-centred' system of environmental ethics that is opposed to merely human-centred ones. According to him, the perspective of a life-centred theory implies having moral obligations towards wild plants and animals themselves as members of the Earth's biotic community. The ethical approach towards each member of biotic community implies that the well-being of each one is to be realised as an end in itself.¹ *It is interesting to note in this context, and highlight that the traditional Indian philosophical and cultural wisdom had clearly enunciated an amicable and sustainable relationship between humans and non - human species based upon the ethical value of respect.*

I shall be expounding on three systems of traditional Indian philosophical-ethical and religious thoughts, viz., Jaina, Buddhist and Hindu on their respective delineation of human-animal amicability and relationship of treating all members of biotic community and even the natural entities with respect and reverence. The core ethical tenets of these traditions have emphasised on valuing a symbiotic relation between humans and non-humans, so as to keep the natural world in harmony. It is well known that both Jaina and Buddhist traditions have deliberated on the ethics of compassion and friendliness to establish human-nature bond. Hinduism, a large system of philosophy, theology and mythology has dwelt upon cosmic inclusiveness of individual beings, all life forms and natural objects. It has thereby established not only a companionship between humans, animals and plant life but sanctified all forms of nature by treating some members, both from flora and non-human animals, as divine deities and symbols of divinity.

II. Jaina Ethics: Ethics of Equality; Non-Violence towards All Living Species

The Jaina philosophers and prophets propound and preach essential equality of all living beings.² This equal treatment is an entitlement ensued according to their metaphysical belief that consciousness is the essence of all living beings (*jiva*)- from complex souls like humans to the smallest unperceived like microbes. Besides consciousness, they emphasise on the presence of sentience, in varying degrees, among all the living entities.

Equality, according to Jains is natural to all beings, while differences and distinctions found among them are adventitious. They are the consequences of auspicious and inauspicious karmas or actions. According to Jainism, in their pure and pristine state, all beings are equal. The 'inauspicious *karmain* Jaina ethics implies that which originates out of physical/ bodily desires only, while a detachment from these entails righteous *karma*.³

According to Jaina philosophy, the principle of non-violence or non-injury (*ahimsa*) is the most fundamental ethical value. This ethic of non-violent *karma* or conduct is intimately related to the belief in virtue ethics of compassion in Jaina tradition. 'An everyday implementation of the principle of non-violence is more comprehensive than in other religions, and is the hallmark for Jaina identity. Jainas believe in avoiding harm to others through thoughts, speech, and actions. According to the Jain ethical texts, killing any living being out of passions (bodily desires) is akin to injury and, hence abstaining from such act is *ahimsa* (non-injury). Hence, Jainas extend the practice of nonviolence not only towards other humans but towards all living beings.'⁴

For this reason, vegetarianism is considered to be the hallmark of Jaina food ethics. Besides propagating non-violence towards humans, animals and insects, Jainas make efforts not to injure plants any more than necessary. Although they admit that plants would be destroyed for the sake of food, they accept such violence only as much as it is indispensable for human survival. Strict Jainas, including monks do not eat root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and garlic because tiny organisms are injured when the plant is pulled up and because a bulb or tuber's ability to sprout is seen as characteristic of a living being. A strict Jaina adherent may even propagate and practice veganism as it is considered to be a bad *karma*, if there is violence against animals and plants even with a tinge of suffering⁵. Thus at the root of the feeling of compassion is the attitude of empathy towards all beings owing to their philosophical belief of considering equality among all living species owing to the possession of consciousness and sentience.

Another virtuous or non-physical/*karma* aiding the right knowledge, according to Jaina philosophy, is established owing to an amicability between all living species. All worldly beings are identical when viewed from the standpoint of their original pure state. And keeping in view this uniform and perfectly identical nature of these beings, there may arise in one's mind a delighting conception of their mutual friendship. The non-human animals are without any power of discrimination, discretion and judgment, but human beings are endowed with understanding and special power of discretion and it is expected of humans to use this power and think and act rightly. 'This cultivation of the feeling of empathy and compassion towards all beings is called *maître-bhāvanā* or the feeling of friendliness.'⁶ Developing this friendly disposition alone makes one a *Jina* or a victor, i.e., a true Jaina. A true Jaina exemplifies and embodies values of non-violence and trust. This denotation of 'universal love as a synonym of non-violence for all has been identified with the spiritual love by the Jainas.'⁷

III. Buddhism: Compassion and Friendliness towards All Living Beings

Buddhism as a philosophical thought advocated a *middle path between self-abnegation and self-indulgence*. This philosophical system has undergone many variations since its inception by the Buddha himself. However, the core of the thought and essence remained the same. 'Buddha's central message is contained in the four noble truths, and relating these with the theory of *karma* or action. Buddha advocated eightfold noble path in consonance with four virtues (*brahmavihāra*).'⁸

The Buddhist theory of the noble truths and righteous actions can be summed up as: 'The first noble truth states that all forms of existence are unsatisfactory, and hence the worldly existence is full of suffering. The second states that the origin of the dissatisfaction lies in an incessant craving or ceaseless desiring. The third states the way or the eight fold noble path of liberation from this state of suffering, and the fourth refers to the state of liberation or nirvana. The truth of suffering is explained through twelve causal links starting from birth or decay and rebirth. The root of this the wheel of existence (the *bhava-chakra*) which makes a person suffer, and this is centred on incessant craving, and the way to remove this suffering is sought through the righteous *karma* which is explained in eight fold path treaded with moderation. These paths are: right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right effort and right concentration. These eight fold steps have to be conducted with right discipline and right concentration, and these should be practiced following the four virtues, which are: universal Friendship, universal Compassion, happiness in the prosperity of

the others and lastly, detachment from self-centeredness. All of these were to be followed by both saints (*bodhisattvas*) and by the laymen and women alongside the ten moral precepts.⁹

Concern for the welfare of the natural world and all its creatures was the focal point of Buddhist ethical action/ *dharma* based upon righteous *karma*. The concept of *karma*, even though has been around since the time of Vedas, found a unique prominence in early Buddhism. 'The theory of *Karma* in early Buddhism provides the linkage between suffering and the doctrine of the theory of no-self or of the denouncement of 'ego-centeredness' of human beings. Buddha called it an intentional action done by body, by speech and by thought. Buddha advised his disciples to remember the traditional Indian doctrine of *karma* which literally means an action performed. The most significant pointer in Buddhist ethics has been Buddha's description of a living being as not the eternal self but an agent exemplifying a unity of action, thought and speech. In this regard, humans and animals are considered to be identical but differ in being reflective and instinctive respectively. The morality upon which Buddhist ethics or *dharma* is based is focussed on love and respect for all life, and he emphasised upon the phrase, 'let every creature's heart rejoice.'¹⁰

Buddhist ethics have emphatically focussed upon a pragmatic balance between a sense of realism and a refined or an enlightened ecological sensibility. This is fostered by our concerns with ecological or natural environment which includes both humans and non-human animals. It is also clear that for the Buddha, the root of compassion is wisdom. Wisdom, according to Buddha, did not imply an intellectual quality but meant a virtue that gives rise to a spontaneous concern for all forms and species of living beings. In Buddhist ethics, therefore, one sees a clear link between morality and the broader philosophy of leading a meaningful life. Through practice of right mindfulness, Buddhism provides resources for a sustainability ethic and a holistic orientation for human- non human and nature solidarity. Buddhism with its insistence on right conduct and right mindfulness, and on cultivation of friendship, empathy, compassion and respect seeks deliberation both at the individual and at the collective level to review the given disorderliness.

The notion of attainment to nature is given due expression in Mahayana-Vajaryana tradition, the latest variant of Buddhism being followed by Tibetans, the legendary exponent of which is Dalai Lama XIV. Excerpt from one of his public addresses validates this point about this pragmatic wisdom:

"Whether it be the environment that is inhabited, or the inhabitants, both of them are composed of five basic elements. It is on the basis of these five basic elements that there is a very close interrelatedness or interrelation between the habitat that is the natural environment and the inhabitants, the sentiments living within it"¹¹

Two of the most important virtues emphasised by Buddhist ethics are loving-kindness and compassion. Buddhists insist upon extending these to all living things: people, animals, plants, the earth itself. These virtuous goals ought to be achieved by: i) taking moral responsibility, ii) cultivating a conduct of compassion and empathy, and iii) living a prudential virtuous middle path of avoiding indulgence and austerity.

IV. Hindu Philosophical Wisdom on Revering All Forms of Natural Life

Hinduism can be referred to as an inclusive tradition, which has extended divine forms and symbols to both human and animal life forms. Besides these, Hindu thought has always extended the gamut of divine species to trees and plants- to all forms of natural life. According to Hindu thought, there is no separation between the Divine and the world of nature. They are the two aspects of the same reality. The cosmic reality is one, an absolute, the formless, but spiritual, is referent of the right knowledge, and represents the pure state of bliss.

Ultimately for the Hindu Philosophy, as the Upanishads say, everything is Brahman, (you are that, or I am the Soul/Brahman). The Hindu perceives a Divine and sacred presence working behind the forms of nature as their inner spirit, which is the real object of their adoration. Hinduism is all for introspection as well as for an all-inclusive vision of the cosmos 'The important argument, as put forth in the Upanishadic tradition, popularly referred to as the Vedanta philosophy, is that this Absolute/ Spiritual/Universal Essence is present in the world of nature, i.e., the *Jagat* too. God, soul and the world are aspects of One Reality, but not in a limited way. Each shares the entirety of the underlying Reality. Each is sacred and holds the same deeper nature of Being, Consciousness and Bliss (*Sat-chit-ananda*).'¹²

This Vedic vision of unity as ratified in the philosophy of the Vedanta is the basis for an ecological approach in which we can honour the entire universe as part of our own higher Self. It takes us beyond the duality of God and the creation. God does not create the world out of nothing. The world, God and the soul are inherent aspects of the same Eternal Being. 'We can honour nature as our own greater life and expression, only by being an inclusive whole wherein divine is both human, non-human animals and natural endowments.'¹³ Hindus honour all the forms of the Divine but also recognize the formless Divine even beyond the Creator, extending to the Absolute. Vedanta teaches us that this Absolute or Brahman is the being, self and soul of everything animate and inanimate. It says our very Self is the entire universe and the entire universe dwells within us. According to Hindu philosophical and cultural thought, 'to honour nature is to honour ourselves. To

honour ourselves, one should honour all of nature. For the Hindus the Earth is sacred as the very manifestation of the Divine Mother. Hinduism is an aggregate of innumerable religious cults, customs and practices from the antiquity- it is difficult to limit its analysis and explanation.¹⁴

However, for the present context, it would safely suffice to argue that in the Hindu mythical and cultural tradition, known popularly through a Pantheon of divine deities, a kind of a mix of polytheism and pantheism is explicated.

The sense of the Divine in all of nature is the reason why Hindus find sacred places everywhere. The Hindus have sacred mountains and hills, sacred rivers and lakes, sacred trees and groves, sacred flowers and grasses. 'The Divine is not only the father, mother, brother, sister, lord and friend, but also takes form as the sacred animals, plants, flowers, rivers, rocks, planets and stars.'¹⁵

All living and even non-living features of the world are revered as potent divine symbols, and this fact has drawn its sustenance from its monistic philosophical tradition of universal oneness, as explained in the preceding paragraph(s).

Hindu mythology abounds with stories about divine being represented in animal forms or with animal features, and in most cases animals have been worshipped since they have been vehicles of divine deities. Divinity in a hybrid form of human and non-human animal are revered in popular theological culture..Hindu temples contain not only human representations but also deities with animal heads and animal bodies.

A couple of examples can be cited to substantiate the points made in the preceding paragraph. 'Lord Ganesha with the head of an elephant and the body of a human male is invoked as a patron of letters and learning and all things auspicious, and is one of the most popular divine deities. Likewise, Hanumana, the deity with the face of monkey evolved through a couple of centuries, from being a devout being to becoming a divine deity in [His]own right, and is revered for valour and righteousness. Animal forms like Cobra snake and Cow are the most revered divine symbols. Cobra has been venerated as the symbol of wealth and fertility, and is associated with Lord Shiva. Cow has been worshipped as a sacred animal, since it represents goodness, altruism and pure form of motherly love. Also, Cows have been associated with Lord Krishna, whose another name is Gopala(cow-herd).Both cows and snakes have been venerated in Jain tradition(cow symbolizing non-violence) and in Buddhist literature, snakes have held position of esteem since they transferred their power over nature to Buddha. However, in some myths, butterfly, lion, squirrel, mouse, crows etc. are also revered either in their own right as symbols of divine or powerful attributes or as vehicles of divine deities. I have paraphrased some references from Sushma ,Londhe's paper 'A Tribute to Hinduism' and Dr.Devdutt Patnaik's work.'¹⁶

V. Conclusion

Thus all Indian philosophers propound that all beings are uniformly of the nature of divinity, sentience and consciousness, and consequently declare that one should not bear any ill-will towards any being. The paper concludes that this amicability between humans and other species in the biosphere was based upon the principles of respect and compassion, and stands contrary to the dichotomy between the two as seen in the contemporary world view. The emphasis, instead, was on cultivating virtues and noble feelings of friendliness, respect and compassion towards all beings. This traditional Indian wisdom has provided us with the guidance that is in consonance with the approach that has gained currency in the present day world that when we injure others, or even think of being inimical towards others, we injure our essentially spiritual- rational nature.

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