

## Animal Ethics in the Mahābhārata

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**Abstract-** According to Darwinism, every creature on the earth survives at the cost of others and thus the conflict in existence is inevitable. Theory of evolution believes that human being by using its intellect have established domination over other creatures. Indian *Dharmic* tradition however gives us a cognitive tool to think about life from alternative perspectives through the maxims like '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*', (the world is one family), which tells us that all the creatures of the earth should be treated with due consideration. These two ideas i.e. inevitability of conflict and desire to coexist in peace, apparently contradict each others. The Mahābhārata seems to be trying to find a synthesis between these two. Though the inevitability of violence in existence is accepted, it seems to be cautioning us in a different way to put a check on it. The disrespectful treatment to the lives of non-human creatures brings its retribution. Though the wars and hunting are perceived as manly, the epic gives a message that it is compassion that makes a better human being.

**Key words-** Anthropocentrism, Compassion, *Dharmic*, Retribution, Virtue.

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“Whatever about *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* that is contained in this Bharata, may be met with elsewhere; but whatever is not in it, is not to be found anywhere” (Dutt, Vol I:10)

The Mahābhārata is believed to have acquired written form roughly from 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Thaper 2018 :7) But the stories that have found place in the text were in circulation much before this. Having gone through the long period of interpolation and extrapolation, the epic seems to have become a timeless text addressing the concerns of the human existence. One of the fascinating features of the epic is that it is not entirely a didactic

text, but looks at the human life from multiple perspectives and this makes it closure to real life. The didactic portion seems to be superimposed on the narrative text to set the standards. The paper explores the encounter between the two ideologically conflicting attitude towards life as reflected in the epic. One is primitive, instinctive desire of domination and the other is all embracing compassion.

### **Is Darwinism inevitable?**

According to Darwin, the conflict and struggle is an inherent part of existence. Species live at the cost of others.(Darwin :65) But the epic seems to be subtly trying to put check on the primitive instincts of human being, by portraying compassion as a better virtue than being stronger and clever.

We presume certain things, because it suits us. The idea that the living organism that we cultivate, domesticate, use and eat also feel pain and have the right is an uncomfortable idea and we human being arrogantly claiming to be at the pinnacle of evolution, carefully choose to ignore this and use our logic to justify our interest by claiming the inevitability of conflict. We have used our intellect to establish domination over other creatures on the earth. The Greco-Christian tradition in general projects the world view of anthropocentrism (Charabarty:156). This gives priority to the lives and need human being over other creatures on the earth.

Can there be another way of regulating our life? Instead of over lording over all other living organism, can we use our intellect to create a peaceful and harmonious world for every creatures? Does the idea of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’, (the world is one family) prevailing in the Indian *Dharmic* tradition encompasses the non-human being?

The conflict between these two apparently contradictory ideas i.e. Darwinism on the one hand and all embracing kindness on the other has found space in the Mahābhārata. The epic often celebrates hunting and war, as these are considered as manly actions. At the same time it often eulogies non-violence. The indiscriminate killing of the species brings heavy retribution in the form of curses and many times the non-human species scrutinize the human behavior and reminds us of the '*Dharma*'.

### **The Khāṇḍava burning-**

In order to avoid conflict between the cousins, the Pāṇḍavās were given the forest tract named Khāṇḍava and to build the city they burnt the forest. The animals and humans who tried to escape from the fire were killed by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. The text describes the plight of animals, serpents and birds. They were cut down in hundreds and hurled into the fire. (Dutt, Volume 1: 612).

The portrayal of the heart wrenching cries of the dying creatures seems to be a deliberate attempt of making the readers to pause and think, if it is worthwhile to build the palace at the cost of so much of loss of life. The epic probably wants us to feel embarrassed when we kill animals for fun and destroy forests to build shopping mall. (Chakrabarti:157)

Iravati Karve points out that as the assembly hall of the Pāṇḍavā's new capital was built after perpetuating so much of violence, how there can be a peace? As she puts it poetically,

“Born in violence, its dazzling demonic splendor turned out to be a fleeting dream” (Karve:120)

Very soon we find that the capital was snatched from the hands of the Pāṇḍavās during the infamous *Dyutaparvan* (the gambling with dice) and they were exiled to forest. In line with the forgiving nature of the nature, it is forest that gave shelter to the Pāṇḍavās during exile.

**Yudhiṣṭhira's dream-** During the period of exile few deer come in Yudhiṣṭhira's dream and say that because of the extensive hunting done by them, the deer in the forest are on the verge of extinction and request the Pāṇḍavās to leave that forest (Dutt, Volume 2: Pp. 721-722). Next day, the Pāṇḍavās leave that forest to take shelter in another forest. This raises the question if the composers of the epic were aware of the idea of ecological balance and importance of every species in it?

The epic is a collection of heterogenous material coming from the different tradition and some of the episodes and narrations do give an indication of inclusiveness encompassing the whole creation. The animals and birds are given voice to assert their rights; overtly and covertly.

### **Hunting and curse-**

Pāṇḍu shoots down the mating deer and the deer (the sage in disguise), before dying engages in dialogue with Pāṇḍu. (Dutt, Volume 1:343-344). While Pāṇḍu assert his Kṣatriya right of hunting, the deer remind him of the ethical moderation that should be followed while hunting; like a mating creature is not to be killed. Though dialogue remains inconclusive, Pāṇḍu is cursed, which deny him sensual pleasure and procreation. What message the story gives? In a subtle way, it underlines the right of species to live and procreate. Does it also want a human being to feel ashamed when we kill species for sport? The curse later becomes a reason for Pāṇḍu's death when *Kāmamohiṭa*, i.e. under the influence of passion, he embraces his wife Mādri and dies. Pāṇḍu's death cannot be called a heroic death. For a Kṣatriya, a heroic death is a death on the battlefield, but he dies while trying to embrace his wife. Is it a subtle way of the epic to tell us that what we give to the world (including to the non-human species), will come back to us?

Another episode in which an indiscriminate hunting is punished is Karṇa's accidentally killing of a cow (Dutt, Volume VII: 6). Karṇa was a skilled archer who could shoot the invisible target only by hearing the sound it emits, but Karṇa could not distinguish between the sound made by the movement of domestic cow and wild animal and ends up killing the cow. As a reaction he is cursed that as his arrow is stuck in the head of the cow, similarly the earth will swallow the wheel of his chariot and will become a cause of his death, which eventually happens. The story subtly gives a subtle message that you should not kill a creature unless you are sure about the target. Talent and skill, and specifically the skill of using weapons, without restraint can inflict serious injury not only on the life around us, but on oneself too.

**Yudhiṣṭhira, compassion personified-**

As the indiscriminate violence to the species is punished, the compassion is rewarded. In the *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, the Pāṇḍavās hand over their empire to their grandson Parikṣit and go on pilgrimage. During their tour, a stray dog accompanies them. After visiting the important places of pilgrimage, they start there ascend in the Himalayas as it was believed that the heaven lies somewhere high up in the Himalayas. The dog continues to trail them. Draupadī, Nakul, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhīma all fall one after another, but Yudhiṣṭhira marches on and the dog trails behind him. As he reaches near the door of the heaven, God Indra comes in his chariot to pick him up and asks him to leave the dog behind and ascend the chariot. But Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to leave the dog behind and go to heaven alone. He takes a stand that it is *Adharma* to abandon a creature that had been faithful and come to us with hope. In the dialogue between God Indra and Yudhiṣṭhira, Indra tries to convince Yudhiṣṭhira that the dog in any case going to die in the bitter cold. But Yudhiṣṭhira states that his presence is providing some comfort to the dog and so long it

is alive, he cannot abandon it. The dog finally turns out to be God Yama and Yudhiṣṭhira gets his place in the heaven. (Dutt, Volume IX: 996-997)

What message the epic is trying to give through this? If this episode of stray dog is removed from the epic, it will not make much difference in the general pattern of the narration, then why did the story had found place and remained in the epic?

Probably, the epic is trying to communicate that it is not deliberate accumulation of the merit i.e. *puṇyasangrāhā* done with the desire of getting place in the heaven that you will go to heaven, but it is a act of compassion to all creatures, including the stray dog that makes you a suitable person for heaven, or in other way if you are compassionate, the heaven is here for you. You are a better human if you understand the pain in somebody's heart without them articulating it. The Dog does not speak to Yudhiṣṭhira in the human language, but might have looked at him with pain, tears and appeal in his eyes. The epic puts emphasis on '*anukrośa*' i.e. empathy (Bandyopadhyay). How many of us look in the eyes of the dog before driving it away, if it has taken shelter in our corridor to shield itself from the heavy rains? Many of us do not think twice before hitting it. But the epic wants us to be ashamed of the inhuman treatment meted out by the human being to other creatures.

This desire of hurting and killing is categorized as the '*āsurī sampad*' i.e. demonic wealth in the Bhagavadgītā (16.14). It also says that a really wise person is someone who looks at all the creatures with an equal eye,

“ *vidyā-vinaya-sampanne*

*brāhmaṇe gavi hastini*

*śuni caiva śva-pāke ca*

*paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ” (5.18)*

(The truly learned, with the eyes of divine knowledge, see with equal vision a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.)

The virtue of unconditional compassion personifies in Yudhiṣṭhira on numerous occasions. During the *Yakṣapraṣna* episode, when the *Yakṣa* asks him what it is the greatest *Dharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira replies that it is ‘*ānṛśamsya*’ i.e. absence of cruelty is the highest *Dharma*. (Dutt, Volume II: 870). Prior to this, he tells Draupadī, I am virtuous not because I want something in return, but I am virtuous because it is my nature and I cannot be otherwise. I am not trader in virtue. (Dutt, Volume II: 87)

Yudhiṣṭhira’s behavior also communicates the idea that if you have made compassion as your nature, you will be compassionate with everyone around you. He is not only willing to give up the heaven for the stray dog, but also willing to do so to provide comfort to his brothers and wife (Dutt, Volume IX:1004).

**‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ (the whole earth is my family) and deep ecology** - This statement of Yudhiṣṭhira of being naturally inclined towards compassion for the sake of it, gives us a cognitive tool of analyzing our own environmental ethics. Are we talking about the ecological balance with the intention of limiting our canvas to protect the generations of human species? Do we acknowledge that the other species have the right of their own?

The epic through numerous episodes extents the moral canvas to embrace the non-human actors. We have a mongoose, who mocks at the pretentiousness of Pāṇḍava’s *Yajña* (sacrifice) and reminds us hypocrisy in human nature. (Dutt, Volume IX: Pp.865-881) The epic also eulogies

the self sacrifice in the story of dove and eagle, the king Śibi gives up his life to resolve the moral dilemma of protecting the shelter seeking dove and to satisfy the hunger of the eagle (Dutt, Volume II: Pp.368-370).

According to the belief of transmigration of soul, all the creatures in the universe are on the journey. We accumulate merits and demerits and accordingly, either go upward or downward in the ladder, but a creatures like plants who are at the lower level are also not denied the opportunity of progress, thus we have a ‘spiritual socialism’ which includes each and every living being as Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā says,

*“aham ātmā guḍākeśa  
sarvabhūtāsāya-sthitaḥ  
aham ādiś ca madhyam ca  
bhūtānām anta eva ca”* (10.20)

(O *guḍākeśa* i.e. Arjuna, it is I who resides in every creatures, I am the beginning, the middle and the end of everyone)

Accordingly there is divinity in each and every creature. The divinity is also extended to the non-living entity in the concept of the ‘*Panchmāhābhūtā*’ i.e. the five great elements that make this material world; namely earth, water, air, fire and space. The minerals which runs in our body, were part of some other creatures earlier, so it is not only spiritually, but materially also we share bond with other creatures. Jñāneśvar seems to be echoing the similar sentiments as he says,

*“He vishwachi maze ghar, aishi vritti jayachi shtir*

*Kibhuna charachar apanchi jahala”* (Marathi) ( *Sri Jnaneshwari : 564*)

(For a devotee the whole universe is his house, nay he dwells in each living and non-living entity)

This awareness of shared connection between the humans and non-humans has a potential to keep a check on the greed and violent instincts of human being and provides us with psychological tools to think beyond anthropocentric Darwinism. According to *Advaita*, there is only one supreme soul and the physical differences are due to delusion. (Warrier: 148) This kind of belief system has the potential to create harmony between the human world and the non-human species. Eliminating violence all together from life is impossible, but the conscious awareness about the spiritual equality between the human being and other creature has a potential to reduce the violence.

Animal behavior is mostly instinctive driven. But human beings are endowed with the capacity of self questioning consciousness. Our lives are not simplistically guided by stimulus and response, but we can resist the urge of instinct. We can refuse to hit back, when hit!

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