

Hunting And Curses; The Eco-Philosophy In The Mahabharata

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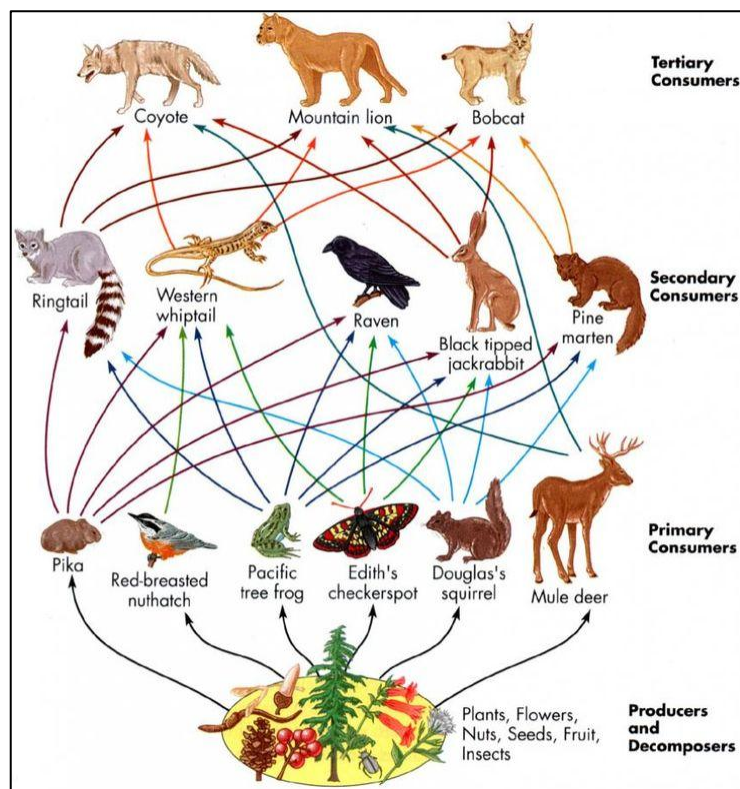
Abstract-

Indian epic, the Mahābhārata has preserved the philosophical musing of ages. Through the numerous stories in it, it gives a subtle message that humans and animal kingdoms are interconnected and interdependent. Humans should not use their superior intellect to kill and dominate other species discriminately, but use moderation, but respect their rights to live. Pandu hunting a mating deer and Karna's killing of a cow brings violent retribution. Yudhiṣṭhira's kindness to street dog earns him a place in heaven.

Key words Animal, Darwinism, Humans, Hunting, Kindness.

INTRODUCTION

Darwinism believes that the conflict is an inevitable part of survival. The food chain/web is a good example of species living at the cost of one another.



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Homo Sapiens by using their intellect, became more organized, discovered hunting tools and were able to hunt or enslave the species much stronger than themselves.



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Discovery of agriculture made the conflict between the humans and animal more intense. Human beings started cutting more and more forests to clear the land for cultivation and this led to shrinkage of the habitat of the animals.



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This shift from hunter-gatherer stage to agriculture had taken place during pre-historic period and we do not have very reliable account of this conflict, but some traces are found in the literature like the Indian epic Mahābhārata that grew during ancient time.

Burning of forest- In order to avoid conflict between the cousins, the Pāṇḍavās were given the forest tract of the Khāṇḍava Van 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 heart wrenching cries of the dying creatures are portrayed in the epic. The text describes the plight of serpents, hyenas, bears, elephants, tigers, lions, deer, buffaloes, birds. They were cut down in hundreds and hurled into the fire. (Dutt, Volume 1: 612).

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 in that capital? 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 Dyuta Parva (the gambling with dice). Draupadī, who became queen in the same hall built after perpetuating so much of violence was inhumanly insulted and the Pāṇḍavās were exiled to forest. This had further led to spiral of violence and counter-violence. In line with the forgiving nature of the nature, it is forest that gave shelter to the Pāṇḍavās during exile.

Beyond Darwinism- But is the Darwinism inevitable? Can human beings use their intellect to protect and nurture the living creatures instead of killing or enslaving them? The Mahābhārata tries to address the conflict between the primitive instinct of domination and the sublime philosophy of treating all the creatures with equality and respect.

The epic is a compilation of the heterogeneous material coming from different traditions. As the manifestation of the instinct of dominance we have numerous wars, hunting and killing which are very often portrayed as manly and desirable especially for the Kṣatriya community. But time and again it also proclaims 'Ahimsa Parmo Dharma' (Non-violence is the greatest Dharma)

In contrast to cruel Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, who mercilessly massacred the creatures in Khāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira seems to be personifying the compassion. During the Mahaprasthaika Parva of the epic, the Pāṇḍavās hand over their empire to their grandson Parikṣit and go on pilgrimage along with Draupadī. During this pilgrimage a stray dog accompanies them. After touring all over the country, they finally start ascending the Himalayas. Here one after another everyone falls except Yudhiṣṭhira and the stray dog trailing behind him. Yudhiṣṭhira does not stop for his brothers neither for Draupadī.

Yudhiṣṭhira reaches the door of heaven and here God Indra comes in his chariot to pick him up on the condition that he should abandon the dog, as dogs have no place in the heaven. But Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to do so. God Indra tries to convince him in different ways, but Yudhiṣṭhira does not budge and says that his stay is providing comfort to the dog and it is a violence to abandon someone who has come to you with hope. Finally the dog turns out to be God Yama and Yudhiṣṭhira is rewarded for his compassion as he gets entry in the heaven. (Dutt, Volume 9: 996-997)

What message the episode gives?

It is not your valour and beauty that will get you a place in heaven, but heaven is accessible to you if you have compassion in your heart. Brave Arjuna, strong Bhīma and beautiful Draupadī falls, but Yudhiṣṭhira reaches heaven in his mortal body. How many of us will treat a dog with consideration if it takes shelter in our corridor during rains?

The inner struggle in the human heart between the greed and ego on the one hand and concerns for the fellow creatures is scattered across the epic. It seems to be struggling to go beyond anthropocentrism. Indiscriminate hunting and violence towards animals bring its retributions. Pāṇḍu is punished as he killed mating deer (Dutt, Volume 1:343-344). Karṇa is punished for accidentally killing the cow (Dutt, Volume 7: 6).

On number of occasions the human behavior is put under scrutiny by the non-human actors in order to remind us that we owe a debt to non-human species. A mongoose mocks the pretentious Sacrifice of the Pāṇḍavās. A crane who is killed by the ungrateful Brahmin forgives him. (Chakrabarti:154) Thus these animals and birds reminds human about 'Dharma'. The narrations have a potential to make human being ashamed of their violence towards other species. It subtly reminds us that probably a sparrow may be silently watching us and crying in her heart when we destroy her house in the forest to build shopping mall.

The philosophy of treating every creature with equality seems to be percolating in the Indian Dharmic tradition. Bhagavad Gita says,

“अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।

अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ” || 10.20 ||

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

It also says that a really wise person is someone who looks at a dog, a cow, a Brahmin and a Caṇḍāla with an equal eye.

“विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः” || 5. 18 ||

Thus expanding the moral compass to all the living creatures.

Jñāneśvar seems to be echoing the similar sentiments as he says,

“हे विश्वची माझे घर, ऐशी वृत्ती जयाची स्थीर,
किंबहुना चराचर आपणची जाहला” (श्री ज्ञानेश्वरी: ५६४)

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

This cognitive awareness about the equality have a potential to put a check on the attitude of considering human being as superior species to other creatures.

The belief about the transmigration of soul also gives a narrative that every soul is on its journey, thus philosophically every creatures have the same soul and can one day reach the same position that we human beings are and human being can also go down to their level if we are not conscious and careful about what we think and do.

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.

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