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Animals in Rabindranath Tagore's Spiritual Humanism: Compassionate Love in the Idea of Organic Unity

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Abstract:

The animal world of Rabindranath Tagore symbolizes the karmic force determining man's path to the realization of his humanity. The poet combines the Upanishadic Pantheism and Buddhist ethics in his spiritual idealism to advocate the mission of devoted service to the whole Universe being the extension of God's Body. *Bhakti* in the idea of organic unity and *dharmakarma* define the spirit of Tagore's Man the Eternal who realizes his destiny through compassionate love for the earthly world. *Ahiṃsā* lays the foundation of humanity and *Viśvakāḥ* becomes the leading way to the fulfilment of human *dharma*. The idealism of devoted, disinterested and unconditional love in compassionate service to the most wretched, neglected, abused and forlorn, symbolically represented by animals, builds the core and the essence of Tagore's spiritual humanism.

Key words: Animals; Ahiṃsā; Organic Unity; Spiritual Humanism

Love is the only reality and it is not a mere sentiment.
It is the ultimate truth that lies at the heart of creation.
- Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore arises on the boundless scene of philosophical thought as an exponent of spiritual humanism.ⁱ With the force of his poetic genius, he expresses the universal truth of human destiny and *dharma*,ⁱⁱ the truth originating from the timeless message of compassionate love for the whole living world. The poet combines the eternal spirit of the Upanishadic *Ātman-Brahman* equationⁱⁱⁱ with Gautama Buddha's teaching on *ahiṃsā*^{iv} as the Ultimate Good in the potent voice of his humanitarian humanism.^v He descends from the highest stratum of society, from the pedestal of Brahmanism to the lowest stratum of outcasts to become the spiritual prophet of the rejected. With his poetic spirit, in his imaginative words he reaches the poor and humiliated, he meets beggars and oppressed, he goes where God dwells and steps among misery. Finally, he crosses the conventional social boundaries and descends below all imaginable strata to unite in suffering not only with humans but also with beasts and animals, thus recognizing the Divine Spirit in every living shape.

This revolutionary idealistic attitude positioned Tagore as a prophetic poet and a precursor in the field of transferring an abstract philosophical approach into a practical social program. Not only does Rabindranath Tagore break the taboo of untouchability of dalits but he also outstandingly breaks the social bias in the comprehension of the animal world. From the truth revealed in words the poet makes his own journey to the truth realized in deeds, which is most explicitly manifested in compassionate service – voiceless and defenceless animals that can neither express their pain nor fight against their oppressors.

tears off the veil of spirituality from animal sacrifice and uncovers the falsehood and mendacity of this merciless ritual condemned by him as offensive to God and the natural divine law, the law so explicitly manifested in the Upanishadic Pantheistic parallel of *Jīvātmā* and *Paramātmā*. The organic unity between an animal, a human and the infinite body of the Creator is realized in the climax of the drama where *Jāysiṁ*, a young *ksatriya*, to quench the thirst of *Kālī* and appease her anger, offers his blood and life on the alter where animals died, thus inevitably uniting in his death with all innocent victims of the brutal sacrificial ritual. Through *Jāysiṁ*, Tagore proclaims the timeless and yet forgotten truth of universal equality in pain, suffering, in fear of death and longing for love. He raises to the level of consciousness the subconscious instinctive capacity to feel compassion for the whole living world and to unite with all living beings with the force of commiseration.

The climax of this tragic scene is the essence of Tagore's humanism based on the organic unity of God and the Universe where every part of the cosmos originates from the Creative Divine Body which in its nature is giving not demanding, loving not punishing. Thus, only in love and through love can man unite with the Highest Spirit and realize his destiny and dharma. As the path to self-fulfilment of an individual and the negation of cruelty in which man parts and detaches from God, compassionate love is the core of Rabindranath's teachings.

Thus, with spiritual humanism Rabindranath Tagore introduces the cosmic principle of *ahiṁsā* which inevitably refers to the idea of compassion in self-identification with another creature understood as an inherent part of the Divine Whole. Hence, animals undergo a symbolic transformation and become the incarnation of the mystic forces linking man to the organic sensitivity of the Universe incarnated in the cosmic body of God. In animal sacrifice rituals, man acts against the Creator by killing His creation and thus a part of Himself, yet, on the surface of his unconscious mind, he believes that he worships his Lord. The paradox of the cultural superstition reveals the complete detachment of man from God and uncovers the utmost paradox of a man losing himself in the profane tradition.

The symbolic image of a goat returns constantly in the poetic imagination of Rabindranath to convey his deeply humanistic message. A goat seems to be a speechless messenger of the essential truth of the cosmic brotherhood and affinity between all beings, regardless their species. This concept is the direct echo of the Upanishadic “*tat twam asi*”^{viii} which is the fundament of Tagore's compassionate humanism and refers to the idea of Man the Eternal, the complete man who by recognizing his own self in the selves of other beings, discovers the Highest Self and the Highest Truth. Tagore depicts this thought symbolically in his lyric *You Maker of Pictures*:

The poor goat-seller remains ignorant of the fact
that the picture does not represent the commonplace beast that is his own,
but it is a discovery. (2004, 380)

The discovery of the inherent omnipresence of God in every creature as much as in our own 'self' leads to the self-identification of man with the whole living world and results in the awakening of compassion. This empathic identification prevents man from acting violently against any being as by recognizing himself in the countless shapes and forms of the outer world, he must inevitably feel bonds with all creatures.

The unconditional rejection of cruelty brings the absolute evolution of ethical principles and rearranges the hierarchical structure of the perception of other beings. The recognition of the whole world as the body of the Highest Spirit is essential for the awakening of unbiased love for all beings. This revelation causes the ultimate revision of attitudes and ideas which so far allowed

only the social perspective of common conventions. Creatures deprived of their identity and lowered to the level of objects are now symbolically raised from the dust of humiliation to the light of spirituality. They become the essential force on the path of mankind to humanity as they play an outstanding role in self-fulfilment of an individual human being. Through his compassionate service to them, Tagore's Man the Eternal breaks the limits of the narrow comprehension of worship and expands his humanity into the realm of divinity.

Tagore's philosophy of humanism reformulates the idea of *Bhakti*^x by announcing that devoted love for God is realized in compassionate service to God's creatures. Tagore reverses the concept of *Bhakti* which essentially teaches that through the worship of God people obey the divine order. Rabindranath interprets love of devotion as love for every living form which is a part of the divine body of the Creator. According to him, there is no love for God without love for the world which is God's own creation, hence, detachment from the world is not service but deception as the world is the extension of its Creator. Love thrives on earth and only through love for flesh and blood creatures, can man pay tribute and respect to God. Hence, the idea of *Bhakti* for Tagore is realized in devotional service to living beings here on earth, beings which are made from God's body and who are thus its extension (Tagore, 2004, 53). Consequently, the concept of the organic unity becomes the fundament of "*Viśvakāḥ*", "*Work for the World*" and the basis of *Viśvakarma*, "*World Worker*"(50-51), *man who devotes himself in his disinterested work to all beings and thus realizes the idea of Brahmvihāra, "life in Brahma."* (51)

Tagore's philosophical idealism of Viśvakāḥ and empathy resounds in *Mālinī*, a drama depicting the clash between the old religious tradition and *boudhadharma*, Buddhist faith proclaiming the mantra of mercy (*karuṇā*), friendship (*maitrī*), love (*prem*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and pardon (*kṣamā*). (Siṅha, 1415 BS) The ritual killing is condemned by the poet as the contradiction of compassionate love and service to the world:

In oblation, sacrifice, penance freedom is none,
Freedom is in the work for the world done.^x (35)

The poet defies the sacrificial offering by referring symbolically to animals in the words of Supriya which echo the Buddhist mantra of love in the idea of *ahiṃsā*. Animals are linked to the same cosmic organism and coexist in the organic unity with man who, being aware of this truth, is obliged to live in compassionate love for the whole world,

This organic unity between man and the world is reinforced by Rabindranath in compassionate service of his protagonists to oppressed animals which play deeply symbolic role in his writings as the outer transference of human emotional states. A sacrificial goat appearing in his dramas, poetry and short stories, symbolizes a discounted and brutalized creature that undergoes metaphorical transformation from the position of an object to the position of the divine mystery. In consequence, it depicts symbolically man's evolutionary path to the discovery of the Highest Truth which is revealed in the organic unity and realized in compassionate love.

Animals are introduced to Tagore's world of pain and suffering as the vital force of the deeply symbolic structure of his spiritual humanism. The whole is not possible with the rejection of any little part of the correlated organic unity, therefore, Tagore's Man the Eternal, the complete man is one who lives his life in compassion and commiseration for others fulfilling the idea of *dharmakarma*, "the deeds of dharma." This ideal incarnated by Shohinī, an outstanding protagonist of Tagore's story *Laboratory* (*Lyābareṭari*), refers directly to the concept of empathic love.

Shohinī breaks all the social conventions and becomes the defender and rescuer of stray and laboratory animals which represent the most oppressed and neglected creatures on earth. She is the messenger of compassion and devotion to the victims of ignorance, prejudice and brutality. She realizes the ideal of *Viśvakarma*, “the World Worker,” in service to animals injured and brutalized by humans and human civilization, thus she stands against the social hierarchy, objectification and exploitation of living beings as well as against egoism, ignorance and negligence. She is the symbol of *shakti* (*śakti*), the most active and dynamic force which is capable of bringing change to the world and thus coacting in its creation.

Animals in Shohinī’s microworld symbolize a revolutionary change which is the result of her powerful will to rise against evil and destruction. They are the force of destiny on the path of human spiritual evolution leading from the darkness of egoism to the light of commiseration. They appear on the crossroads of man’s life as if sent by the hand of God in the trial of love. Shohinī manifests her choices, bravely expressing her disapproval of religious superstitions and celebrating life through disinterested love. Her humanitarian service is depicted in the allegorical scene of a stray dog’s bath when she announces gloriously:

I’ve saved him. He broke his leg in a car accident. I bandaged it up and cured him. Now I have a share in his life. (...) I like the way he’s gaining back his health, after coming so close to death. Because I sustain his urge to live, I don’t need to drag a goat to the Kali Temple for religion’s sake, I’ve decided to build a hospital for the lame and blind dogs and rabbits in your biology lab.^{xi} (269)

Animals are metaphorically transformed into martyrs thus they implicate suffering and pain. They exceed their role as pariahs and become the essential force in the implementation of the eternal Good. To fulfil his idealistic humanism Tagore abandons in his writings temples and descends on the streets to meet God who is the Lord and Creator of all beings and is both physically and spiritually a part of everything. Ignored, neglected and humiliated by human egoism, this God waits for human love and compassion not in a temple but on a street pavement. So much worshiped and glorified in rituals, now completely defenceless and forlorn, the lowest among the low, the Lord steps down silently into dust in the most miserable and despised shape of a dog.^{xii}

The scene of the dog’s bath has thus a very significant meaning as the stray is metaphorically a part of a love trial between Shohini and God who tries her capacity for compassion. Moreover, by granting a human privilege of a bath to a stray dog, Shohinī raises this most despised creature to a level of a being who deserves care and love. This is a most outstanding manifestation of Tagore’s spiritual humanism which condemns so called progressive civilization, a civilization that leads to the reevaluation of life and in consequence to objectification of beings innately penetrated with the Divine Spirit. Tagore rises against dehumanization that has its roots in materialism and conventionalism. The poet announces solemnly that “man” must become “Man the Eternal” and he can achieve it only by realizing his humanity in compassion for the lowest of the low into whom the very Creator breathed his own soul and life.

This truth is fundamental for the understanding of the role of the organic integrity in Tagore’s universe of compassionate love. Whatever is inside the human heart, mind or soul finds its reflection, justification and realization outside in the Universe, in the lives of other beings. The organic parallel which is the basis of the cosmic order, is artfully depicted in *The Wife’s Letter* (*Strir Patra*), where the life and suffering of domestic animals become the symbolic transference and reflection of Mṛṇāl’s pain, who fights a lonely battle against her tyrannical indifferent husband. Animals in *The Wife’s Letter* play a supportive role and thus they remain in the background of the

story. They silently mirror the destructive effect of dehumanization, negligence and lack of love which lead to the complete decay and degradation of everything around.

They suffer physical hunger and thirst which metaphorically reflects emotional starvation of the protagonist. Alienation and the lack of love, the dense growing atmosphere of impending death and darkness are broken by Mṛṅāl who after losing her baby secretly helps cow-mothers by saving them from starvation. Animals here are not only the symbols of innocent defenceless victims but above all they are the 'tools' in the realization of human and humane feelings. Living in complete isolation, the protagonist has no chance of self-fulfilment, all her instincts and natural needs remain mute, therefore, seeking the way of satisfying them, she gives her maternal but also compassionate love and care to animals. She weeps motherly tears in pain:

My heart wept for them (...) when I first entered your house, those two cows and three calves seemed to me as my only familiar relatives in the whole city.^{xiii} (208)

Tagore purposefully chooses cow-mothers, which naturally symbolize affluence, care and fertility but also holiness. Paradoxically, profaned and humiliated, they live in hunger, pain and alienation, which evokes the image of death and destruction, instead of life and happiness.

Animals are metaphorically juxtaposed with the protagonists not only in images but also in actions. The desperate escape of Bindu, Mṛṅāl's relative, from her oppressor is reflected in the little calf's frantic flight from the butcher's hands:

I do not know where I got the strength; but I could not bring myself to send to the slaughter-house the calf that had run away from there to take shelter with me.^{xiv} (215)

Rabindranath Tagore shapes animals into the conveyors of the deepest and least pronounced truth and message of compassionate love. The poet appears as a prophet of the Infinite Good but also as a sad witness of pain and human ignorance. The lack of consciousness originates from spiritual blindness which disables man to identify himself with the suffering of others. Tagore recognizes such an attitude as anaesthetized consciousness which makes man incapable of seeing the real truth and the essence of life. Covered with the veil of avidyā, the human mind follows the path of ignorant and indifferent cruelty, so powerfully condemned by the poet in *Glimpses of Bengal* in the depiction of senseless killing for food:

(...)I saw, all of a sudden an odd-looking bird making its way through the water to the opposite bank, followed by a great commotion. I found it was a domestic fowl which had managed to escape impending doom in the galley by jumping overboard and was now trying frantically to win across. It had almost gained the bank when the clutches of its relentless pursuers closed on it, and it was brought back in triumph, gripped by the neck. I told the cook I would not have any meat for dinner. (70)

Poet refers to this inglorious truth, uncovering human wickedness with his touching words:

We manage to swallow flesh only because we do not think of the cruel and sinful thing that we do. Cruelty... is a fundamental sin, and admits of no arguments or nice distinctions. If only we do not allow our heart to grow callous, it protests against cruelty, is always clearly heard; and yet we go on perpetrating cruelties easily, merrily, all of us—in fact, anyone who does not join in is dubbed a crank. (70)

This is the most outstanding step in the spiritual evolution towards Tagore's Man the Eternal as it culminates in the absolute love for all living beings which are the embodiment of life-giving breath of God. Thus, the idea of compassion realized in reference to animals as the unconditional

rejection of killing of any kind becomes the fundament of spiritual evolution and the path to the realization of humanity. Tagore highlights this fact in *Sāadhanā*, saying:

(...) in India a whole people (...) gave up taking animal food to cultivate the sentiment of universal sympathy for life (...). (70)

The world of animals portrayed symbolically by the poet for the emphatic depiction of unspeakable torment plays a significant role in conveying the deeply humanitarian message of compassionate love. The pain of sacrificial beasts, laboratory animals, farm cattle and strays constitutes the cosmic dimension of Tagore's universe of suffering, suffering which expands into the collective consciousness of humankind to awaken with its potent cry compassion in the callous heart of man. The path to the realization of the wonderful divine potential of humanity dormant in the Heart of our hearts leads through the suppression of the 'ego' and the awakening of the infinite Divine Self which resounds in the Buddhist mantra of compassionate love. (Siñha, 1415 BS)

Humanity can only be realized in the idea of spiritual humanism which connects the Upanishadic organic unity with Buddhist compassionate love for all living creatures understood as the extension of the infinite body of God. The recognition of oneself in another being and self-identification with universal suffering brings a fundamental change in which cruelty against others becomes cruelty against our selves. Hence, by inflicting pain on others man annihilates himself as a human being and loses his destiny. (Tagore, 2006, 61) Compassion which is the root of *ahiṃsā* transforms vicarious pain into the first-hand experience of suffering which results in absolute rejection of cruelty of any kind. Disinterested compassionate love becomes the fundament of spiritual humanism which is the message of the poet and the mission of humankind.

Notes

ⁱ See and compare van Bijlert (2012, 35-51)

ⁱⁱ "Dharma (...) is THE TRUTH and the way to conform to and realize The True: Brahman/ Self. (...) Dharma and self-realization are inseparable" Giri (1987, 236). According to Tagore through love for the world being the God's body, man can realize his humanity and thus his *dharma*. See Tagore (2006, 43-44) and Tagore (2004, 52).

ⁱⁱⁱ The equation *Ātman-Brahman* expresses the Upanishadic Pantheism in which *Ātman* is both a separate reality and the whole world identical with *Brahman*. See *Mundākopaniṣad* (II.1.1) and Deussen (1906, 2).

^{iv} *Ahiṃsā* was translated by Mahatma Gandhi as "non-violence." See Shan (1999, 199-206). The phrase "*Ahiṃsā pāramo dharma*" (*non-violence is the highest dharma/principle*) was popularized also by Mahatma Gandhi, who drew it from *Mahābhārata Anusānā Parva*, from the conversation between Yudhisthirā and Bhīsmā concerning the consumption of meat. (Anu.115.21-23) "According to Buddha and Jain philosophy, *ahiṃsā* is the most noble *dharma* of humankind." See Prāṇa (2003, 2). In Hindu tradition *ahiṃsā* appears in *Upaniṣad* and *Mahābhārata*. See *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (VIII 15.1), *Mahābhārata* (1.11.12, 3.198.69, 13.116.1, 13.117.37-38), *Bhagavad-gītā* (10.5, 13.8, 16.2, 17.14).

^v Rabindranath Tagore believed that the Buddhist tradition was the practical use of Upanishadic ideas. See Tagore (2006, 14) and van Bijlert (2012, 35-51).

^{vi} Compare the Bengali original of *Bisarjan*:

Ke tomār biśbamātā! Mor
 Śīśu cinibe nā tāre. Mā-hārā śābak
 Jāne nā se āpan māyere. Āmi yadi
 Belā kare āsi, khāy nā se trṇadal,

Deke deke cāy pathpāne--kole kare
Niye tāre, bhikṣā-anna kaḥ jane bhāg
Kare khāi. Āmi tār mātā. (307)

^{vii} Compare the Bengali original:

Dharmahāni brāhmaṇer nahe adhikār.
Asahāy jībarakta nahe jannīr
Pūjā. (311)

^{viii} ‘Tat tvam asi’ (from Sanskrit) ‘That thou art.’ The phrase refers to the parallel *Brahman-Ātman*, in which *Jivātmā* and *Paramātmā* are equal. See *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* (VI.8.7.)

^{ix} *Bhakti*- “love of devotion to God.” See *Bhagavad-gītā* (6.47). The philosophy of *Bhakti* is linked to *Karma Yoga*. See *Bhagavad-gītā* (2.47). Rabindranath Tagore transfers the philosophy of *Bhakti* and *Karma Yoga* to the ground of spiritual humanism in the consciousness of Man the great who worships the Creator in service to humankind. The poet explains in *The Religion of Man*:

The individual man must exist for Man the great, and must express him in disinterested works. in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship. This is his religion, which is working in the heart of all his religions in various names and forms. (4)

and he develops further his thought to conclude:

It is significant that all great religions have their historic origin in persons who represented in their life a truth which was not cosmic and unmoral, but human and good. (...) Whatever might be their doctrines of God, or some dogmas that they borrowed from their own time and tradition, their life and teaching had the deeper implication of a Being who is the infinite in Man, the Father, the Friend, the Lover, whose service must be realized through serving all mankind. For the infinite in Man depends upon men’s service and men’s love for his own love’s fulfilment. (52-53)

^x Compare the Bengali original of *Mālinī*:

Yajñe yāge tapasyāy kabhu mukti naḥ,
Mukti śudhu biśbakāje. (35)

^{xi} Compare the Bengali original of *Lyābareṭari* :

Pā bheñchila mōṭarar talāy paṛe, āmi sāriye tulechi byāñdej bēdhe. Ekhan ora prāṇ tār madhye āmāro śeyār āche.(...). Marte marte oi ye o sere uṭhache, eṭā dekhte āmār bhālo lāge. Ai prāṇīr bēce thākbar darkārtā yakhan dine dine miṭiye dii, takhan dharmakarma karte chāgalchānār galāy daṛi bēdhe āmāke kālitalāy dauṛte haḥ nā. Tōmāder bāyōlajir lyābareṭarir kānākhōṛā kukur-kharagośa gulor jan'ye āmi ekṭā hāspātāl bānāba sthīr karechi. (709)

^{xii} Tagore derived a dog in reference to man's *dharma* (*Mānav Dharma*) from *Mahābhārata*. A dog appears in the epos many times building the frame structure of the work. *Mahābhārata* opens with the tale of *Saramā*, *Dēvaśunī*, the mother of all dogs in the First Book (*Ādi Parva*) and closes with the tale of Yudiṣṭhira and Dharma dog in the Book of the Great Journey (*Mahāprāsthānikā Parva*). See and compare *Vidyeshwari* (2010).

^{xiii} Compare the Bengali original of *Strir Patra* :

Āmār prāṇ kādta (...) tomāder bārite yedin natun elum sedin sei duṭi gōru ebaṁ tinṭi bāchuri samasta śaharer madhye āmār ciraparicita ātmīyer matō āmār cōkhe ṭhekla. (574)

^{xiv} Compare the Bengali original:

Āmāra ye ki jora āche jāni ne -- kintu kasāiyer hāt theke ye garu prāṇabhāye pāliye ese āmāra āśray niyeche tāke (...) ābār sei kasāiyer hāte phiriye dite habe, e kathā kōnamatei āmār man mānte pārla nā. (579)

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