

Anthropocentric Views And An Idea Of Ecotopia In Āryaśūra's

Jātakamālā

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Abstract:

Nowadays the whole world is struggling with the ecological devastation and the subversive collapse of our existential harmony and habitational biodiversity caused by the Anthropocene and reckless human dominance. When Europe and other 1st world countries are initiating multitudinous research work, India, with all her rich culture and centuries old epistemic Sanskrit texts, has already set up copious examples of harmonious living with nature and other non-human beings. While western philosophy was busy with its logics and whatnots, Indian philosophy flourished with and within nature. The prominent Indian philosophical schools like Vedic and Upaniṣadic schools, Buddhism and Jainism are highly associated with nature.

This paper aims to focus on the environmental consciousness and harmony on Buddhist Jātakas through Jātakamālā (also known as Bodhisattvāvadānamālā), an extraordinary Sanskrit text by Āryaśūra. Jātakamālā was composed not only by Āryaśūra but also by other two poets. In 6th century it was composed by Haribhaṭṭa. And after Haribhaṭṭa, almost 150-200 years later in 8th century again it was composed by Gopadatta. But Jātakamālā by Āryaśūra is the only Sanskrit Buddhist text which is available with commentary. The importance of Jātakamālā lies in its language and literary style. The original Pali Jātakas in the canonical Jātaka book are all in verses which are composed with very weak story structure. According to J. S. Speyer, the style of the author of the Jātakamālā is classical and his language is chaste Paṇinian Sanskrit... It may be noted that the full narratives of the Jātaka stories, in prose and verse, were first developed in Sanskrit, in the Mahāvastu-avadāna and the Jātakamālā.¹ For the employment of literary devices like simile, metaphor and alliteration, the poetic brilliance of Āryaśūra's Jātakamālā not only overshadows the Pali Jātakas in sophistication, but also depicts a way of living of flora and fauna symbolically parallel to humans. In this paper an attempt of setting the Jātaka Stories as an ideal example of Ecotopia is made through Āryaśūra's Jātakamālā.

Keywords: Sanskrit Buddhist Literature, Ecotopia, Ecological harmony, Indian philosophy, Buddhism.

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I. Introduction:

The term *Ecotopia* was used for the first time by Ernest Callenbach as the title of his novel. The name *Ecotopia* comes from merging two words, *Eco+Utopia*. According to Wikipedia, A *utopia* typically describes an imaginary community or society that possesses highly desirable or near-perfect qualities for its members.² In that sense an ecological Utopia is an *Ecotopia*. According to Oxford Reference, an *ideal society based on principles designed to minimize the society's negative impact on the environment*.³

Formerly it is stated that the term *Ecotopia* has been used by Ernest Callenbach, but the idea of *Ecotopia* was not new for the Indians. For early Indian literature, it was a very common concept which was perceived and reflected through simile, metaphor and alliteration by the poets. The language which was mostly used is Sanskrit, and sometimes Prakrit and Pali for some specific Buddhist Literature. The Buddhist *Jātakas* are very remarkable in this concept of *Ecotopia*. *Jātakas*, having the overwhelming presence of compassion and non-violence among its parables, constructs an environmental theory. The virtues such as benevolence, simplicity, humility, compassion, kindness, non-violence are projected to be beneficial to the environment. The parables substantiate and support the development of these ethics in many ways. *Jātakas* deliver certain essential wisdom to solve the problems in some particular situations. Certain moral tools and methodology has been portrayed for the complex situations where making decisions is difficult. In these stories the presence of *Māra* has been shown time and again to portray the opponent against the virtues. The effect of *Māra* causes *dukkha* for one's mind and that leads to destructive behaviour. In this context if somebody is not compassionate and nonviolent towards his/her own kind, compassion towards nature is impossible. Nature naturally becomes the subject of aggression and greed for that person. The desire 'to have more' is not only the primary cause of pain in somebody's mind but also leads somebody to environmental destruction. The *Jātaka* stories being inclusive of various animals, not only deals with human ethics but also environmental ethics. This paper deals with 11 *Jātaka* stories (1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th, 10th, 11th,

[It was beset with thickets made up of lovely creepers, grasses, and trees; abounding in flowers and fruits; adorned on its boundary with a river, the stream of which was as blue and as pure as lapis lazuli; its ground, covered with a carpet of tender grass, was soft to the touch and handsome to look at...]¹⁸

The next adjective which was added by Āryaśūra, is *tapasvijanavicarite*,¹⁹ which indicates that the place was not abandoned but frequented by the ascetics. Here lies an important lesson to be focused on, that inspite of the place being shared and enjoyed by the ascetics, it was not harmed but glorified to its most. This can be an ideal example of Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. There is a popular film named *Zootopia* (2016)²⁰, which portrays a civilised and learned animal society which is nothing but the reflection of human society and its chaos. The story of *Śaśajātaka* shows a similar picture where all the animals are living with human virtues,

...babhūvurudraḥ śrgālo vānaraśca, te parasparasambandhanibaddhasnehā iva bāndhavā anyonyapraṇayasammānanāvīrūḍhasauhārdā iva ca suhṛdaḥ saṃmodamānāstatra viharanti sma| tiryaksvabhāvavimukhāśca prāṇiṣu dayānuvṛtṭyā laulyapraśamādvismṛtasteyapravṛtṭyā dharmāvirodhinyā ca yaśo'nuvṛtṭyā paṭuvijñānatvādviniyamadhīrayā ca sajjaneṣṭayā ceṣṭayā devatānāmapi vismayanīyā babhūvuḥ//²¹

[...an otter, a jackal, and an ape. They became his companions, attracted by the love and respect which his eminent virtues inspired in them. Like relations whose affection is founded on mutual relationship, like friends whose friendship has grown by the compliance to each other's wishes, they passed their time rejoicing together. Opposed to the nature of the brutes, they showed compassion to living beings, and their cupidity being extinguished, they forgot to practise theft. By this behaviour and by their having regard to good renown conformably to (the precepts of) righteousness (dharma), by their keen understanding and, owing to this, by their close observance of religious obligations in the manner approved by the pious, they roused even the surprise of the deities.]²²

This story also illustrates *dāna*, one of the six *pāramitās* as the Hare gives his body (life) to feed his guest. At the end of the story Āryaśūra states,

tadevaṃ tiryaggatānāmapi mahāsattvānām śaktyanurūpā dānapravṛttirḍṛṣṭā/ kena nāma manuṣyabhūtena na dātavyaṃ syāt?²³

[So then the practice of charity according to their power by Great Beings, even when in the state of beasts, is a demonstrated fact; who, then, being a man, should not be charitable?]²⁴

In the next story *Āgastyajātaka*, the 7th story of *Jātaka*, poet Āryaśūra points out that covetousness is the seed of self-centred destructions. This is also relevant for the anthropocentric behaviour of human beings. After leaving all the earthly possessions and mental and emotional attachments Agastya started living his life as a hermit. As the story proceeds, he was tested by the king of Devas, Śukra and pleased his mind. As a result, when he was offered a boon, he asked,

dārānmano'bhilaṣitāmstanayānprabhutvamarthānabhīpsitavisaḷatarāṃśca labdhvā/
yenābhitaptamatireti na jātu tṛptim lobhānalāḥ sa hṛdayaṃ mama nābhyupeyāt//²⁵

[May that fire of covetousness, which after obtaining a beloved wife, children, power, riches more abundant than had been longed for, still goes on heating the mind of men never to be satisfied - may that fire never enter my heart!]²⁶

The 10th story *Yajñajātaka* is about a *yajna* which claims a massive amount of animal sacrifice for its fulfilment. The king instead of approving this found a different way to solve the problem of his kingdom. He took the path of charity. At the end of the story Āryaśūra mentions,

na paśuḥiṃsā kadācidabhyudayāya dānadamasamyamādayastvabhyudayāyeti tadarthinā dānādipareṇa bhavitavyamityevamapi vācyam//²⁷

[Injuring animals never tends to bliss, but charity, self-restraint, continence and the like have this power; for this reason he who longs for bliss must devote himself to these virtues.]²⁸

In ancient times animals were killed for religious sacrifices. And nowadays they are also recklessly killed by human kind for satisfaction of their selfish purposes. Some of the species have already been extinct or about to be. This causes nothing but disbalance (or destruction) of the ecosystem. This is one of the most brutal anthropocentric activities which needs to be stopped as soon as possible.

The next story *Śakrajātaka* (11th *Jātaka*) is a wonderful story about compassion and specially focused on the awareness of animal protection. When Devas were being defeated by the *asūras* and the army of the Devas was almost intent on flight, Mātali, the charioteer of Śakra thought it to be the perfect time to retreat. He asked for so and they were about to go back, Śakra found some eagle-nests full of eaglets on a silk cotton tree on the way to the chariot-pole. If they go back, the nest will be crushed by the chariot. But if they do not retreat, they will be hurt by the *asūras*. Surprisingly out of compassion Śakra says,

tasmānnivartaya rathaṃ varameva mṛtyurdaityādhipaprahitabhīmagadābhīghātaiḥ/
dhigvādadaḡdhayaśaso na tu jīvitam me sattvānyamūni bhayaḍīnamukhāni hatvā// 11.13²⁹

[“Well then,” said he, “turn the chariot. Better is it for me to die by the terrible club-strokes of the chiefs of the Demons than to live blameful and dishonoured, if I should have murdered those poor terror-stricken creatures.”]³⁰

At the end of the story Āryaśūra mentions,
tadevaṃ devarājam prāṇānapi parityajya dīrgharātram paripālītāni bhagavatā sattvāni| teṣvīha
prājñasyāghāto na yuktarūpaḥ prāgeva vipratipattiriti prāṇiṣu dayāyattenāryeṇa bhavitavyam| tathā hi dharmo ha
vai rakṣati dharmacāriṇamityatrāpyunneyam//³¹

[In this way the Lord did long ago protect animal life even at the risk of his own and of the loss of the
Celestial sway. Keeping then in mind that it does not at all befit a wise man to offend living beings, much less to
sin against them, a pious man must be intent on practising compassion towards the creatures.]³²

This *Jātaka* stress on the matter of animal protection and is considered to a story of *karuṇā*, one of the
six *pāramitās*.

The *Matsyajātaka*³³, the 15th story of *Jātakamālā*, tells a story of a drought. Bodhisattva in his Fish
incarnation, filled with compassion prayed to the Gods and made it rain. This story, with compassion as a motive,
focuses on the necessity of setting things right in nature.

Rather than passive compassion he appeals to the king of Gods to send rains on account of his exemplary
righteous conduct. Though the story tells of the miraculous production of rain,

In *Haṃsajātaka*, the 22nd story of *Jātakamālā*, Āryaśūra mentions a *Jātaka* regarding a group of swans.
When they found a lake with marvellous beauty, they told their king,

asti deva dakṣiṇena himavato vārāṇasyāṃ brahmadatto nāma narādhipatiḥ/
tenāyadbhūtarūpaśobhamanirvarṇyagunaśaundaryam mahatsaraḥ pakṣibhyaḥ svacchandasukhopabhogyam
dattam/ abhayaṃ ca pratyahamavaghuṣyate/ ramante cātra pakṣiṇaḥ svagṛha iva prahīnabhayāśānkā/ tadarhati
devo vyatītāsu varṣāsu tatra gantumiti/ tacchrutvā sarva eva te haṃsāstatsaṃdarśanasamutsukā babhūvuḥ//³⁴

[There lives at Benares a king of men, named Brahmadatta, who has delivered to the birds a large lake of
marvellous beauty, possessing delights of indescribable loveliness. All birds may enjoy it at their free will and
wish, and safety is warranted to them by a royal decree which is made known every day by proclamation. The
birds divert themselves there as unrestrained and fearless as if they stayed in their homes. When the rains are over
Your Majesty ought to go there.]³⁵

After hearing this the King of swans (Bodhisattva) asked for his commander-in-chief's opinion. Through
the reply of Sumukha, the commander-in-chief of the Swans says, Āryaśūra acknowledges a terrible human reality.
He says,

kṛtakamadhuropacāravacanapracchannatīkṣṇadaurātmyāni ca prāyeṇa pelavaghrṇāni śaṭhāni
mānuṣahṛdayāni...//³⁶

[The hearts of men are false, their tender compassion is deceitful, and under the guise of delusive sweet
words and kind attentions they conceal a cruel and wicked nature.]³⁷

Vāsitārthasvahrdayaḥ prāyeṇa mṛgapakṣiṇaḥ/
manuṣyāḥ punarekiyāstadviparyayanaipuṇāḥ// 22.19³⁸

[Quadrupeds and birds are wont to express their true feelings by the import of their cries. But men are the
only animals skilled in producing sound meaning the contrary of their intentions.]³⁹

ucyate nāma madhuraṃ svanubandhi niratyayam/
vaṇijo'pi hi kurvanti lābhasiddhyāśayā vyayam// 22.20⁴⁰

[Their language, of course, is sweet, well-intentioned, and wholesome. Merchants also make expenses in
the hope of obtaining gain.]⁴¹

The suspicion of Sumukha came to be true. There were traps all over the lake to catch the swans. And the
king of the swans was trapped in a snare. But eventually by the order of the king Brahmadatta he was freed from
the snares of *niṣāda*.

In *Rurujātaka*, the 26th story of *Jātakamālā*, the same fear of the animals is portrayed,

...rurumṛgo babhūva/ sa jānānaḥ svasya vapuṣo'tilobhanīyatām tanukārūṇyatām ca janasya
nirjanasampāteṣu vanagahaneṣvabhireme, paṭuvijñānatvācca tatra tatra vyādhanaviracitāni
yantrakūṭavāgurāpāśāvapātalepakāṣṭhanivāpabhojanāni samyak pariharannanugāminam ca
mṛgasārthamavabodhayannācārya iva piteva ca mṛgāṇāmādhipatyam cakāra//⁴²

[...There was a Ruhu-dear. Knowing his body to be a much desirable object and being aware of the
pitiless nature of man, he liked to frequent such forest-tracks as were free from human intercourse, and in
consequence of his keen intellect, was careful to avoid such places as were unsafe by the artifices of huntsmen,
their traps, nets, snares, holes, lime-twigs, and the seeds and other food they strew down. Moreover, he warned
also the animals who followed after him to avoid them. He exercised his rule over them like a teacher, like a
father.]⁴³

The words uttered by Sumukha and the fear of the Ruhu-dear are relevant till today. We, by all of our
intellect and impure mind, are deceiving the nature.

Mahākapijātaka, the 27th story of *Jātakamālā* shows a picture where wild life is tortured by human kind,

atha sa rājā samabhilaṣitārthavipralopinastān vānarān pratyabhikruddhamatiḥ-hata hataitān/
vidhvaṃsayata vināśayata sarvān vānarajālmāniti saparuṣākṣaram svān puruṣānādideśa/ atha te rājavuruṣāḥ

sajyacāpabāṇavyagrakarāgrā vānarāvabhartsanamukharāḥ samudyataloṣṭadaṇḍaśāstrāścāpare
paradurgamivābhiroddhukāmāstam vānaspatimabhisarūḥ atha bodhisattvastumulaḥ
tadrājabalamanilajavākālitamivārṇavajalamanibhr̥takalākālārāvamabhipatadālokyāsanivarṣeṇeva samantato
vikīryamāṇam taruvaram śaraloṣṭadaṇḍaśāstravarṣeṇa bhayavirasavirāvamātraparāyaṇam ca
vikṛtadīnamukhamunmukhaḥ vānaragaṇamavekṣya...⁴⁴

[The king became angry with those monkeys who robbed him of the objects so ardently longed for, and with harsh words as “Hit them! hit them! drive them away, destroy them all, these scoundrels of monkeys!” he ordered his men to assail them. And those warriors made themselves ready to shoot off the arrows from their bows (strung), and uttered cries to frighten away the monkeys; others lifted up clods and sticks and spears to throw at them. They invaded the tree, as if they were to attack a hostile fortress.

But the Bodhisattva had perceived the approach of that noisy royal army moving with loud tumult and uproar, like the billows of a sea roused by the violence of the wind; he had seen the assault made on all sides of his excellent tree with a shower of arrows, spears, clods, sticks, which resembled a shower of thunderbolts; and he beheld his monkeys unable to do anything but utter discordant cries of fear, while they looked up to him with faces pale with dejection...]⁴⁵

*Mahākapijātaka*⁴⁶, 24th story of *Jātakamālā* also portrays the brutality of humankind through a man who was lost in the forest and in search of food fell into a precipice. Bodhisattva in his monkey incarnation saved him. In spite of being saved by him (Bodhisattva) the man, filled with by greed and evil tendencies, did not show any gratitude, and tried to murder him to eat his flesh. However, being struck with leprosy the man became remorseful, he ended up with horrible consequences. All these *Jātakas* keep reminding us about *karmaphala*. The terrific deeds which are continuously being performed, will return with the most terrible sufferings. And the bearer of those horrific consequences would be none other than us.

III. Conclusion:

Through this paper the anthropocentric tendency of humans has vividly been portrayed. The relevant portions from *Jātakamālā* have comprehensive and clear portrayal on existential well-being and ecological thoughts and harmony which show us a hope of an *Ecotopia*, a world beyond the anthropocentric snare, a way out from our ecological devastation.

References:

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- [6]. ⁶ <http://www.dsbcproject.org/canon-text/content/22/224>
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[34]. ³⁴ [Http://Www.Dsbproject.Org/Canon-Text/Content/22/245](http://Www.Dsbproject.Org/Canon-Text/Content/22/245)
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