



## Constructing Buddhist Attitude towards Environment: Plants, Animals and Forest in the Jatakas

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**Abstract :** Jataka stories is related with the previous birth of Buddha in which stories recited to teach disciples the right conduct of life and the lessons of Karma, Sansara and Dharma. Jatakas reflect the travails and experiences that Buddha underwent to attain the wisdom. There are almost 550 Jataka stories, out of them some are in human form and some in animal form. In each stories of Buddha's life indoctrinated in a folklore way. Nature of jatakas stories are devoted mostly to the questions of ethical advancement concerning laity. Notions of community interaction and relations with others that arise in everyday living are stressed both in Buddha's appearance as a human being or an animal. Animals can be seen as potential human beings in Buddhist cosmology. Numerous examples justify the strong evidence of Nature and Environment in Jatakas stories.

**Keywords:** Buddhist; towards Environment, Buddhist Attitude

Jataka stories is related with the previous birth of Buddha in which stories recited to teach disciples the right conduct of life and the lessons of Karma, Sansara and Dharma. Jatakas reflect the travails and experiences that Buddha underwent to attain the wisdom. There are almost 550 Jataka stories, out of them some are in human form and some in animal form. In each stories of Buddha's life indoctrinated in a folklore way. Before examine the main theme of the article, first we should discuss the origin of jatakas. Renowned Buddhist scholar T.W.Rhys David in his books "Buddhist India" writes, "when the original jataka was being gradually formed most of the stories were taken bodily over from the existing folkore of Northern India." This is the reason why Buddhist scholar of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century did not taken it seriously. Scholar like K.R.Norman believes that although many jatakas can be regarded as being non-buddhist or pre-buddhist, but there are some which are certainly Buddhist. Recent researches shows that jatakas did assimilate Buddhist principles in all seriousness and can not be overlooked due to their origin. When we compare jatakas to other Indian folkfore of that time then we see that certain Buddhist themes present in the jatakas were not present in other Indian folkfore, such as Panchtantra. So it would

be inappropriate to neglect jatakas in present day research.

E.B.Cowell states that stories of former lives of the Buddha, the jatakas are atleast older than the vaishali council. His perception is based on the fact that scenes taken from the jatakas are sculptured in the carvings on railings round relic shrines found out spread in India. These can be found in Sanchi, Amravati and Bharhut, where the titles of several jatakas are inscribed over some of the carvings. It is clear that understanding jatakas, it would be better to use various methodologies in order to build up a complete picture and understanding.

Nature of jatakas stories are devoted mostly to the questions of ethical advancement concerning laity. Notions of community interaction and relations with others that arise in everyday living are stressed both in Buddha's appearance as a human being or an animal. Animals can be seen as potential human beings in Buddhist cosmology. Boundry between the animal and human are very thin in jatakas. There is no textual evidence from the time of the Buddha regarding Environmental problem in ancient India, reason behind this was that environmental crisis is a new phenomena. It does not mean that Buddha was not concerned with a human being relationship to the environment in which it lives. The principal of dependent arising, if faithfully followed by the human being, especially when they live a moral life, could not lead to total neglect of the environment.

One thing is noticeable that when he was practicing severe austerities, he is said to have developed compassion, even for a drop of water and was determined not to destroy even a minute creature. With such a beginning, it is not surprising that the Buddha and his disciples continued to encourage respecting, nurturing and preserving the natural environment. These things reflected in jatakas stories also.

The Buddha is also said to have had several births as animals before he was born as human being. Buddhism considers animals as potential humans and as beings that can teach humans some moral lessons. Of the 550 stories, a full half of them 225 have animals usually as central characters. Seventy



different types of animals are mentioned and 319 animals or groups of animals appear in these 225 stories. Among the animals, the monkey forms the lead pack. Monkeys are represented in 27 different stories. Elephants are mentioned in 24 tales followed by Jackals (20), Lions (19), Crows (17), Deer (15), Birds (15), Fish (12) and Parrots (11). Environmental consciousness highlighted in the form of story telling in Jatakas. We have to look into the descriptions connected to virtues, vices and beyond are presented through the stories in such a way that they could enliven environmental discourse inadvertently.

In this part I will discuss some stories in which environmental consciousness highlighted. I will start with Nigrodh Jataka (Jataka no- 12) in which story of pregnant doe narrated. One day a pregnant doe belonging to Sakha's herd had her turn for the slaughter. As she was pregnant, she prayed her leader to postpone her turn until the young one was born. Sakha was inconsiderate and did not pay any attention to her request. Wailing, she went to Nigrodha, who complied with her request out of sheer compassion. Next day, Nigrodha himself went to the execution block and showed his readiness for the slaughter. Surprised at the presence of the golden deer eagerly awaiting its slaughter despite the immunity granted, the king's men reported the matter to the king. The king was also surprised. He immediately arrived at the park and asked the deer king to explain the cause for his willingness to be killed. Nigrodha then said, "Sir! A pregnant doe came to me and prayed to let her turn fall on the other. So, to save the life of two deer, I decide to get killed.

The king was moved by his compassion. He said, "O deer king! I am impressed with your loving kindness. I spare the life of the doe and yours." Nigrodha said, I thank you for that. But what shall happen to other deer, here?"

"I spare their lives too, said the king.

"The deer in your park shall thus gain immunity; but then what will happen to the deer living in your kingdom, queried the deer king.

"I will spare their lives too", said the king.

"Sir! The deer will be safe in your territory; but then what will happen to other four-footed animals", Nigrodharaja asked.

"From now onwards, I spare their lives, too", promised the king.

"Sir, four-footed animals will thus be saved; but then what would happen to the birds", asked the deer king in his naïve dignity.

The king said, "I spare their lives too", answered the king.

"Sir! Birds will thus be safe, but then what will happen to the fishes", questioned the deer.

"I save their lives too, O deer king", the king assured

Thus the good deer by his compassion saved the lives of all the animals of the kingdom.

If we closely examine the story of this jataka, it is clearly stated that if you are doing things in compassion, it will not only save you but also the whole generation. As we understand this story in terms of environment it is clearly stated that we should be concerned for future generation and think about each other. Our feelings and behavior should show a desire to help each other. In our surroundings environment is an integral part and we are dependent on nature so any negative act can destroy our existence.

In the *Vātamiga jātaka* (jataka no-14) a deer is lured in to a palace, bit by bit, as he has developed a taste for honeyed grass. The deer's craving leads it into a trap. This story clearly suggests that need of the hour is to curb over consumption or wrongful consumption, which mainly relate to the idea of greed.

In Amba Jataka (jataka no-124) story of drought had been discussed. In those days there came a great drought upon the Himalaya country, and everywhere the water was dried up, and sore distress fell upon all beasts. Seeing the poor creatures suffering from thirst, one of the hermits cut down a tree which he hollowed into a trough; and this trough he filled with all the water he could find. In this way he gave the animals to drink. And they came in herds and drank and drank till the hermit had no time left to go and gather fruits for himself. Heedless of his own hunger, he worked away to quench the animals' thirst. Thought they to themselves, "So wrapped up is this hermit in ministering to our wants that he leaves himself no time to go in quest of fruits. He must be very hungry. Let us agree that everyone of us who comes here to drink must bring such fruits as he can to the hermit." This they agreed to do, every animal that came bringing mangoes or jambus or bread fruits or the like, till their offerings would have filled two hundred and fifty wagons; and there was food for the whole five hundred hermits with abundance to spare.

Above story clearly suggests that if we are concerned and caring towards nature, it will be



rewarded and whereas misapply and avidity towards nature will be horrific.

In Sanjiva Jataka (jataka no-150 ) story name of the character is Sanjiva, to whom the Bodhisatta taught the spell for raising the dead to life. But though the young man was taught this, he was not taught the counter charm. Proud of his new power, he went with his fellow-pupils to the forest wood-gathering, and there came on a dead tiger.

"Now see me bring the tiger to life again," said he.

"You can't," said they.

"You look and you will see me do it."

"Well, if you can, do so," said they and climbed up a tree forthwith.

Then Sanjiva repeated his charm and struck the dead tiger with a potsherd. Up started the tiger and quick as lightning sprang at Sanjiva and bit him on the throat, killing him outright.

This story clearly suggest that misuse of power and act against nature will bring horrible consequences. The problem with modern human thinking is that they can achieve anything with the help of newfangled technology, these type of human-centric arrogance will bring nothing good and ultimately lead to disaster.

In Maha Vanija Jataka(jataka no -493 ) story of a magical Banyan tree discussed, which provides everything on demand. A group of travellers lost on his way and saw this tree. When looking at the leaves of the tree, they see everything glistens like water-wet, and the branches of the tree looks like it was full of water, which then makes them think so that if they cut the branches they will get the water. By having this in mind, one of them climbs the tree and cut the branches: out with torrential streams thick like a palm tree trunks, they wash with water and drink it. Next, they cut the branches facing toward the south: get out of it various types of food and they eat it. Then they cut the branches facing towards the west: exit beautiful women and beautiful flawless and they have fun with these ladies. Finally, they cut off a branch facing north and got precious items. All traveler(except one) wants to uproot the tree to see what the roots will give them. This act invite the ire of serpent king who was guarding the tree. Serpent king destroys all the travellers and rewards the only one who was not greedy.

This narratives clearly reflecting the greedy nature of human towards environment. Problem with human being are that they want more in life and excel at any cost. This type of thinking made them emotionless towards any living creatures.

Ultimately with this thought process they tend to make mistake that brings decline to any human being. Nature and human are dependent on each other, if we try to use it in excessive mode, it will definitely demolish the Man-Nature relationship.

In another story from Mati-Posaka Jātaka (Jātaka no. 455 ) tells of a magnificent white elephant that lived with his blind mother in the forest. He took great care of his mother by making sure that sufficient fruits were brought to her every day. One day a forester lost his way in the forest. The kind-hearted elephant directed him out of the forest. However, instead of showing gratitude to the elephant, the forester brought the king's troop to capture him. The elephant refused to eat any food. When questioned why he behaved in such a manner, the elephant replied that his blind mother was left helpless in the forest and he was worried for her health and safety. The king was moved by his strong love and concern for his mother. He set free the elephant and ordered food to be served to him and his mother every day.

Meaning derived from this story is that for the artificial beautification We bring animals or birds in our home without even thinking that they are displaced from their natural habitat. In their natural habitats, birds continuously communicate with each other, they also need freedom and company of other birds.

The aim of the jataka story is to devolope moral and ethical characther not only to humankind but also to all living beings in the world. In order to achieve this aim, many stories had conveyed compassionate massage by many ways in various aspects through stories in which animal, flora and fauna characters play a central role.

Above mentioned numerous examples justify the strong evidence of Nature and Environment in Jatakas stories. Non-voilence (Ahimsa) was the main principle of Buddhism, it may be the prime reason for compassion and kindness towards all living creatures. In 6<sup>th</sup> c B.C. Nature was the sole source for everything like security, sustainability and flourishing. Humans fulfilled all their needs from nature, adored nature and also took solace in nature. Hence the expression of love and understanding of nature and the presence of environmental ethics in early Buddhism can be adequately understood through the early Buddhist literature. If early Buddhist environmental ethics are stressed and propogated in a full-fledged manner, it will definitely help curb the global environmental crisis that we face today, and then we can strive for security, sustainability and human flourishing.



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