

Echoes of Empathy: Analyzing the Ethical Dimensions of Animal Sacrifice in Tagore's 'Sacrifice'

Dr. B. Yasoda Rani

Lecturer in English, P.S Government Degree College, Penukonda, Sri Sastya Sai Dist.

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, a distinguished Bengali poet and social reformer, is celebrated for his significant contributions to Indian literature and his incisive critiques of societal norms. One of his notable concerns was the practice of animal sacrifice, particularly in the context of worshiping the goddess Kali. This essay delves into how Tagore's literary creations and philosophical perspectives challenged this ritualistic tradition. By closely analyzing his play "Sacrifice" along with other narratives, novels, and dramas, we can uncover his opposition to animal sacrifice and his broader vision for a more ethical and compassionate spirituality.

Keywords: Animal Sacrifice, Rituals, Misconception, Goddess Kali.

Tagore, the revered Bengali polymath, is recognized for his trenchant critiques of various social customs, including those associated with animal sacrifice. His writings often reflect a profound commitment to human dignity and the sanctity of life.

In his literary expressions, Tagore confronted traditional practices that he deemed cruel or antiquated. He championed a more humane and empathetic approach to existence, highlighting the significance of compassion, moral integrity, and the inherent value of every individual. His literary and philosophical works inspire a thoughtful reconsideration of rituals that inflict harm on living beings, advocating for a more enlightened and ethical perspective on life and spirituality.

Rooted in humanism and ethical living, Tagore's philosophy of spirituality emphasized that genuine spirituality goes beyond superficial rituals, focusing instead on the inner moral and ethical growth of individuals. His vision of spirituality was both inclusive and compassionate, prioritizing inner virtue over external ceremonial practices. In stark contrast, animal sacrifice epitomized a ritualistic approach that he sought to challenge and transform.

The Play "Sacrifice" by Rabindranath Tagore

The play "Sacrifice" by Rabindranath Tagore primarily explores the themes of animal and human sacrifice in the worship of the goddess Kali within Hinduism. In many temples dedicated to Kali across India, sacrifices of goats and roosters are commonplace. This practice continues to be prevalent in various temples today. Sacrifice is viewed as a religious rite, where offerings pleasing to the deity are made in hopes of receiving blessings. Individuals maintain a connection with the supreme power through these acts of sacrifice, a sentiment widely observed in Indian culture.

People offer various items to the deity, seeking favors such as good rain, bountiful harvests, wealth, children, health, and other material blessings through prayer and offerings. Sacrifices, whether in the form of animals or flowers, are also made to seek forgiveness for past wrongdoings or sins. Some non-vegetarians even abstain from meat on specific days as a form of sacrifice to honor their deities.

A more extreme form of sacrifice is human sacrifice, where a life is taken as an offering to the god. In "Sacrifice," the character Gunavati, a queen, reflects on whether she has offended the formidable mother goddess Kali, as she has not been blessed with motherhood despite her royal status. She questions if this is a curse for sins committed in her past or a previous life. Kali, the fearsome goddess, is particularly revered in Calcutta, the capital of Bengal. During Tagore's time, many people lacked education and lived with superstitions, often without a scientific understanding of the world, making them vulnerable to exploitation by spiritual leaders like the temple priest Ragupathy.

Gunavati: Have I offended thee, dread Mother? Thou grantest children to the beggar woman, who sells them to live, and to the adulteress, who kills them to save herself from infamy, and here I am, the Queen, with all the world lying at my feet, hankering in vain for the baby-touch at my bosom, to feel the stir of a dearer life within my life. What sin have I Committed, Mother, to merit this, to be banished from the Mothers' heaven?

(Enters RAGHUPATI, the priest.)

O Master, have I ever been remiss my worship? And my husband, is he not godlike in his purity? Then why has the Goddess, who weaves the web of this world-illusion assigned my place in the barren waste of childlessness?

RAGHUPATI: Our Mother is all caprice, she knows no law, our sorrows and joys are mere freaks of her mind. Have patience, daughter, to-day we shall offer special sacrifice in your name to please her.

GUNAVATI: Accept my grateful obeisance, father. My offerings are already on their way to the temple. -red bunches of hibiscus and beasts of sacrifice.

Ragupathy wielded significant influence over the king and his subjects, his words seen as absolute authority that demanded blind obedience. Even King Govinda found himself subject to the priest's will. Ragupathy advised Gunavati to make an offering of a beast and flowers to appease the goddess. Gunavati, compelled by this belief, took a goat belonging to a poor girl named Aparna for the offering. When questioned by the king, the servant Jaising reassured Aparna that it was the mother goddess's wish, and she should not feel regret. Aparna expressed her deep connection to the goat, having cared for it as if it were her own child. In response to the growing conflict, King Govinda prohibited all sacrifices in the temple and ordered his decree to be disseminated throughout his land. The priest challenged this, asserting that the king's authority should not extend to ancient traditions and religious practices.

RAGHUPATI: She has been drinking blood for ages. Whence comes this loathing all of a sudden

GOVINDA: No, she never drank blood, she kept her fave averted.

RAGHUPATI: I warn you, think and consider. You have no power to alter laws laid down in scriptures.

GOVINDA: God's words are above all laws.

RAGHUPATI: Do not add pride to your folly. Do you have the effrontery to say that you alone have heard God's words, and not I?

NAKSHATRA: It is strange, that the King should have heard from god's and not the priest.

He condemned the king's disregard for Kali, who, he believed, deserved her sacrifices. Gunavati was distressed by the king's order, as it nullified her offering. The king argued it was a command from the goddess, which he felt compelled to enforce.

The priest plotted to offer a beast to the goddess, but King Govinda intervened through his general Nayanrai and second commander Chandpal. However, the general chose to honor his faith over the king's order, surrendering his royal sword. The priest and Nakshatra, the king's brother, conspired to eliminate Govinda, spurred by the priest's claim that Nakshatra would become king with the goddess's favor after the king's blood was spilled. This manipulation highlights the deep-rooted fears and superstitions surrounding religious beliefs in that era.

The play illustrates a persistent conflict among the characters regarding loyalty to the king versus adherence to age-old religious rites dictated by the priest. Ultimately, the boy Druva, whom the queen feared as a rival for the throne, was selected for sacrifice instead of the king. The priest and prince endeavored to fulfill this offering, but their efforts were thwarted by the king. In a tragic twist, Jaising, devoted to the priest and raised as a son, took his own life to fulfill a promise made to the goddess, as his blood was also of royal lineage.

King Govinda, who epitomized justice and righteousness, sought to prevent the sacrifice, while the priest disobeyed the king to assert his religious authority. The priest's ambition culminated in a conspiracy that ultimately failed, leading to his and Nakshatra's exile for eight years. Jaising's death devastated the priest, who had treated him as a son.

The experience of losing a loved one can be profoundly distressing, yet it frequently serves as a catalyst for significant realizations regarding the value of life and the essence of relationships. Such losses often prompt individuals to introspectively consider what truly matters—the importance of cherishing moments, cultivating connections, and acknowledging the delicate nature of existence. Furthermore, it can foster a deeper comprehension of love, resilience, and the critical need to communicate one's emotions to those still present. In a climactic moment, Ragupathy denounced the goddess, declaring her a mere stone and asserting that divinity resides in the hearts of individuals.

GOVINDA: Killed himself? Why?

RAGHUPATHY: To kill the falsehood, that sucks the life-blood of man.

GUNAVATI: The Goddess is no more.

GOVINDA: She has burst her cruel prison of stone, and come back to woman's heart.

APARNA: Father, come away.

RAGHUPATHY: Come, child, come, Mother. I have found thee. Thou art the last gift of Jaising.

The play concludes with the revelation that true divinity is not found in idols but within the human spirit. Tagore's work emphasizes the belief in karma, where individuals reap the consequences of their past actions, suggesting that Gunavati's struggles stem from deeds in previous lives. The depiction of Kali, with her fearsome attributes, symbolizes the complex relationship between faith and sacrifice in this context.

Goddess Kali: The Embodiment of Love and Motherhood Beyond Misconceptions. In the vast and intricate tapestry of Hindu mythology, Goddess Kali stands as a formidable and paradoxical figure. Often depicted with a fierce demeanor, adorned with a garland of skulls and a tongue sticking out, Kali's image can be unsettling to those unfamiliar with her deeper symbolism. A common misconception surrounding Kali is that she demands the sacrifice of her children, which starkly contrasts with her true

nature as an embodiment of love and motherhood. Understanding Kali requires delving beyond surface appearances and exploring her role within the context of divine love, protection, and transcendence.

Goddess Kali is renowned for her fierce appearance, which serves a specific purpose in her spiritual symbolism. Her dark skin represents the all-encompassing nature of the cosmos, her tongue protruding outward symbolizes her consuming power, and the garland of skulls signifies the transcendence of ego and the impermanence of life. These elements, while intimidating, are not to be interpreted as a literal call for violence or sacrifice but rather as metaphors for the destruction of ignorance and the liberation from material constraints.

Kali's narrative often involves her role as a protector and destroyer of evil. In many stories, Kali emerges to defeat malevolent forces and restore cosmic order. One famous episode is the battle between Kali and the demon Raktabija. Each drop of Raktabija's blood that touched the ground gave rise to more demons, but Kali, through her fierce determination, manages to overcome this challenge. This act of destruction is not about senseless violence but about removing obstacles that threaten harmony and righteousness. Despite her fearsome aspects, Kali is fundamentally a mother goddess. Her relationship with her devotees is deeply nurturing and protective. In the Hindu pantheon, she is often seen as a loving mother who embraces her children with unconditional love and protection. Her fierceness is a manifestation of her protective nature; she destroys the negative forces that endanger her children, ensuring their safety and well-being. Kali's maternal aspect is reflected in her role as a source of divine compassion and guidance. Her fierce appearance and actions should be seen as an expression of her fierce love, which manifests in the form of necessary destruction of evil to protect her devotees. This protective fierceness is akin to a mother's fierce determination to defend her children from harm.

Misinterpretations and Modern Understanding:

The misunderstanding that Kali demands the sacrifice of children stems from a superficial interpretation of her iconography and myths. Such interpretations ignore the symbolic nature of her acts and the broader context of her divine mission. In the modern era, there is a growing recognition of Kali's role as a symbol of empowerment and liberation, rather than a deity who condones violence.

In various traditions and practices, Kali is honored and revered not through literal sacrifices but through rituals and worship that affirm her role as a guardian and benefactor. Her worship often involves chanting her mantras, performing dances, and engaging in meditative practices that align devotees with her protective and loving energy.

Goddess Kali is a profound embodiment of divine love and motherhood, whose fierce appearance and actions are deeply symbolic. Far from demanding the sacrifice of her children, Kali's true essence lies in her role as a fierce protector and nurturing mother. Her actions are a testament to her commitment to safeguarding her devotees from the forces of darkness and ignorance. By embracing the deeper meanings behind her myths and symbols, one can appreciate Kali's true nature as a loving, protective, and empowering deity. This essay aims to address misconceptions about Goddess Kali and to shed light on her true nature as a loving and protective deity.

Rabindranath Tagore's "Sacrifice" critiques the misguided practices of ritual sacrifice in the name of religion, advocating for compassion and understanding over superstition. The characters' struggles reflect the societal challenges of that time, urging a shift from blind faith to a more enlightened and humane approach to spirituality.

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