



## Beyond Speciesism: Animals, Ethics, and Non-Violence in Indian Philosophical Traditions

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### Abstract

*The ethical consideration of animals has emerged as a critical theme in both ancient and contemporary philosophy. While modern debates on animal rights have been shaped by critiques of speciesism advanced by Richard Ryder and Peter Singer, Indian philosophical traditions have long articulated a moral vision extending beyond human-centred frameworks. This paper examines the place of animals in Indian thought, focusing on Vedic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain perspectives. It highlights the centrality of ahimsā (non-violence) as a guiding principle and explores how doctrines of compassion, ecological balance, and reverence for life offer profound insights into human–animal relations. The study situates Indian traditions within global animal ethics, drawing comparisons with Western frameworks such as utilitarianism and rights-based theories. By analyzing classical texts, edicts, and philosophical discourses, the paper argues that Indian traditions anticipate many of the concerns articulated in contemporary animal ethics, while also offering a distinctive metaphysical grounding rooted in the interconnectedness of life. The findings suggest that integrating Indian perspectives into global debates enriches theoretical discourse on moral inclusion, environmental ethics, and interspecies justice.*

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## 1. Introduction

The ethical treatment of animals has increasingly become a central concern of philosophical, legal, and cultural discourse in the modern era. Industrial farming, animal experimentation, and ecological degradation have placed human–animal relations under intense scrutiny. Within this discourse, the concept of *speciesism* defined as the unjustified privileging of human beings over other species has been particularly influential. Coined by Richard Ryder (1970) and developed by Peter Singer (1975/2009), speciesism is now widely regarded as a moral prejudice comparable to racism and sexism. This framing has reoriented ethical debate, compelling philosophers to reconsider the scope of moral community and to include non-human beings as legitimate moral subjects.

Despite the apparent novelty of this discourse in modern philosophy, concerns about animal welfare are deeply rooted in intellectual traditions across the world. Early legal codes such as the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1754 BCE) recognized obligations in human–animal relations, while thinkers such as Aristotle, Plutarch, and Porphyry reflected on the moral and medical significance of animals (Sorabji,

1993). In the early modern period, philosophers including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Jeremy Bentham questioned the ethical permissibility of cruelty towards animals, with Bentham (1789/1996) famously asserting that the relevant moral question is not whether animals can reason or speak, but whether they can suffer.

In parallel with these developments, Indian traditions cultivated a remarkably consistent ethic of nonviolence and reverence for life. The Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharmaśāstras developed frameworks that regulated animal use, while Buddhism and Jainism articulated rigorous philosophies of compassion and *ahimsā* that challenged sacrificial practices and emphasized the sanctity of all sentient life (Chapple, 1993; Dundas, 2002). The Mauryan emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE) institutionalized such principles by issuing edicts prohibiting certain forms of slaughter, establishing animal hospitals, and encouraging compassion towards all living beings (Thapar, 1997). These traditions demonstrate that far from being confined to the modern era, the moral inclusion of animals is a recurrent theme in philosophical reflection.

## **2. Speciesism and Equal Consideration of Interests:**

Whether animals are legitimate subjects of ethical consideration has often been approached through the lens of speciesism. Coined by Richard Ryder in 1970, speciesism refers to “a prejudice or bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Ryder, 1989, p. 16). The concept was subsequently popularized by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975/2009), where he argued that just as racism and sexism are morally indefensible, so too is discrimination based solely on species membership. For Singer, the morally relevant criterion is not rationality, language, or autonomy, but the capacity to suffer. Any being capable of experiencing pleasure and pain possesses interests that must be weighed equally with comparable human interests.

Singer’s framework builds upon Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, which had already challenged anthropocentric ethics in the late eighteenth century. Bentham (1789/1996) rejected the notion that rationality or speech determined moral worth, insisting that “the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (p. 283). This insight shifted ethical discourse from a focus on abstract capacities to the concrete reality of sentience. In contemporary debates, this utilitarian argument continues to serve as a foundation for animal liberation movements, calling into question practices such as factory farming, animal experimentation, and entertainment industries that cause immense suffering to non-human beings.

Other philosophers have developed alternative approaches to the problem of speciesism. Tom Regan (1983), for instance, advances a rights-based theory of animal ethics. Rejecting utilitarian calculations of interests, Regan contends that many animals are “subjects-of-a-life” with inherent value, and therefore possess moral rights that cannot be overridden merely for human benefit. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2006) applies her capabilities approach to animals, arguing that justice requires creating conditions in which both human and non-human beings can flourish according to their characteristic forms of life. These perspectives converge in rejecting anthropocentric exclusions, though they diverge in whether moral inclusion is grounded in interests, rights, or capabilities.

The critique of speciesism has also expanded beyond the utilitarian and rights traditions. Ecofeminist philosophers have highlighted the connections between the domination of animals and other forms of oppression, suggesting that patriarchal structures of control and objectification underpin human exploitation of non-human beings (Adams, 1990; Plumwood,

1993). Meanwhile, environmental ethicists have debated whether moral concern should be extended not only to sentient animals but to ecosystems, species, and nature as a whole (Leopold, 1949/1989; Naess, 1989). These debates broaden the scope of inquiry, situating animal ethics within the larger field of ecological justice.

Despite differences in theoretical orientation, the principle of moral extensionism—the expansion of ethical concern beyond the human species—remains central to contemporary animal philosophy. What unites these diverse approaches is the rejection of arbitrary boundaries that exclude animals from moral consideration. As Singer (2009) notes, “Pain is pain, no matter who experiences it” (p. 8).

This theoretical foundation provides a useful lens for examining Indian philosophical traditions. Long before the coinage of the term speciesism, Indian thinkers articulated critiques of anthropocentrism and developed ethical systems that prioritized the well-being of animals. Doctrines such as *ahimsā* (nonviolence) in Jainism and Buddhism, the symbolic centrality of animals in Hindu cosmology, and Ashoka’s policies institutionalizing compassion all reflect a recognition of animals as moral subjects. Placing these traditions in dialogue with contemporary theories allows for a richer understanding of how different cultures have grappled with the challenge of interspecies ethics.

### **3. Animals in Vedic and Classical Indian Thought:**

The earliest strata of Indian thought, preserved in the Vedic corpus, provide insight into the place of animals within religious and ethical frameworks. Animals appear frequently in the *R̥gveda* (c. 1500–1200 BCE), not merely as resources but as beings integral to the cosmic and ritual order. Cows, horses, and birds were praised in hymns, often symbolizing fertility, strength, and divine presence (Jamison & Brereton, 2014). The Vedic worldview was thus both utilitarian and reverential: animals were used in sacrificial rituals yet simultaneously associated with deities and natural forces. This ambivalence reflects a complex negotiation between human dependence on animals and recognition of their sacred significance.

The practice of animal sacrifice was central to Vedic ritualism, particularly in the *aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and *gomedha* (cow sacrifice). However, even within this ritual framework, restrictions and symbolic substitutions emerged. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* records instances where animal offerings were replaced with symbolic effigies or grains, suggesting an early discomfort with killing (Olivelle, 1998). Moreover, the Upanishadic period (c. 800–400 BCE) introduced a new philosophical orientation, emphasizing internal sacrifice (*antaryajña*) and

spiritual realization over external ritual. This transition reflected a gradual shift toward minimizing violence, laying the foundation for doctrines of *ahimsā* that would become central in later traditions.

Another important dimension of Vedic and post-Vedic thought is the role of animals in cosmology and mythology. Almost every major deity is associated with an animal companion (*vāhana*). For instance,

Śiva's bull Nandi symbolizes strength and fidelity, while Durgā's lion embodies courage and ferocity.

Gaṇeśa, with his mouse, highlights the coexistence of the great and the small, while Viṣṇu's association with Garuḍa underscores transcendence and cosmic order (Kinsley, 1988). These associations not only sacralized animals but also integrated them into symbolic frameworks of divine-human relations.

The Dharmasāstra literature, especially the *Manusmṛti* (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE–2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), codified ethical norms regarding the use of animals. While permitting meat-eating under certain ritual conditions, the text warns against unnecessary cruelty. For example, *Manusmṛti* 5.48–5.52 discourages meat consumption, declaring that abstaining from animal killing leads to great merit (Olivelle, 2004). This ambivalence demonstrates that while sacrificial traditions continued, ethical restraint regarding animal use was gaining prominence.

The Ayurvedic texts, particularly the *Sushruta Saṃhitā* and *Charaka Saṃhitā* (c. 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE), further illuminate classical Indian approaches to animals. These works document not only human medicine but also veterinary science, recognizing the importance of animal health in agricultural and social life (Wujastyk, 2003). Cattle, elephants, and horses were central to economic activity, and their treatment was regarded as a moral as well as practical responsibility.

The Arthasāstra of Kauṭilya (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) provides another perspective, emphasizing state responsibility toward animals. It includes regulations on the management of cattle, the care of elephants (essential for military power), and penalties for animal cruelty (Kangle, 1992). Significantly, Kauṭilya classifies *Ānvīkṣikī*—the science of critical inquiry—as the “lamp of all sciences,” under which logical and ethical reflections on non-violence could be situated. Although utilitarian in orientation, the *Arthasāstra* recognizes the interconnectedness of political power, economic prosperity, and animal welfare.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that classical Indian thought did not regard animals as mere instruments. Instead, they were seen as part of a larger moral and cosmic order. While sacrificial practices revealed human domination, the simultaneous emphasis on restraint, symbolic substitution, and reverence suggests a tension that prepared the ground for more radical non-violence in Buddhism and Jainism.

#### **4. Animals in Buddhist Philosophy:**

One of the most influential contributions to the discourse on animal ethics in India emerges from the Buddhist tradition. Rooted in the principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-harming), Buddhist philosophy regards all sentient beings—humans and animals alike—as sharing the capacity to suffer and to seek well-being. From this perspective, ethical obligations extend beyond the human community, encompassing animals within the sphere of moral concern.

The earliest Buddhist teachings, preserved in the *Pāli Canon*, emphasize the avoidance of intentional harm. The first precept (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*) instructs adherents to abstain from killing any living being (Harvey, 2000). Unlike the Vedic sacrificial tradition, which permitted ritual animal slaughter, the Buddha explicitly criticized such practices, declaring that sacrifices should be directed toward ethical conduct rather than the destruction of life (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* III.55).

Buddhist cosmology further reinforces the shared status of humans and animals. Rebirth narratives in the *Jātakas* depict the Buddha in previous lives as animals such as deer, monkeys, and elephants, often performing noble deeds. These stories not only highlight animals as moral agents but also underscore the continuity of consciousness across species (Appleton, 2010). By attributing wisdom and compassion to animals, the *Jātakas* challenge anthropocentric assumptions and legitimize the inclusion of animals in the moral community.

A central argument for Buddhist animal ethics rests on the recognition of sentience (*sattva*). All beings capable of experiencing pleasure and pain deserve moral consideration, not only humans. This anticipates modern arguments against speciesism, such as those advanced by Peter Singer (1975). The Buddhist emphasis on suffering (*duḥkha*) as the fundamental condition of existence implies that the alleviation of suffering must extend universally.

Philosophers such as Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century CE) reinforced this position by linking compassion (*karuṇā*) to the realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). If the self lacks inherent existence, then rigid boundaries between human and animal lose ultimate justification.

Compassion must therefore extend impartially, challenging hierarchical distinctions (Garfield, 1995).

## **5. Ashoka's Edicts and State Policy**

Perhaps the most remarkable historical example of Buddhist-inspired animal ethics is found in the edicts of Emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE). After embracing Buddhism, Ashoka promulgated policies prohibiting animal sacrifice and restricting hunting. The Rock Edict I declares: “Here no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice” (Thapar, 1997, p. 256). In his Pillar Edict V, Ashoka lists specific species protected by law, including parrots, ducks, and squirrels, while also restricting the killing of nursing animals and their young.

Ashoka's policies reflected not only religious piety but also an attempt to institutionalize compassion (*dayā*) as a principle of governance. He established veterinary hospitals, planted medicinal herbs for both humans and animals, and banned certain harmful practices, such as branding livestock. In this way, Buddhist ethics influenced not only individual conduct but also public policy, setting a precedent for animal welfare in premodern history (Keown, 2005).

Buddhist animal ethics has had a lasting global influence. In East Asia, Mahāyāna vegetarianism inspired entire monastic communities to adopt plant-based diets, shaping cultural attitudes toward animals (Chapple, 1993).

In modern times, Buddhist principles continue to inspire animal welfare movements.

Organizations such as the “Buddhists Concerned for Animals” in the United States explicitly draw on

Ashokan ideals and Mahāyāna compassion to oppose animal testing and factory farming (Harvey, 2000). The resonance of these principles demonstrates the enduring relevance of Buddhist philosophy in shaping ethical discourse on animals.

## **6. Animals in Jain Philosophy:**

Among all Indian traditions, Jainism articulates perhaps the most rigorous and uncompromising philosophy of non-violence toward animals. Rooted in the teachings of Mahāvīra (599–527 BCE), the twenty-fourth *tīrthāṅkara*, Jain ethics elevates *ahiṃsā* from a general moral principle into the very cornerstone of spiritual life. The radical commitment to non-harming is evident not only in monastic discipline but also in lay practices, dietary rules, metaphysical doctrines, and social customs. In this respect, Jain thought represents the most systematic and sustained

attempt in world philosophy to construct a moral universe in which the welfare of animals is inseparable from human spiritual progress.

The Jain worldview is dualistic, distinguishing between *jīva* (soul, conscious life) and *ajīva* (nonsoul, inert matter). Every living being, from humans and animals to plants and even microscopic organisms, is believed to possess a *jīva*. Consciousness, however dim, is thus ubiquitous in the natural world (Jaini, 1979). This expansive conception of life broadens the moral community to include not only animals but also entities often excluded from ethical consideration in other traditions.

Harming another being is understood as an act that entangles one's own soul in karmic matter, thereby impeding liberation (*mokṣa*). Violence is not simply an ethical wrong but a metaphysical burden: every injury generates karmic accretions that weigh down the soul. Hence, the practice of non-violence is intrinsically tied to spiritual purification and ultimate liberation (Dundas, 2002).

For Jains, *ahiṃsā* is not merely one virtue among many but the supreme religious duty (*ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*). Mahāvīra's discourses, preserved in the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, emphasize vigilance in avoiding harm, extending even to the smallest beings: "All beings desire to live; none wishes to die.

Therefore, one should not kill, nor cause others to kill, nor consent to killing" (Jacobi, 1884/1964, p. 37).

The Jain commitment to non-violence manifests in both intention and action. Unlike Buddhist ethics, which often evaluates morality in terms of volition (*cetanā*), Jainism insists that even unintentional harm carries karmic consequences. Thus, practitioners must adopt strict measures to minimize harm in daily life. This principle accounts for the meticulous care with which Jains conduct ordinary activities, such as sweeping the ground before walking or filtering water to avoid killing microscopic life.

Historically, Jain communities have played a significant role in promoting animal welfare in India. The institution of *pañjarāpoles*—animal shelters for sick, injured, or abandoned animals—can be traced to Jain patronage. These shelters, found across Gujarat and Rajasthan, embody the communal practice of compassion, offering sanctuary to cows, dogs, birds, and other creatures. In this way, Jain ethics moves beyond abstract philosophy into tangible institutions of care (Dundas, 2002).

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Moreover, Jain patronage of inscriptions and temple regulations often reinforced prohibitions on animal slaughter in cities where Jains held influence. Their economic role as merchants and financiers allowed them to shape social policy in alignment with *ahiṃsā*. Even today, Jain organizations remain prominent in campaigns against animal cruelty, factory farming, and leather industries, extending their ancient principles into modern activism (Parel, 2006).

Jain vegetarianism is not merely a dietary choice but a philosophical imperative. It rests on the recognition of animals as sentient beings and the conviction that consuming their flesh entails direct participation in violence. Even plant-based diets are evaluated according to degrees of harm. For example, fruits and seeds are preferred because their consumption allows the plant to regenerate, whereas root crops are avoided because uprooting kills the entire organism.

This graded understanding of harm reflects the Jain doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism), which acknowledges the complexity of reality and the multiplicity of perspectives. Ethical decisions must weigh degrees of violence, always striving toward the minimization of harm, even if total non-violence remains an unattainable ideal (Matilal, 1981).

While Buddhism and Jainism share the commitment to *ahiṃsā*, Jainism radicalizes the principle to an unparalleled extent. In Buddhism, the morality of killing depends on intention, and exceptions are sometimes made for self-defense or unavoidable harm. Jainism, by contrast, asserts that all harm, intentional or accidental, accrues karmic consequences. The Buddhist allowance for monks to consume meat if it is “pure in three respects” has no equivalent in Jainism; vegetarianism is mandatory.

Despite its philosophical depth, Jain non-violence has faced critiques. Some argue that its radicalism is impractical in a world of ecological interdependence, where some harm is unavoidable. For instance, the insistence on avoiding root vegetables has been critiqued as overly rigid and disconnected from broader ecological concerns (Kumar, 2007). Others note that the focus on personal karmic purity may result in an inward-looking ethic, prioritizing spiritual self-interest over systemic reform (Long, 2009).

Nevertheless, these critiques must be balanced against Jainism’s unparalleled contribution to the conceptualization of universal compassion. By insisting on the moral relevance of even the smallest beings, Jainism provides a counterpoint to utilitarian calculations that weigh lives by capacity for suffering. Its uncompromising defense of life has provided a powerful moral vocabulary for ecological and animal rights movements worldwide.

### ***Beyond Speciesism: Animals, Ethics, and Non-Violence in Indian Philosophical Traditions***

Despite their differences, Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions share a profound recognition of the moral significance of non-human life. All three traditions affirm, in different ways, that animals are not mere resources for human use but are beings worthy of moral respect. In this sense, Indian traditions collectively represent one of the earliest and most sustained philosophical attempts to extend ethical concern beyond the human species.

Though each tradition has a solid foundation regarding the moral significance of non-human life, each tradition has also faced critique, both internally and externally. Vedic tradition has been criticized for its sacrificial violence, which appears inconsistent with the later valorization of *ahimsā*. Philosophers like the Buddha and Mahāvīra directly challenged the legitimacy of animal sacrifice. Buddhism has been critiqued for inconsistencies regarding meat-eating. While the first precept prohibits killing, the acceptance of meat under certain conditions has raised questions about the coherence of Buddhist compassion. Jainism has been accused of impracticality and excessive rigidity. The extreme avoidance of harm sometimes seems disconnected from ecological realities and systemic ethical concerns. Despite these critiques, each tradition provides enduring insights into the moral relationship between humans and animals and also has a contemporary relevance.

The comparative study of these traditions resonates with contemporary debates in animal ethics and environmental philosophy. Modern discussions often revolve around utilitarian, rights-based, or ecological frameworks (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983; Naess, 1989). Indian traditions contribute distinctive perspectives:

- From the Vedic-Hindu perspective, the idea of a cosmic order (*rta* or *dharma*) suggests that humans are embedded in a moral universe that demands respect for life. This aligns with ecological approaches that emphasize balance and sustainability.
- From Buddhism, the emphasis on sentience and compassion parallels contemporary arguments against speciesism, highlighting the need to reduce suffering wherever it occurs.
- From Jainism, the radical insistence on the sanctity of all life challenges anthropocentric assumptions and provides a counterpoint to utilitarian calculations that prioritize beings with higher cognitive capacities.

Together, these traditions enrich modern discourse by offering a non-anthropocentric moral vision rooted in ancient philosophical reflection.

### ***Beyond Speciesism: Animals, Ethics, and Non-Violence in Indian Philosophical Traditions***

The influence of Indian animal ethics extends far beyond South Asia. Mahatma Gandhi, deeply inspired by Jain and Hindu principles of non-violence, transformed *ahimsā* into a political philosophy of resistance, influencing figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela (Parekh, 1997). In the field of animal rights, global vegetarian and vegan movements often cite Indian traditions as precedents for ethical abstention from meat (Chapple, 1993).

Buddhist ethics has similarly influenced global discussions on compassionate living, vegetarianism, and environmental activism. The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have framed ecological responsibility as a natural extension of Buddhist interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Jain organizations today advocate for veganism and ecological sustainability, extending their ancient ethic into modern activism (Long, 2009).

### **7. Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, it can be said that the comparative analysis of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions reveals both a shared ethical core and distinctive philosophical elaborations. While the Vedic heritage transformed from sacrificial ritual to vegetarian ethics, Buddhism articulated compassion as a universal principle, and Jainism radicalized non-violence into an uncompromising discipline. Together, they constitute a unique intellectual heritage that continues to inform global debates on animal ethics, environmental responsibility, and the moral limits of human action. By foregrounding non-human life within the sphere of moral concern, these traditions challenge the anthropocentric biases of modern philosophy and provide resources for constructing more inclusive and ecologically sensitive ethical frameworks.

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