

Animals and Advocacy for Social Justice

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Human-Animal Relationship; Why is it Important to Include Animals in our Advocacy for Social Justice.

Initially of course, it was not the artists who were my teachers, but rather nonhuman animals themselves. These animals did not instruct me on what was amiss in society. Nor did they offer me a solution to the problem that I could understand. What they did was bear witness to their soulfulness and intelligence, and to the supreme richness and breadth of their own emotional lives. Since birth, I have watched individuals we call “pets” come into my life and love, smile, play, triumph, ail, grow old, and die. And they taught me the only truth I have ever known—the Oneness of all beings: The certainty of death and the beauty, sanctity, and interconnectedness of life. (Kemmer)

“The personal is political” as the slogan goes which simply means that everything we choose to do (or not do) matters. So the claim that being compassionate towards animals or including them in your advocacy is a personal choice doesn't really make sense if we start to dissect our social, cultural, religious and psychological debris that has formed over our compassionate inclusive selves. Our relationship with animals is layered and multifaceted and goes beyond just the idea of adopting a compassionate attitude. There is a general lack of empathy in Pakistan and it is across the board to all those who are vulnerable mostly. If dissected, we can see how it is all interlinked and seeps into all aspects may it be animals or humans.

Most of us have intuitions about suffering in other creatures simply put, this is empathy. Unfortunately, we often become desensitised and set our empathy and critical minds aside. However, when we re-think, analyse, and reawaken our sensitivities, it is clear that we are not exclusive in our capacity to experience emotional responses, capacities to think and the desire to live. Humans as we know today are product of constructed meaning and conditioning, so if we can be conditioned and desensitised into reducing the other particularly the vulnerable to objects both humans and animals alike, it can be reversed to subjects perhaps if we start hitting the right nodes especially compassion through all the angles of socio-political cultural, psychological and religious takes.

As Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Dream of the Ridiculous Man* said, “I will not and cannot believe that evil is the normal condition of mankind.” We can perhaps consider on certain levels that what has led us to a point where we have seized to extend our compassion outside a limited

circle and can make a conscious choice to not let it pass as rather normal or acceptable instead engage at some level. With awareness, there comes a sense of engagement and vice versa. While this notion can be investigated from different angles, one can be our relationship to the other animals. This leads to a path of awareness and engagement which eventually awakens a more socially responsible and receptive human being. There are particular connections among forms of oppression and our comprehension of those connections require that we include animals in our advocacy.

There is anger and passion here. How could it be otherwise?

Individuals are working hard to bring change, and when someone tries to explain that they have fallen short of justice and equality, people often feel defensive, irritated, exhausted broadsided by yet another weighty concern. Worse yet, one that they are contributing to. (Kemmer) This is a general debate faced by animal rights advocates all around. To counter this behaviour, maybe we can just highlight and expand the understandings of social justice, about connecting the dots and recognising links of oppression to expose and dismantle all forms of it in order to get rid of the either/or debate. The ease with which we forget not only facilitates animal abuse but also other outrages that tend to make us gasp and reach for the word “unspeakable”: child abuse, nukes, poverty in the midst of plenty. We need to learn how to speak of such things in a way that keeps them uncomfortably conscious. By encouraging public to be informed, not let this pass as normal and to make choices that are aligned with a heightened understanding of linked oppressions we can create a great deal of vigilance, introspection, and a willingness to change.

After we make a radical change in thought or behaviour, we are habitual to distance our new selves from our previous selves. That’s understandable, but not very productive. If one can not remember much less have empathy with our former selves in terms of thinking and feeling, how

can you make meaningful connection with those who still think and feel as we used to do?

And, one is unable make contact, how can you prompt others to rethink what feel to them like intensely personal choices? (Kemmer)

What we want to know what we need to know is why. Animal advocates need to understand this response more clearly on all levels so that they can understand why efforts to force people to confront their complicity in cruelty rarely lead to behaviour changes. By understanding and dissecting this multifaceted relationship one can have the agency reverse and unlearn in order encourage transformation.

It can be established that people are generally empathetic towards humans would be kind or would not deliberately hurt an animal. However, when you interact with animals where you are already transcending the bond of species, there comes a point where all the pre-conditioned learning blurs to some extent and all you start to recognise is suffering, emotions such as pain, fear, anger, love, gratitude and perhaps you are being trained to more receptive to emotional responses may it be human or animals. This could be contributed to engagement on field regularly with beings that need help which reminds them of their need to be there and take action which is often not the case when you have already been indulged into a comfortable privileged life. With engagement comes awareness and you realise that there is so much more than what that has led to the constructed meanings around certain beings especially animals as they do not represent themselves in human societies, rather are a representation by humans to give them multiple cultural and personal meaning that can be stated as Social Construction. The understanding of the animal is subjective, as per to their use and benefits to be exact. Associated meaning and purpose are attached to animals as the age advances and pure compassion is overshadowed by ideological justifications. To elaborate further one can question and

contemplate on the fact that what is an animal outside of culture and associated meaning? The ideological justifications upheld are not neutral and to understand them, one has to dissect layer by layer.

In an interview with Huda Sarfraz, an animal rights activist from Lahore as she recounts her journey of her awareness, a lot of logical reasoning was explored around the idea of dogs and the social-cultural stigma around the idea of animals in general. As a child, being extremely phobic of dogs and now being a pet parent to multiple indoor dogs that too rescues from streets. She emphasizes on how adopting a scientific mind-set towards an animal that she was petrified of actually not helped her get over her fears but also develop a bond of love with. The fears she now believes were charged by the general stigma attached to dogs in Pakistan. Huda does not categorize herself as animal lover or a pet lover or being obsessive about pets as a child. She believes that her urge to help is not driven by the fact that they are cuddly and cute animals but for the fact she felt sorry towards their situation on roads and when one can understand the suffering of a being he doesn't make the differentiation in who or what it is. Compassion for her can not be limited to one being or specie.

Elaborating on the fact that our learning throughout our lives are very human centric, it is natural to distance ourselves from comprehending other species as incapacitated to feel or think on similar lines as humans do. Huda, as she recalls started acknowledging and respecting feelings in almost all beings after a particular incident with a cockroach. While studying body languages of dogs as a subject in order to overcome her phobia, she had started to explore how animals express and communicate through bodily gestures. She explains,

“My insight developed through scientific observations and I made links of emotional responses. I

used to be very repulsed by insects and naturally felt compelled to kill them out of disgust mostly but one instance of attempting to kill a cockroach changed my understanding of them. In an attempt to kill him, I observed how he was trying to curl up, it reminded me how it was very similar to how big animals would do when in danger to hide and act small in danger. He did it because so that he could hide and not be killed. It made me feel so bad that even the cockroach had the basic understanding that he is about to be killed and tried not to by hiding. I thought to myself that even insects on such level can feel so much so I didn't kill it. I have been very conscious about it ever since.”

She recalls that how she always had the basic understanding of not hurting any dogs or cats but with insects, she figured it on her own by just making a logical connection of him being alive and sentient. That's how a certain emotion was encountered by reasoning logically, making connections and reducing the distance between us and them through interaction. Another aspect that can not be ignored when we dissect the human-animal relationship and what we have to gain in terms of learning with this interaction is the unconditional bonds that we develop. Huda in her conversation explained that how mostly human relationships are very transactional while when you emotionally engage invest on animals, its unconditional on all levels. By taking care of animals, you are bringing out the nurturer in you, the urge to give more which is a healthy practice. Eventually, if such behaviours are encouraged, one tries to give back more to the community as well without the sense of personal gain or concrete benefits. Animals help you transcend the transactional self. Furthermore, one has to emphasize on the importance of removing the stigmas attached to non-livestock animals in our culture if we are to learn more from our relationship with these animals. It is nearly impossible to navigate to compassion and understanding if we do not encounter the negative connotation imposed on the idea of the

animals that particularly are not food or utilitarian. Huda explains that one of the major reasons of her family accepting and loving dogs gradually was that they did not hold any of the stigma and were open to experience the animal himself. Stray animals particularly dogs in Pakistan and are seen as filthy and untouchables, children are discouraged to interact with them and this cultural stigma is usually projected while masked as a religious concern, wrongly so. Huda elaborated on an another incident where she was asked not to cross by the mosque because the namazis, people who come to pray objected that the dog in front of the mosque has polluted their ablution, however, the same mosque had an over flowing sewer crossing right at the gate with the filth spread all around which was not a concern but the dog was. Here one can clearly point out how the idea of dog is being charged by notions not logic. Clearly, the dog had to be cleaner than the sewers. The cultural “paleet” stigma of being impure was charging the hatred towards another being which is of course barrier in encouraging positive interaction or empathy towards non-human animals in the longer run.

More often than not, the religiously charged cultural notions are not the only evident barrier in Pakistan. Pet animals are mostly projected as a possession and not an autonomous living beings. While hundred thousands of dogs suffer on roads of Pakistan, every one in 50 households will have a pet dog. The only difference is that it will be of a foreign breed. Huda explores into the phenomenon of our society being fascinated with labels and brands and establishes a link. She explains that our general public is not knowledgeable about the characteristics of breed but are rather fascinated by the label of it being of some monetarily value and foreign status attached to it. A similar behaviour is also seen in their preferences of what they wear, for instance she explains that, “They love a suit from khaadi not because it is a good print, they love it because it is Khaadi. Similarly, a Pointer dog on roads will not be valuable until and unless you tell them

that it's a pointer.”

Observing this superficial phenomenon in our preferences here, one can understand how cultures and subcultures of a certain country or region are across the board and are mostly constructed through social means such as media. Similarly, how our lack of empathy is endemic in our society and is being powered by lack of certain narratives in our mainstream media as well. Huda and many other animal enthusiasts attribute their love for animals to TV channels such as animal planet, shows that included animals in their projection of their everyday life and books with a character of a pet like Fantastic Four as Huda mentions is where her desire to play with a dog emerged because they had a pet dog. However, all of these are foreign outlets in English language and are not accessible to general public. There is little or no representation of animals in our mainstream media especially entertainment industry in Pakistan thus most of the people fail to register them as a part of the picture eventually making us more distant and animals as responsive individuals more alien. Such micro narratives should be necessarily included and instead of taking on a drumming approach, one can simply in a very subtle show the general public a positive image and instil in their subconscious as this being normal. Coupled with this way of learning, children should not be discouraged to interact with animals in the vicinity but counselled on how to keep safe and how to behave around them in order to avoid unpleasant situations such as stray bite incidents. There is a need to lessen the distance between human and animals by engagement on different levels. The fear of the unknown can only have reversed by knowing and eventually leading to a more empathetic human being.

Apart from encouraging educational learning on these premises, one has to be very receptive towards human emotions on a cultural level as well. Huda makes a link that we see children as very dumb and too naïve to pick on things, however it is not the case because as a child she

understood most of the things what her elders thought that she is incapable of. When we do not acknowledge the emotions in a person especially a child we are regressing their empathic tendencies, for instance laughing on things that child cries on because it is funny on an adult level but it troublesome to the child makes him more apathetic and eventually the chain starts. Huda concluded her interview saying, "Empathy is across the board, if you feel for it for one being, you'll feel it for all, same if you don't."

Argument being taken forward; one can understand the importance of empathy here in order to build compassion on a general level. Sarah Jahngir Khan, a rescuer from Karachi housing 60 animals' builds on the narrative on how taking up an empathic lens and perspective she experienced a transformation in her understanding of suffering. In her interview she says, "Are you born with empathy or do you develop it? I think your circumstances make you more empathetic, I keep saying that I am a stray dog, I was bullied as a kid for being over weight and people would talk to me with such disrespect. I felt bad about myself but now I feel as if it's a the same with the stray animals especially dogs, everyone feels as if they are disgusting, dirty and diseased but only once you know them for instance, the people who know me now feel that I am worthy. Same with animals, when you raise them, you know that they are funny, they have a personality, they are so much fun. I love that, I love knowing that."

Sarah explains in her interview that empathy is developed through your personal experiences and once it has been developed, it can be take this up a tool to navigate and eradicate suffering, animal human alike. Her basic belief as she explained that suffering is the same in humans and animals. Both feel pain, scared, hungry, happiness and love, the only difference is that animals are not able to express it that manner like humans can and maybe that is why we disregard them as objects, which is an ideology that needs to be fixed. As Sarah makes a constant back and forth

relationship of how her understanding of animals has informed her heightened consciousness about her dealings with everyone including her staff and people she prefers to befriend. From being a child who was very snobbish and materialistic, she now spends most of her day with her domestic staff and is so accepting towards them, she is not only able to acknowledge them but also makes no differentiation. Focusing on what she built on, it can be assumed that empathy is a very learned behavior and more of a process that leads to a chain of reaction. It has a tendency to make you more receptive and inclusiveness. It encourages the idea of letting go of ideological and social barriers and the shift the center from your own being to a more a inclusive and tolerant approach.

She suggests that her understanding of religion has also informed her journey and proposes that it can be a good tool for general public. Empathy and kindness are very deep rooted in Islam. In Pakistan, one needs to focus on how kind this religion is instead of projecting a “Danday ka zaur” an approach where you project a stern impression of it of being violent and forceful. The idea that animal love is very elitist and western is somewhat baseless because if one considers religious teachings to be the key in Pakistan than there is no mistake now how God feels about torturing or killing innocent animals. There are so many accounts of animal stories in Sunnah that speak of mercy, kindness and them being creatures of God too so perhaps by using religion as informative and a reformative tool. Sarah also emphasizes on how religion is mostly used for personal benefits in our society for instance in patriarchal structures, she explains,

“Where are animals when it comes to religion. If Parda and Haya is so much focused here, then where is the animal part. Why is not equally a sin, if you go against it then why is there not a backlash? People here do not do a lot thing here because it is forbidden is Islam but then so torture, rape, kill animals as well. There should be a fatwa on it. An evil did done to animal is

same as to a human as per Quran.”

Considering the religious angle of the debate, it can be very much concluded that religion here has been influenced by personal meanings and construction. The capacity of religious teachings can be used to encourage a positive behavior in Pakistan, especially if an animal centric debate is built. It has to be spread across through clergy in events so simple as Jumma Surmons and text book curriculum of Islamic studies on educational levels. Compassion as explained by religion is an education that we need as a society if we are to make the country more tolerant and inclusive.

There are two main forces that inform the majority of Pakistan, one is religion and the other is politics. Najda, a psychologist by profession and living with about 15 rescued animals recognized a very important aspect between how politics inform our general understanding of animals and associate a meaning to them. For instance, Maryam Nawaz the leader of very prominent political party with a majority of followers from general public of Pakistan comes into political rallies with lions to impose the idea of power, bravery and as a symbol of being the ruler. However, the lions are drugged and most of them die because of over dose. This is not only a criminal offence if we consider the rules of wild life but straight off animal abuse.

Surprisingly, this act is not recognized as something unacceptable amongst the general public mostly because of the political meaning that is attached to it instead encourages people to want to keep lions as pets. As per an observation, there has been an increase in breeding lions as pets in Lahore recently and most of them have died because of unsuitable living conditions. A practice of using animals as symbols in political exchange can be dated back to times when exotic animals were sent as gifts across countries to as a gesture of goodwill already registered them as objects, but in country as such Pakistan they are being abused on National TV with no uproar or objection. This behaviour reduces the idea of animals to projected meanings instead of individual

sentient beings. The respect for life is overshadowed by political agency here. Two such instances where a dog was wrapped in PTI's flag and shot on camera followed by a donkey painted Nawaz League N beaten and pelted in response till it succumbed to the injuries in broad day light in public space. Both of them filmed in a humorous tone can not be distanced from the narrative that is built on political scales of registering right and wrong when it comes to animals. Furthermore, what complicates this understanding more is both of these actions were legally dealt and reported on news channels not as cases of abuse but encountering the disrespect towards the political parties. However, on the other hand if you see political representation on animals in countries like US, every president owns a dog that too from local shelter, family portraits in Whitehouse are incomplete without the dog. A similar extension of this behaviour is then observed in the general public too from New York being a city with maximum numbers of dog adoptions to a general phenomenon of having dogs in family pictures too. By recognizing such expansions of norms and behaviours, it is possible to encourage change by instigating on these levels so that it eventually seeps in. However, it will not be wrong to say that Pakistan is generally an apathetic country and most of it can be attributed to the poverty levels here as Najda explains in her interview. When people are constantly subjected to misery, pain, suffering they are desensitized to it as a result that they not only lessen their reception to it for themselves but also those around. So when a person who is struggling with means to feed himself or to barely keep alive, will hardly have a state of mind to acknowledge the suffering of the other may it be human or animal. Thus eventually a general lack of empathy prevails and in some cases anger and frustration takes over as well subjected majorly towards vulnerable that are either children, women or animals.

However, since empathy is a learned behaviour so is apathy and it can perhaps be unlearned.

Najda now an avid animal once enjoyed stomping on small animals, it was not until she had to interact with a puppy herself that she started to change her behaviour and was cautious of it. She also recalls being a bully in school as her defensive response to not being fat shamed and exert a certain dominion which she now believes was wrong. She feels as if she has been kinder to all those around once she started registering emotions in animals and unlearned the apathetic approach of hers. But reversing the apathetic attitudes of the general public on a mass scale will take a lot more than just interaction with animals, the public has to be counselled by all angles through mass media through repetition and also held accountable for the offences when it comes to animal abuse. Pakistan has not passed an animal protection bill till this date, the last one of the region was passed in 1851 by British only. The legal aspect is crucial to be implemented and exercised along with the other angles if one has to instil the respect for life here.

This brings us to the questions now, what are animals outside culture and associated meaning. Ifrah, a rescuer housing and feeding 100 dogs explains how her love for animals grew by witnessing them for who they are and their desire to live. By just removing all the cultural and social meaning to them, she just experienced them as living breathing creatures capable of emotions and mental capacities very similar to ours which has informed her personal choices such as going vegan. Her rooster, begum died of natural causes and was not slaughtered because no one had the heart to kill an animal they have witnessed express such a personality in her family even. As per her, you do not need anymore reason to not harm them apart from their own will to live and love you unconditionally.

Another series of interviews were conducted with murder convicts and all of them highlighted one aspect while speaking of difference of animals and humans which was humans being “Asraf-ul-Makhlooqat”, (a term that means man is the noblest of all creations) and animals as dumb, void of any sense. The problem with term is the context in which it is being exercised here, these people who apparently believed humans to be superior because of being intelligent, able to think, make conscious choices while animals being dumb were the same people who had taken another human life senselessly. The context of dominion was not only limited to animals now in this case but perhaps led to their actions towards other vulnerable victims as well for which they had no remorse. Assuming this position of power and authority that stemmed from this idea is problematic and is an important factor if we link our behaviour towards animals and other forms of oppressions and social injustices. On the contrary, when all of the people from the animal rescue community were questioned about the same idea of Ashraf-ul makhlooqat, they elaborated as this being a responsibility bestowed upon them by God to take care of other forms of life here. They perceived this idea as not a sense of dominion but in stewardship which they believed was a major drive in them being inclusive and kind towards all living beings.

Rubina, an animal rescue worker who has saved about 500 animals came as domestic help only and now is an avid animal lover. She has had no formal education or any previous counselling on animal rights except for her father showing by example on how to care for injured animals. She explains her stance on compassion being itself an education and the only way that you can learn is through awareness and engagement. No amount of formal training as per her can inform the heart, one has to do it from within. The status of animals can be improved if a less distant approach is adopted from all animals. A more socially aware and responsible approach can ben

opted when it comes to our fellow beings. What has been instilled over the years can still be questioned and negated only if we value morality and compassion over social conditioning and personal benefits. We can reason our way out of traditional practices and instead of dominion, we can take the position of stewardship only if we are to exist in a just and equal society.

To conclude we can say that compassion is not easily divisible into “human” and “nonhuman.” If you consider how Martin Luther King or Gandhi might have informed the animal rights movement, you might just pause and realise how important it is to realise the link. It is necessary for each of us to understand the factors that influence our understanding and treatment of animals and by doing so we need to recognize that it is important to include animals in our advocacy if we are to work towards a kinder and inclusive world for all.

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