

Of Ants and Anthropocene Man: Making a Case against Insect Speciesism

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Abstract

The very real threat of catastrophic decline and extinction of many insect and invertebrate populations has triggered an interest in an area of inquiry involving humans and insect communities. '*SadananderKhude Jagat*' or 'Sadananda's Little World', a short story penned by the Oscar winning director and writer, Satyajit Ray way back in 1962, formulates one such inter-species encounter but attuned to the possibilities of sympathy between a human adolescent and an insect community. Ray's Sadananda navigates into the ant world as he possesses in abundance, sympathy, compassion and imagination, unfettered by the dogmas of post-Enlightenment scientific rationalism. Further, Ray's *skalpavigyan* aesthetics sets into motion the inauguration of ethics into the discourse on ants. The paper pays particular attention to insect speciesism, that is, a form of discrimination against the insect/ant world and suggests ways of meaningful and non-violent living, keeping the story in focus. Lastly, an attempt has been made to achieve an incorporation of insect species and their studies as a crucial part of this multispecies discourse revolving around the notion of ethics.

Keywords

Animal ethics, Anthropocene, children's literature, insect speciesism, sympathy, imagination, non-human, *kalpavigyan*

Of the vital lessons that the calamitous Anthropocene epoch is seeking to teach us, the primary seems to be the interdependence between all forms of life. The very real threat of catastrophic decline and extinction of many insect and invertebrate populations has triggered an interest in an area of inquiry involving humans and insect communities. '*SadananderKhude Jagat*' or 'Sadananda's Little World', a short story penned by the Oscar winning director and writer, Satyajit Ray way back in 1962, formulates one such inter-species encounter but attuned to the possibilities of sympathy between a human adolescent and an insect community. The text can also be exemplary of literature's engagement with the marginalized segment of insects (here, ants) relegated to a real peripheral position in relation to vertebrate animals and their study. To this end, the

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paper pays particular attention to insect speciesism, that is, a form of discrimination against the insect/ant world and suggests ways of meaningful and non-violent living. Sadananda is employed by Ray to navigate into the ant world as he possesses in abundance sympathy, compassion and imagination, unfettered by the dogma of post-Enlightenment scientific rationalism.

The story written and published in 1962 in *Sandesh*, an iconic Bengali children's magazine, started by Satyajit Ray's grandfather, Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, has the thirteen-year-old Sadananda as the upholder and up keeper of the privileges and right to existence of the ant creatures in a world that considers them as mere pests and unworthy of human interest and consideration. The fact that this story was published in *Sandesh*, is indicative of Ray's belief or hope that children with proper cultururation or correct education could be groomed into understanding, appreciating and exploring alternative realities.

Ray firmly belonged to a breed of writers who explored the dimensions of *kalpavigyan*, a term coined by the science fiction writer/editor Adrish Barman for *Ashcharjya* (1962-63). "*Ascharjya* (meaning wondrous, surprising, or fantastic, with connotations of the magical) was the first exclusively science fiction journal in India, produced in the Bangla language in Kolkata" (Chattopadhyay 435). The term, as described by Chattopadhyay, "is associated with literature in a generic cluster that includes fantasy and 'science,' horror, as well as other fictions of the inexplicable and visionary" (435). The first part, of the complex neologism *kalpavigyan*, 'kalpa', may have been derived by Bardhan from a word in common parlance across many Indian languages, *kalpana* meaning imagination, which discussed by Chattopadhyay, "unwraps the qualitative aspect of imagination; it signals the singular power of the human mind to conceptualize change as a movement in time" (436). The second part of the term referring to "knowledge of the material world, or *vigyan* – that is, science – is only one kind of knowledge and while significant, it is not complete knowledge nor even the major kind, from one perspective" (436). The genre specific term originated in the colonial period, made attacks on superstitions but as in the Nehruvian model, *vigyan* was driven towards a curtailment of uncontrolled Western scientific and technological knowledge and development. A constant theme of this genre that Chattopadhyay identifies is "subverting the boundaries of what is scientifically knowable" (451). Ray too wanted to explore the inexplicable and visionary and he possessed what was needed to motivate children to perceive alternate realities through imagination. Adrish Bardhan categorically identified the urge of *kalpavigyan* writers "to escape from the limitations of reality to a world where there is no need to be trapped and ossified within four walls ruled by the iron finger of physical laws" (108). Here, Sadananda breaks free from the stronghold of rationality and reason and the view that humans epitomize civilizational progress and that ants are dispensable and unworthy creatures of the planet, a mere nuisance.

The aims of the children's magazine *Sandesh* had been precise:

It avoids all sensationalism, sentimentalism, cheap popularity and other unhealthy trends in juvenile literature. It aims at inspiring a healthy, constructive attitude to life, interest in science, literature and culture, and appreciation of the best in human values, ancient and modern, national and international. (Lai 440)

In incorporating 'appreciation of the best in human values' as one of the vital aims of the magazine, Upendrakishore must have had in mind notions of sympathy, compassion, obligation and whatever constituted humaneness. According to the observers of that age of children's literature, "the early Bengali children's books were mostly didactic, meant to be educational, and designed to instill moral values in their young readers" (Bhadury 15). This moral tenor of the magazine was carried forward by Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray as able successors to Upendrakishore's legacy and vision. In fact, Satyajit Ray was instrumental in reviving *Sandesh* in 1961 after a gap of 30 years.

The presence of the non-human or other-than-human animal was distinct in the Rays' oeuvre from the very beginning. Sukumar Ray even created imaginary animals in *Abol Tabol (Rhymes Without Reason, 1923)*. These animals like the *hathimi* (whalephant), *bakachhap* (storkoise) etc. did not belong to the world of scientific realism, they were not documented, authentic, natural biological or zoological phenomena as they resisted classification into a single discernible species. They were imagined into existence, into fantastic amalgamations and were made to carry distinct political undertones- "Ray's portmanteau illustrations in *Khichudi* (Hotch-Potch) are significant because they demonstrate his unease with an unequal power balance that is almost always weighed heavily in favour of one dominant species" (20). Thus, we have a cow-cock wearing a distinctively disgruntled look as it ponders on the undesirable hybrid existence as a mammal-avian.

Satyajit Ray goes beyond the realm of portmanteau animals and their suggestiveness of unequal power dynamics into addressing a real and disturbing clash or conflict between humans and other-than-human species and the inherent politics embedded in these encounters. The story in the first-person narrative transports the readers into the life of Sadananda, who, belying his name, is in constant agony as he witnesses multiple and varied and indiscriminate acts of violence and cruelty on the helpless, innocent tiny insect creatures (ants) or earthlings. All, except Sadananda are profoundly secure in their 'species' pride. Speciesism, as we know, is a term coined by Richard Ryder in the 1970s (just a handful of years after the writing of this story) to draw attention to forms of discrimination such as sexism and racism. It is fundamentally "the belief in the superiority of one species over others" (White 2). Animal liberationists make this comparison between speciesism and racism to reveal a basic human tendency, that is to, unreflectively accept and promote contemporary moral values.

Sadananda, in spite of membership in the human species, is not loyal to the species. Unlike other humans he can marvel at the ants and their high level of intelligence, social skills, communication power, and high architectural dexterity. And all these without any human intervention? From initial interest, Sadananda's involvement with the ants escalates to a point where the human agent can fight to defend the insect creatures' lives, dwellings, food supply and the basic right to survive human torture. As a member of the dominant species, Sadananda has to work hard to win the trust of the ant creature friends. He does so by rescuing his first ant friend from sure drowning, he leaves sugar particles at strategic places like window sills, accessible to the ants. Most importantly, Sadananda distracts other humans from killing ants as and when these creatures are deemed a threat to food resources and a nuisance to human habitation (an ant can move into the orifice of the nose or ear to deliver a stunning bite).

Richard White's article on insect speciesism, that is, discrimination against the insect world by other species members, is revelatory of the irrational perceptions and

prejudices against the earthlings that are minute – “The dominant classification and attitude toward insects has regrettably, been forged by a toxic speciesist and human-centric prejudice, one which has manifested itself in a geography of violence and subjugation, that once again, defies comprehension” (White 5). The irony is not lost on us as we have India as our motherland, a land that had held sacred tenets of kindness and benevolence since time. In one of the early observations of an English clergyman, John Ovington, “India, of all the Regions of the Earth, is the only publick Theatre of Justice and Tenderness to Brutes, and all living creatures for not confining Murther to the killing of a Man they religiously abstain from taking away the Life of the meanest Animal, Mite or Flea; any of which if they chance willfully to destroy, nothing less than a very considerable Expiation must atone the offence” (Roy 90-91). And then there are accounts of ‘merciful Hindoos’ who behold “in every creature, a kinsman: he rejoices in the welfare of every animal, and compassionates his pains; for he knows, and is convinced, that of all creatures the essence is the same, and that one eternal first cause is the father of us all” (91). It has to be that in the land of Bapu, *ahimsa* (non-violence/non-injury) translates into a form of non-violence against all forms of life, including human beings and other life forms with one to five senses. Or is it not expandable to the so-called ‘meanest’ creatures as inferred from Ovington’s observation quoted above? If we refer to the Vedic categorization and classification of animals, we are told that animals were supposedly created “in certain classes in the beginning by the creator God, by *Purusha* (the Cosmic Man) or *Prajapati* (the Lord of the Creatures)” (Smith 528). According to this account, the creator God “created all, whatever copulating pairs there are, right down to the ants” (528). But then when the myth focuses in detail and provides further enumeration on humans, cows, horses, asses, goats and sheep, the researcher marks an omission in that “not counting the lowly ants” (529). Here again, we contend with the fact of the lowly, undeserving creatures that are the ants. Ovington too had hinted at the presence of ‘meanest’ creatures like ‘mite’ or ‘flea’ and doesn’t mention ants in the list.

In the early modern period, European chroniclers traveling to or resident in the subcontinent took particular note of the outspoken commitment to the preservation of non-human life, even in its meanest or ‘useless’ forms (89). Parama Roy’s article goes on to document another feature of the Indian culture of dealing with the non-human, “perhaps the most conspicuous instances for observers from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries of Western Indian non-violence toward animals were the bird and animal hospitals known as *parabdis* or *pinjrapoles* dedicated to the shelter and care of sick, injured, or non-productive birds and animals. By far the most remarkable feature of these institutions, for most observers, was the existence in many of them, of rooms called the *jivatkhana* (or less commonly, *jivakothi*, literally an abode for the living), or insect rooms. In these rooms, which were refuges for insects of various kinds, were housed the weevils and other insects found in grain” (Roy 91). What about ants, did they figure in this arrangement?

The presence of ants in the subcontinent though cannot be refuted as there is documentation of their presence in a painting found at the famous Ajanta Caves. The painting at Ajanta Cave number 17 (5th century AD) depicts a number of black ants in a row climbing on a Palas tree stem. The tree is found throughout India and is known as the flame of the forest because of its bright red-coloured flowers. In the painting in

question, the bodies of the ants, their legs and colour are clearly discernible. The researcher speculates how the ants would have “come to collect honey from the flowers” (Kadgaonkar 108) The Jain sect, operating in the subcontinent, would often wear a cloth across the mouth to prevent accidental swallowing of air-borne insects like gnats. “An offering of wheat may, even today be placed for ants around their nests” (Southwood 33). Except this one practice of the Jains, were there other instances of care and consideration for the too common species of ants?

The complexities in the treatment of ants in India, from their Vedic devaluation in the order of creation to their depiction casually in a 5th century painting to them being part of Jain ethical practices and then their absence from the overall ethics of care and shelter cannot be duly addressed in the scope of this paper. But the fact that they are too common and too abundant and perceived as a nuisance, with them threatening destruction on food and resources and livestock (a 2022 BBC report on Tamil Nādu even documented how ‘crazy yellow ants’ were spraying formic acid into the eyes of livestock) may have all contributed in their exclusion from the ethics of care and shelter and cultural devaluation. They are probably worse than a pest because they do not register in human consideration. And how do you define a pest? They either (1) Pose a threat to the ‘quality’ and success of plants grown for food or pleasure and / or; (2) are perceived as annoying or as threatening (e.g., wasps). There is a further dynamic at play here, one which defines ‘pest’ according to the potential impact on capitalist economic profits” (White 13). In all probability, ants are not as dangerous as a locust or a wasp? Are they? We surely do remember H.G. Wells’ short story for children, ‘The Empire of the Ants’(1905), which echoes Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in that there is a journey across the Congo, but most importantly, human skulls are shown to be gnawed by ants. Here, Wells imagines Amazonian ants as definite threats to human existence.

It is surely lost on many that ants do play a significant role in the ecology and contribute to the sustenance of the ecosystem as they help in the process of pollination as documented in reputed science journals. Then there are marginalized communities across the globe who feed on ants and their eggs. From the tribal population in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha to the Aboriginal people in Australia, ants figure prominently in their diet as a source of easy and economic animal protein. These communities value ants and their eggs because of their dietary dependence on them. The well-being of the ants is not the primary objective or motivating criterion for these humans but a sense of profit.

The protagonist of Ray’s story, Sadananda Chakraborty, is a Brahmin boy from a rural village in Bengal, who’s love for ants is not based on any utilitarian purpose rather it remains inexplicable. A chance and casual observation leads on to a more nuanced and deliberate engagement and the adolescent is transformed into a real ants’ rights champion. This is where literature plays a definitive role into conditioning the future of human-animal-insect multispecies engagement. The hope is that some of humanity may be conditioned to abhor violence against any form of life on the earth. This abstinence from violence may be augmented by this emphasis on the cultivation of sympathy and imagination to conjure the lives of the peripheral entities. Thomas Nagel in his famous article “What is it like to be a Bat?”, claims how the actual consciousness of animals is inaccessible to human reason. Nagel discredits human reason as a possible tool to comprehend the non-human animal. We may also safely include insect species into the

ambit too as being inaccessible through human reason. What if human beings relied on sympathetic imagination as a tool to approach the other-than-human species? The beauty of this facility enables communication and consideration between beings considered and different from each other. And the facility does not demand the beings to be similar or same in nature:

There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. ... If I [as a novelist] can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (Coetzee 35)

These words of J.M. Coetzee's (Nobel Prize winner 2003) alter-ego Elizabeth Costello, seem already in practice in the fictional domain of Ray's Bengal village in the persona of Sadananda. He can duly perceive through observation, how the earthlings that are the ants coordinate their social tasks; he can simultaneously imagine what would be the nature of communication between the ants as they perform Herculean tasks. At certain times, Sadananda can even seek to embrace an ant existence rather than the privileged, coveted human one.

Contrary to speciesist human beings, Sadananda is amazed at the talent and ability of the ants to build amazing fortresses for the safekeeping of thousands of ants of the colony. The boy even compares and contrasts the ability of the tiny creatures vis a vis the big animals like the tiger and the elephant and the bear who are devoid of this ability to build shelters on such a massive scale. If birds act on the impulse to build, they do so on a much smaller scale. Sadananda, through observation, can come to know many aspects of the ants and revel in their self-awareness, planning, empathy, emotional nature, and complex creativity.

The ingenuity, perfection and detailing that get achieved by the ants in the form of the ant nest can be of no marvel to the humans who can destroy it in no time. This is exhibited in the text through the character of Srikumar who can demolish an ant nest out of spite and out of speciesist pride. "For all creatures despised and vilified as 'pests' things tend to go very, very badly for them. Indeed, as far as 'pest' insects are concerned, then the violence that they will face is limited only by imagination. It is a violence which is furious, merciless and relentless in its intent; ending only with their extermination and/ or permanent elimination from these spaces where their presence is not wanted: places where they have dared to 'infest'" (White 15). Activists writing on speciesism, targeting animals and insects alike, have imagined these systems of violence towards animals "precisely as constituting a war ... as warlike ... a sacrificial war that is as old as Genesis" (15). This war is very much embedded and animated in these everyday spaces like homes, gardens, playing fields, amphitheaters, office spaces the world over. Srikumar, after his act of violent destruction of the ant nest, targets individual ants and decimates almost five hundred of them by trampling on them. Here, Sadananda draws an analogy between these ant-victims and the passengers that had died in a train accident nearby, at Sahebganj. In both the cases, the victims had died suddenly and their deaths were unwarranted. It is seldom that a writer while addressing the issue of cruelty on other-than-human species would draw a parallel to human suffering but Ray does so. In talking about vivisection, Peter Singer, a vociferous animal rights activist, similarly claims that after Nazism, the experimentation on live subjects was given over to

experimentation on animals and draws the similar analogy between Nazi genocide and genocide of animals in factories.

By this time in the story, Sadananda can actually hear the cries of the ants as they reel from the act of cruelty. On other occasions, he can notice music flowing from the ants' voices. There is a mutual understanding now between him and his ant-friends. The creatures have accepted him as a friend, a benefactor and no longer bite him. Satyajit Ray, besides relying on sympathetic imagination, incorporates the tropes of fantasy, speculation and the absurd to facilitate and justify this breach of the 'soft' boundary between the two species. Ray's Sadananda may be said to have crossed this 'species boundary', as Ian Hackling claims, "attuned to the possibilities of sympathy between some people and at least some animals" (Hackling 20).

We are repeatedly made aware over the centuries of the hierarchy of species operative within the animal ethics discourse with insect species relegated to the margin, with most philosophers and activists promoting animals who can be similar to humans as possible, whether in their intellectual abilities or their ability to suffer. In the seminal work, *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), Tom Regan argues for the consideration of rights of non-human animals, because they are "subjects of a life" (Regan 244-245). To Regan, this criterion is based on the animal's ability to feel pleasure and pain, having perceptions and memory. However, in spite of making this a sufficient condition for obtaining an inherent value, Regan fails to extend this paradigm of 'animal', to the insects and mostly discusses the 'bigger' lifeforms, thereby marginalizing the 'little' ones like pests. This covert hierarchization of animals needs to be critiqued. We need to develop an ethic that can extend our obligations even to those who are not like us and may not be useful to us. Yet in Ray's story, Sadananda acknowledges the 'subject of a life' status of the ants, based on their ability to 'feel', thereby their claim to ethical treatment too? Interestingly, this text also throws up the possibility of acknowledging other-than-human species, here ant insects, 'feeling' their way into ethical consideration. Ray however does reckon the dissimilarities between the human agent and the ants. As a marker of this dissimilarity, ants are classified as insects, therefore not even classifiable as animals.

Sadananda is left so traumatized by this indiscriminate attack on the ant nest, he takes to bed in high fever- delirious and desolate. But here too in his own home there are insensitive humans who can act in a similar manner as Srikumar. His own mother launches an attack on a lone ant and kills him with one swipe of her hand. Witnessing the second act of ruthless annihilation renders Sadananda incapable of recovery and is therefore shifted to a medical facility away from home. The story showcases a strong sense of devotion and loyalty in the ant-friends of Sadananda, who seek him out even in an unfamiliar terrain and locale of a hospital where Sadananda is housed, and can even inflict a bite on the cold and unfeeling medical professional administering an injection to Sadananda.

There is a reflection of certain laudatory human attributes in these ants who are now identified by Sadananda as 'Lal Bahadur Singh' and 'Lal Chand Padhe'. The presence of these talking ants in Ray's short story, this anthropomorphism, can easily be justified as being part of writing for children, which is itself relegated to the realm of the non-serious. But had Ray not presented the ants as sentient and capable of speech, he could not have initiated a dialogue between the two diverse species. According to Juliet Markowsky, the primary reason why an author of children's books would make animals

talk, “is to enable young readers to identify with the animals; the second reason is for the flight of fancy; the third reason is for variety” (Markowsky 460-461). In the case of Ray’s short story, it allows humans capable of sympathy and marked by imagination to enter or escape fantastically into a world of insect-creatures with their own social structures and social behavior that mimic and express our own. This escapism need not have negative or limiting connotations but one that facilitates a movement away from reality with no privileged centers or marginalities. Moreover, Sadananda, had been able to sustain his interest in the ants, had interacted with them and had taken time to enter into their world. Interaction can actually lead to an alternative way of ‘becoming an animal’ (Aaltola 205). Thus, it is an interesting amalgamation of quite a few abilities in Sadananda, his sympathetic imagination, his curiosity, interactional inclination, observational skills and patience that ultimately allow him to come close to the ant species. And here it is Ray’s *kalpavigyan* aesthetics that could set into motion the inauguration of ethics into the discourse on ants.

Those involved in the study of animal ethics are familiar with the ‘Great Ape Project’ and how it argues that “great apes are unique among animals in that they are our closest animal relatives and possess many of our defining characteristics and therefore should have special treatment among animals and equal treatment to people at least in terms of freedom and right to life” (Oliver 267). Derrida responded to this exclusionary vision by arguing how “to want absolutely to grant not to animals but to a certain category of animals, a right equivalent to human rights would be a disastrous contradiction” (qtd. in Oliver 267-268). Critics like Frank Schalow, on the other hand claim that, “contrary to those who propose egalitarianism between animals and humanity, it is really the differences separating them which dictate why we should protect animals from acts of cruelty” (Aaltola 195). Ants as a separate species, have been present on this earth as companions to humans and are as entitled to live, survive and thrive as humans or even more than humans because they are sentient, and as part of the insect species would outnumber humans. Most importantly, they add to biodiversity and contribute fundamentally to the ecological balance for which they deserve to be saved and protected from human inflicted injury and cruelty. It is doubtful how far humanity can surrender its own interest and seek moral concerns of insects as of interest. What can therefore be offered as a minimum ethic applicable to all the earthlings without any distinction is something that already has been articulated, “we ought to refrain from actions which may be reasonably expected to kill or cause nontrivial pain in insects when avoiding these actions has no, or only trivial, costs in our own welfare” (Lockwood 83). Litterateurs too need to be avoid overt negative symbolism and denigration and trivialization of insect lives in their writing.

“Given the environmental urgency upon us, generosity is a virtue that we cannot afford to live without” argues Kelly Oliver while discussing the portent of animal ethics (Oliver 280). Until we address and redress the trivialization and denigration of other-than-human species, there is no redemption for us. How do we go beyond the utilitarian calculations and relate to others different from us and treat them with respect? What this paper has attempted to achieve is an incorporation of insect species and their studies as a crucial part of this multispecies discourse. Literature can aid in this discourse and can imagine a future more secure for all the species of the world than the present.

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