

# SOCIAL ACTION

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# MORALITY, PUBLIC COMPASSION AND OTHER-DIRECTEDNESS

In many senses, we are living in very troubled times. Barbarity is upon us. There is a human foot and handprint in all the bad that is happening around and to us. What is really the point of showing the good when thousands of children go to bed in hunger or die of it, when nations consciously spend billions of dollars developing, marketing or buying weapons to kill other human beings, individually or collectively, when our mothers, sisters, or daughters are molested and raped and when hundreds of species face the reality of their extinction. The list goes on. A studied look at the global every day is saddening for there is so much of pain, suffering, disaster and death around. It does not seem to make much sense anymore.

The socio-eco sites of pain and suffering, destruction and death -- involving both humans and other beings -- are multiplying. Extreme self-centeredness, possessive individualism and 'what's in it for me' mindsets govern most of our social interaction, even the most intimate ones. The dominant social structures provide 'socio-technical wombs' to continue reproducing society as it is. We intensely suffer alienation and objectification in the marketplace. We have become free commodities, quite readily bought and sold by a system that is based on commodification, exploitation, alienation, buying and selling. Unfortunately, even faith-based educational institutions instead of setting new humane pathways are guided by this same logic. It is a time of deep moral crises though we often distract this by displaying or faking great achievements and progress.

While recognising the deep moral crises we are faced with, we also take note of, and even celebrate, the human/humane spirit of being Other-directed i.e. the concern and care for the Other, particularly when the Other is in pain and suffering. That is the very essence of compassion. It is one of our key virtues.

Not only humanity's great teachers have shown us that we can rise to the occasion to take care of humans, other beings and Nature in general, but also ordinary people have done extraordinary acts of kindness and sacrifice. We have examples not only of well-known persons like M.K. Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King or Oscar Romero but also relatively unknown persons like Kamala

Lochan Baliarsingh (of Bhubaneswar), Imam Moulana Imdadul Rashidi (of Kolkata), Ankit Saksena (of Delhi) or Narayanan Krishnan (of Madurai).

In the middle of mindlessness and moral crises, compassion and hope have taken a principled stand in defense of our caring, inclusive humanity. There is also a growing body of knowledge from neuroscience supporting the value of compassion in relation to our survival as social beings. But in modern society, persons who are empathetically Other-directed and have stood for morality and public compassion have courageously faced great dangers from overt and covert status-quo sustaining structures -- demonisation, persecution, kidnapping, torture and many a times the ultimate censure, assassination. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Berta Caceres (Honduras) and Sombath Somphone (Laos), among many others, were killed for their engaged public compassion.

Society has a way to submerge or distract us from the uncomfortable realities that need to be brought to focus so that there is interrogation, deliberation and development of areas that are normally not covered in the humanities and social sciences and that go beyond disciplinary silos. Given their seriousness, morality, public compassion and other-directedness have to be brought into public learning spaces and into our everyday discourse and action. Can we therefore genuinely learn from the present ecological, social and moral crises, the serious responses to them, and the accompanying dangers so that we may shape an engaging scholarship on public compassion? Can we find some pathways to deepen our mindful and empathetic Other-directedness and nurture an active compassionate world? Can we through the study of compassion also develop a transdisciplinary approach to the ‘new humanities’?

Exploring the themes mentioned above has not been easy. It was also difficult to find scholars and activists to contribute to this volume, as it seemed like an area people are not familiar with or confident enough to write about. Yet, some dared to explore.

In the article by Dev Pathak and Piyashi Dutta, *An Ordinary Trope of Compassion: In an Anthropology of Folk and Sociology of Love*, compassion is explored quite widely touching on everyday transactions, philosophy, religions and even performing arts. It is presented as “polyphonic, at the intersection of oral tradition and sophisticated body of philosophical deliberations. It is a human value, oriented toward fellow humans as well as non-humans in the framework of everyday life”. While the everydayness and critical social importance of compassion are emphasized, the authors also

warn us: “Compassion in contemporary times is marketed as a commodity. It is repeatedly used by spiritual gurus, politicians and social workers alike, to address issues of violence, social justice, human rights, peace keeping, climate change, etc.”.

Nadira Khatun in her article *Conceiving the Discourse of Compassion through the Lens of Media* examines the reality of distant suffering and the global discourse on compassion in a world that has become a ‘global village’ through globalisation and the creation of the “public sphere”. Issues of human suffering gets into the public sphere and are globalised. Images and stories on human suffering are available everywhere the global and local media reach out. This allows for the media to play an important role in the development of a global discourse on compassion for distant sufferings. Two case studies are explored to capture this development. The article also cautions us about the class nature of media representations and therefore distant suffering and compassion.

Nadarajah explores the reasons why we need to urgently propose a course on ‘compassion studies’. In his article *‘Living’ in a Violent, Broken World: The Urgent Need for New Humanities and Compassion Studies (A Preliminary Proposal)*, he argues that the “foundational edifice of the unsustainable world we have so carelessly and mindlessly built with all its institutional scaffolding, including the university” only increasingly scatters more and more eco-socio sites of pain, suffering, disaster and death across the globe. It is a world built on the seduction of growth, disciplinarity and technology all putting us in harm’s way by creating a world that for self-preservation purpose sustains structural inequality, exclusivities, violence, insecurities, conflicts and wars. It has become a world that has marginalized ‘Otherness’. There is thus a need to address this through a process of deep change involving deschooling, decolonisation and conscientisation. The article suggests that through this process, it is possible to make learning spaces for areas that have been neglected, like compassion studies.

Ayantika Chakraborty’s article *The Social Activist Folklorist in Folklore Research: Towards a More Compassionate Collaboration* addresses the issue of doing traditional folklore research, which remains detached from the people studied. Data collection is an impersonal, objective process; there is no room for being a ‘compassionate researcher’. This has increasingly created a distance between the researcher and the folk/indigenous people. Without protecting and nurturing the society and culture of indigenous communities, how can researchers continue their work to understand the

ways and wisdom of the folk, which is increasingly recognised as providing compassionate solutions to the ecological challenges we have created in modern societies? The need to intervene poses a tension in folklore research and has been resolved in some ways by creating the Social Activist Folklorist.

A new section entitled “Public Documents” has been introduced in this volume. As part of the learning ecology of compassion, these documents offer a glimpse of the complex and innovative practical pathways it unfolds to take deeper root in society.

This volume is but a small contribution to the growing literature and deliberations on public compassion in a world experiencing a ‘deficit’ in dialogue, inclusivity, and empathetic compassion. We hope that it starts off some serious and systematic thinking about growing innovative learning ecologies around compassion and other key associated areas, like dialogue and inclusivity, which are life affirming and nurturing. Among the many ways, we also need this effort to survive the difficult phase of human history that we are going through globally.

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