



OPINION

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HEN a VIP visits a street, local officials rush to remove the dogs living there. When a minister's relative's plantation is visited by an elephant or used for a nap by a tiger, the politician demands the immediate destruction of the animal. Every day we read of people and politicians abusing animals. In Kerala, they want to empower farmers to kill wildlife for 'intruding' into agricultural fields, forgetting that the fields were the homes of the animals. In cities, people want to kill dogs who have always lived there.

Fortunately, the Animal Birth Control Rules (ABC) prevent what was once a savage massacre. The unrequited responsibility of carrying out ABC programmes lies with local bodies, municipal corporations and panchayats. The cow, being sacred, cannot be destroyed easily, but every corporation is trying to get rid of her. Animals share the earth with humans, but in a mad desire to acquire more land for agriculture, industry and cities, people want to kill off other inhabitants of our planet. As a result, animals who are an essential part of our world and could bring great happiness suffer immensely.

Towards the end of the last Ice Age, humans are said to have allied with wolves. Maybe the humans fed some wolves scraps of food and the wolves protected the humans from predators. The two species collaborated and even hunted together. Since then, a lot has happened. People deliberately breed dogs as pets and later abandon them, making them dispensable.

Ancient civilisations revered nature. All life forms contribute equally to the balance of the five elements or pancha bhuta. In many ancient civilisations such as India, animals are even worshipped. The Lepcha hunter-gatherers of Sikkim believe that the blood pheasant is sacred, for it saved Lepcha ancestors from the great flood and guided them to safety. In Indian traditions, animals are recognised as sentient beings who feel pain and pleasure. It has now been proved that several species feel pain, happiness and sorrow, among other emotions. Some 276 different expressions have been observed in cats and 17 in horses. Dogs produce more facial movements before a human, including raising their eyebrows and making their eyes appear bigger. Canine siblings can recognise each other even after a gap of several years.

Animals such as the elephant, the monkey and the tiger were worshipped as deities in India. Some became vehi-

cles of gods. Many were deities of tribes who were gradually absorbed into the wider Hindu pantheon. Animals like dogs and primates were friends and companions of humans.

Animals interact with the human world through myths. All ancient civilisations had myths which brought together gods, people, animals and nature. Among the nine gems that appeared when the ocean was churned (*samudra manthan*) were the elephant, cow and horse.

We worship elephants as Ganesha, but we keep them chained in temples, or make them carry tourists up the hill and log wood in Assam. Bombs are placed inside pineapples, which burst when elephants chew the fruit, thus maiming them beyond repair. The cow now belongs to the dairy industry, where she is kept permanently pregnant, deprived of her calves and milked till she can no longer produce any more. Horses are ridden till they drop dead. The chimpanzee shares 99 percent of human genes, but is still abused in laboratories. Pilgrims who go to see Lord Ayyappan in Sabarimala forget that Ayyappan was protected by tigers. The temple is situated inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve, where there are hardly 40 tigers left, and even they cannot be seen. Those animals with no perceived value or legal protection have been regarded as expendable.

The concept of ahimsa or non-violence in thought and deed is India's unique contribution to world culture. The *rishis* of the Upanishads were the first to speak of kindness and ahimsa. Mahavira based his teachings on the concept of 'live and let live'. The Buddha spoke about compassion and Emperor Ashoka banned hunting and slaughter in his kingdom. The epics and puranas narrate stories of animals who helped people. The great Tamil philosopher Thiruvalluvar believed "those who have realised what is suffering must refrain from inflicting it on others". Animals are equally subject to the law of karma and a human could be reborn as a biped or quadruped.

Islam promises paradise for animals. According to the Quran (6:38), "There is no animal that crawls on the earth, no bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book. Then to their Lord will they all be mustered (collected)." *Proverb* 12:10 of the Bible says, "The righteous care for the needs of their animals."

Politicians and people want to destroy forests to enable industries and agriculture to thrive. Ancient India used religious sentiments to protect animals. Modern India enacted laws to protect animals, but this has not reduced cruelty or destruction. Human apathy and the belief that the world was made for humans has resulted in the large-scale decimation of animals and their habitats, yet we still turn a blind eye. This earth belongs to every species and everyone has a right to live on this planet. We cannot allow human greed to harm other species.

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