

## FROM THE EDITOR

### KNOWING THE SPRING THROUGH THE AD

Once upon a time the Indian continent was distinguished for its experience of the six distinct seasons in a year. While our ancient literature gives eloquent evidence of this, even the octogenarians and nonagenarians present amidst us testify to their experiencing at least four distinct seasons, each with its unmistakable characteristics.

"One by one they proved elusive—the summer excepting—and in the north the winter," sighed an old man reminiscing over the lost cycle of good old seasons.

So far as the spring is concerned, we often know about its arrival in the way this character in a contemporary writer's story knew: "Spring had come to the town. Ravi learnt about the event from a quarter-page advertisement in the newspaper announcing the arrival of the season's garments in the leading departmental store of the town."

The unprecedented drought that has stunned us is a direct consequence of our brutality towards Nature. We know this. Even then an hour does not pass without some people further denuding the land of woods and what is perhaps worse, of our hills. A broken hill is perhaps among the most pathetic witnesses of man's barbarity, for, in principle, we can raise a forest, but never a hill—not even in a billion years! But some men continue to destroy the hills in an era when they can be easily spared. There can hardly be a greater shame than this.

Man's alienation from Nature—rather man alienating Nature from his life—has dangerous physical consequences, and this is a fact universally acknowledged. But it might have done greater havoc to our minds. The alienation from Nature has perhaps been the beginning of a chain of alienations—alienation of our sense of beauty from our attraction for glamour, of our love for peace from our pursuit of pleasure, of our inner self from our social and superficial identity.

But that is a different matter and a more subtle issue. Let us focus on the obvious aspect of the situation—that our alienating Nature from our life is bringing about our doom. Can't there be a moratorium on all such activities? Why don't our regional political leaders, who are ever ready to launch morchas and gheraos against their rival politicians, divert their attention for a decade to this problem? If they don't, why not the common educated people of every region grow alert enough to protect their ecology?

## ON THE TIDES OF TIME

### DEATH OF A GRAND OLD HABIT

Domestic pets like dogs, cats and birds "are excellent cure for heart and circulatory disorders," says a research paper read at the international symposium on the man-animal relationship at the Agricultural University in Uppasala. "Domestic pets had a salutary effect on the well-being of human beings, and they were, perhaps, the best means of making rich and sound the lives of persons living in sterile modern environment," the paper asserts.

Numerous are the stories of the devotion of the pets to their masters—in mythology and legends. Argos, the dog of Ulysses, was the first to recognise its master when he returned after many years of war and adventure. It died of sheer joy. The greatest example of man's love for his animal-companion in mythology is to be found in Yudhishthira's refusal to be admitted to heaven unless he was allowed to take with him the dog that had followed him faithfully along his great journey, the *Mahayatra*.

History too is no less resplendent with examples of loving relation between men and their pets. Sir Isaac Newton's dog, Diamond, upset a candle on his table reducing to ashes the savant's papers documenting his scientific experiments of many years. "Oh Diamond, Diamond, thou little knowest the mischief thou hast done!" was all he said.

Newton certainly knew the value of a pet dog—perhaps an all-time proof of which is the famous "Dog of Montargis".

In 1371 a gentleman by the name of Aubry was found murdered in a forest. His dog, Dragon, snarled at and tried to attack one Richard of Macaire whenever it saw him. It managed to arouse suspicion in all the friends of Aubry that Richard could have been his murderer.

According to the legal tradition of the time, Richard was ordered to undergo a judicial combat with Dragon. Richard died, but not before confessing to his having murdered Aubry.

### **ACHIEVEMENT OF THE PRIMITIVE**

All the animals that can be domesticated had been tamed by our ancestors at the twilight of civilisation. The 'civilised' man has not been able to add a single species to the list. By and by we have only lost our hold on them. In the households of the ancient Egyptian nobility baboons served as waiters. "The Chinese, during the reign of Kubla Khan, used lions on hunting expeditions," informs Isaac Asimov. "They trained the big cats to pursue and drag down massive animals from wild bulls to bears, and to stay with the kill until the hunters arrived."

The urban lifestyle is no doubt a great factor for man gradually giving up the habit of keeping pets. But what about a country like India the greater part of the population of which still remains spread over villages? There must be some deeper reason for the slow death of the once wide-spread habit.

### **THE UNFORGETTABLE LOOK**

Born and brought up in a village (the nearest seasonal bus-stop was eight miles away and the nearest railway station twenty six miles), I lived amidst animals as much as human beings. Cattle, dogs, cats and a maina bird apart, we had a peacock that was moody but beautiful. I had brought up a mongoose that was ready to perform a variety of tricks the moment it was sure of an appreciative audience.

To this was added an unexpected trophy. Flood used to turn my sister's village into an island at intervals of some years. During one such havoc a tigress and her two cubs found refuge in a bushy frontier of the village. Probably they had fallen into the river in a landslide and, drifting from their forest, had been wandering for long, totally confused.

The tired tigress was killed in a simple operation. News came that I could have one of the cubs if I so desired. What greater excitement could be offered to a nine-year-old?

I reached my sister's village as fast as I could. The return journey was perhaps the proudest in my life, a villager carrying the cub in a basket on his head, it giving out its soft growl from time to time, excited dogs barking at it all the way.

After a few days of bewilderment, the cub began to get adjusted to the new environment. I can never forget the look with which it used to survey my face for minutes at a stretch. That was the sign of its developing faith in me—sign that made me uneasy. No doubt I loved it, but it was a possessive love, inseparable from a sense of pride. The cub did not understand that. Its demand was disarming. It was eager to repose its translucent faith in a suitable object and it was under the illusion that it was discovering it in me.

It died in a fight with a poisonous snake in our garden.

I am afraid, we are fast losing the natural quality conducive to nurturing pets. To have an animal in the house is to be continuously reminded of our lost traits of innocence and faith—a rather painful exercise—unless we succeed in contaminating them with our own conceit.