

Plot
278/6



Readers' opinions on previous editions

"I just let [my train] drive by because I didn't want to stop reading your book in this peaceful twilight mood. Considerately, my night train was one hour late, long enough for me to finish it in one go. Thank you for this gift! I often laughed, even out loud; the crickets may have wondered, or the person monitoring the station camera... Your story reads so fresh and associatively that I didn't want to put it away at any point because I was so curious how it would go on. And now that I'm leafing through it again, I have to force myself to put it out of my hands. Very reassuring that it turns out at the end that the whole booklet is only the preface! ~~N.

Despite differences of opinion about the future of our planet, I hope for and wish you all the best. Everyone should work where they think they are effective. ~~K.

[This is] the second book I've read in my life... Your story reminds me precisely of my current situation... By the way, I think the idea of passing the book on is great, especially regarding its story. This could give many people a different view of the world. ~~D.

I was really sad when it was over and I hope for the main book to this very, very nice preface. Honestly, I really liked it. You narrate and describe things beautifully. It's never been boring or stupid. In some places it even moved me to tears... It makes a big difference to me if someone I don't know and who is hiding behind a pseudonym tells me this, or if this is someone I know and appreciate. ~~T.

Delicious!!! Humour with seriousness, which – if one knows you – is really cool because of the irony towards yourself and others! I like that kind of humor! It requires a little bit of intelligence though... ~~M.

I like it very much, your little booklet. Your explanations cover quite a lot of ground. What makes the most impression on me is that no matter where we are now, we have to struggle with life... This encourages me to act unconventionally, to think outside the box, to stick to what seems essential to me, even if the contradictions which come to my mind much more strongly as a result are difficult to bear. ~~S.

The fact that the milk of a cow with a name tastes different from that of a nameless cow makes sense to me. I would almost say: How could it be otherwise? ~~M.

I have read through your preface—or is it a book? It's wonderful. Thanks for letting me. I made notes of language, style, punctuation and even substance here and there... Once you get rolling, it is quite delightful; the beginning needs a little more attention in my view. You have to read/edit it from the new reader's point of view. And in the beginning your logic of making statements has to be linked to what you have already introduced. Otherwise you are just dropping thought bombs on them. ~~T.

See the madman in my gaze, T. ;-)

Thanks for everybody's honest feedback; it helped me with improving this work to its current version. You wrote the story of my life; I just added the mistakes. ~~J.

Author

Hello, my name is Jürgen and I am in recovery from Industrial civilization. I was born in Stuttgart, Southwest Germany in 1971, and have grown up in the northern Black Forest. After finishing high school and scientific library studies, I completed three years of training as a geriatric nurse. After exams, I worked in senior citizens' homes, on construction sites, in courier logistics, as a postman and as an independent market-driving salesman for pet supplies. At the same time I travelled through a dozen European countries, the USA and Japan. 2010 saw the end of my finances and my patience. I decided to finally lead my life the way I thought it should be, instead of letting myself continue under pressure to succeed and be forced to uglify the world. I moved to a community in southern India, where I work as a freelance translator with a focus on future developments, but mainly in organic farming and as a librarian. My blog appears at irregular intervals at www.paxton.de .

Book

Plot 278/6 is a collection of anecdotes stemming from my move to India. Each reveals a larger context, which combines both the frog and bird view on existence. These insights illuminate the constant friction I experienced growing up. It took me a long time to realize that other people's expectations stirred my irritation, which I compulsively poured over my contemporaries. I was not easy to be with.

Since 2009, in concert with cleaning out the pigsty of my soul, I have been intensively studying the state of the world to grasp what is causing its multiple crises. Taking the consequences of what I found out, I left my home, my job, my friends and my family and moved to the place which you will read about on the following pages. I never questioned that decision. But if one does not know what one actually wants, merely moving elsewhere or rejecting one state does not solve one's problems. Which direction was I heading?

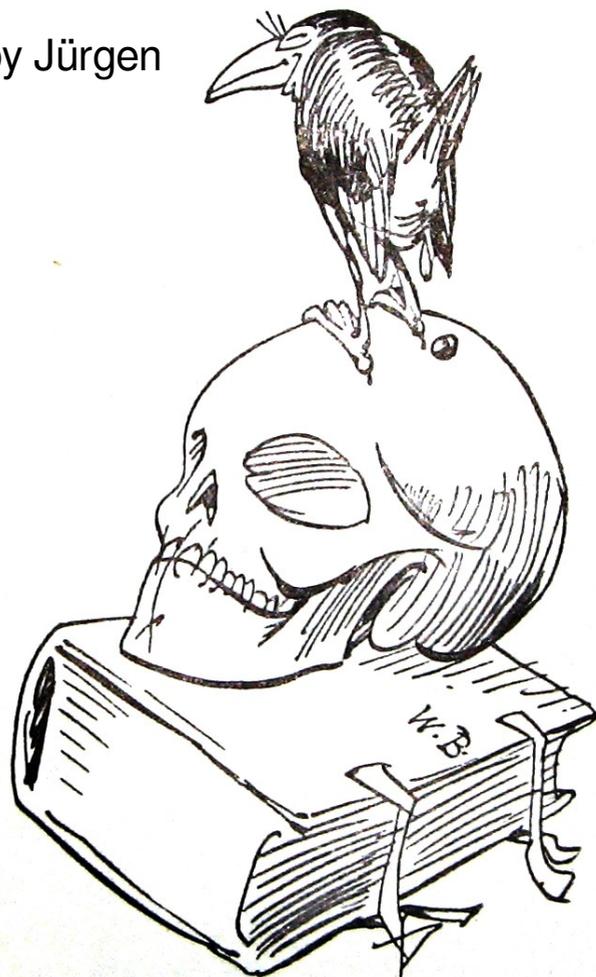
This farm I am living in today has taught me what is important in life and how to act to fulfill that vision. And what I have noticed and learned in my years here drove me to write this book. Only recently a friend of mine made me aware of the American poet Robert Frost who wrote, "*I took the path less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.*" I might have spent less time, back then, being afraid of possible negative consequences, but in the end I have dared to be different and I have no reason to be sorry for that. Now I encourage you to place yourself in suitable company that allows you to listen to your heart and to arrange your life accordingly.

Plot 278/6

dropping thought bombs
on an intentional commune in India

an attempt at making sense of life

by Jürgen



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Edited by Thomas Henry Pope. All remaining errors and rough edges are mine!

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To the living heroes of this book,
to friends who have passed away since,
and to the hundreds of species that are going extinct today.

Disclaimer

This book may contain traces of uncomfortable truths, insulting statements and sarcasm. Its enjoyment can cost you your world view, disrupt public order and, in the worst case, lead to the loss of your social reputation. Read on at your own risk! After use, please deposit professionally with others travelling this road!

Humans are tribal.

We can only succeed talking face to face.

~~ Thomas Henry Pope

mullai yelle (முளையற்ற) – Tamil expression

mullai = brain, yelle = not.

Term used on persons who performed careless actions that did or might have lead to undesirable consequences.

The transcriptions in this book were made by hearing the dialect in the Villupuram area.

Preface

It is perhaps no coincidence that the idea for this book emerged at a time when I was working on a selection of philosophical and spiritual essays I have written over the last twenty years. Looking at the material killed my passion for critical thinking and, not for the first time, I questioned the whole concept of communication. Only a few are graced with the ability to find the right word at the right time that triggers a social earthquake in this way. I'm not one of them. That is why I'm not only a bit short of readers; the dozen or so folks who regularly return despite the unpopular thoughts I sometimes offer belong to the kind of people who never make a comment, neither to me nor to others – which is completely okay, because I file my essayistic activity primarily under the heading "self-actualization".

Anyway, one night, last night, at the time of this transcript, I told myself, I don't know why, stories about the animals on our small farm in Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu, India. They were true stories that our lives together as a humanimal community had written. I have not been much of a story teller so far but I found that those stories

belonged to the kind that I would really like to pass and be heard. Authors from the rural milieu have often benefited from showing their urban audience the joys of quiet, carefree, sluggish country life in order to satisfy people's longing for peace and harmony. Well, why not. There is no money to be made from breeding animals and growing food plants anyway, just as if food were the most insignificant little thing in the world and its production was possible in chemical factories. If the so-called consumer really knew that the farmer's work is ultimately necessary for everything edible we swallow, and if said farmer really knew that a strike could trigger a national emergency, the situation of the farmers would probably look quite different. And the world as well. Perhaps then we would no longer receive drunken midnight calls from our neighbours who, *in vino veritas*, express how much they hate farmers. Perhaps, then, the city planning office would no longer lay roads through the middle of the most fertile lands. And perhaps the general reputation of the producer of large potatoes would also be somewhat better.¹

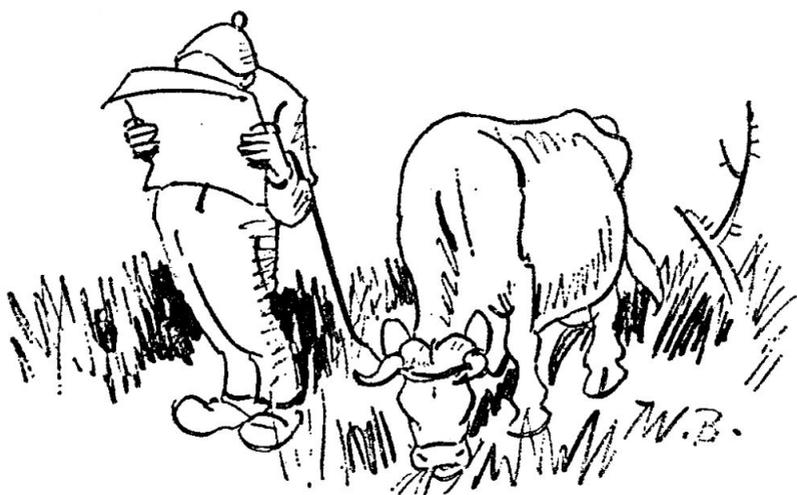
1 The dumbest farmer harvests the biggest potatoes, a German saying holds.

When it seems like I'm drifting into off-topic territory, I'm very sorry, but it's still all about my life in someplace far away. As you proceed you will come across further remarks of this kind because, as far as I am concerned, there is a close connection between our deepest understanding of how the world works and our actions. While some would have preferred me to write about the food I eat or the girls I meet I must confess that, in those respects, I have become a bit of a bore lately: the book would have carried the title, *Plates of White Rice*, and it would have consisted of blank pages. So, no, matters of taste are for most part not the kind of information you'll get here.

Quite unsurprisingly, one of the readers of the original German edition complained about not being able to find 'me' in this book. Well, neither am I, if you allow me a Buddhist joke.

How did I even get to making a farm in southern India the subject of my work? Anyone who knows me from the past – meaning, from Germany, as a couch potato, computer freak and baker of pies in the skies – would probably not have suspected that something like this was somehow

likely. Although my parents' families, that is, my mother and everyone I have ever addressed as "Babba", come from the Swabian countryside and we always had some places around the house for gardening, I never liked the kind of activity as much as the fruits that came from it. Physical exertion spoiled my appetite.



With all the time spent on thinking and philosophizing I could hardly avoid ending up pondering the topic of existence and the role food plays in sustaining life. I don't want to bother you with all the gory details I encountered in this context. It is sufficient to mention the rising suspicion back then that the way I ran my life was grossly dysfunctional and disconnected from anything real. The

more urgent I was longing for change the clearer it became that I had to go away, leave my old life behind, and start something that made sense in its entirety, which meant moving to a community on the one hand, and creating things for meeting my everyday needs on the other.

This is how a lonely dreamer ended up at the far end of the world where he socializes with goats, chickens and cows.

"Pretty stupid!", you're probably thinking. "*Mullai yelle*" is what the Tamil locals say. From their point of view it is incomprehensible why someone who could have lived in comfort and safety wanted to settle in some corner of India to dig in the mud for no income. And I wouldn't be the first dropout to come crawling back home after "Paradise" has turned out to be an illusion – a fate that I've been spared so far.

Because irrespective of how others feel about their decision to leave Germany's society of limited liability, I have whole-heartedly arrived here at my² farm, I am

2 In case you are very (very!) spiritually-minded and feel terrified about the use of the possessive pronoun in this booklet, let me make it clear without the slightest doubt that the words 'my' and 'our' do not indicate entitlement to property, but express a close

intimately connected to it, and I grow and suffer with its mobile and immobile inhabitants. As sometimes it's just silly what happens here, such as the constant dispute with the ex-commune – nowadays neighbours – the idiotic decisions of public authorities regarding farm land, the typically Indian lack of planning and care, with which they begin new activities, or even the thoughtless words we utter every day, our farm is internally nicknamed "*Mullai Yelle Farm*".

The almost forty years before I moved from the wild south of Germany to the wild south of Asia were like an endless jag over a background of world weariness. My drug was music, the cause of my pain was an unanswered question. Why do we humans destroy ourselves and everything around us? Trudging through various jobs, paying taxes in various districts, changing my girl-friends, moving many times over and supporting a club for a while with documenting the German rock music scene didn't help it. While it made me feel like breathlessly hastening through a labyrinth, taking lefts and rights into one dead end after another, none of the

relationship between me/us and the thing, like in 'my mother' who I certainly do not possess.

variations of basically the same escape could change my well-being or the state of the world, but that's exactly what I needed to learn.

I also dug myself a bit into the Japanese music scene, which stands out for its special extravagance of style mixes, clothing and hairdo. At the beginning I found it incredibly refreshing, indeed innovative, but nowadays most of it seems to me only exaggerated and grotesque: caricatures of standardized forms of expression for sale to a society that is in a deep spiritual crisis. Japan, like all of us, suffers from a deadly disease: end-stage consumerism. Supposedly, the colourful world of goods and services should convey identity, meaning and happiness, but how much authentic joy do the parrot-like clowneries of Japanese musicians actually contain? The play with sex, death, disgust and the demonstrative masking of private personality has long since broken all taboos. It often blunted the senses of us fans and left us robbed of our moral frame of reference. Through this music, our emotions have become goods – standardised, produced, labelled, displayed, sold out, used up, thrown away. In Japan, more completely than anywhere else, everyday things and activities in all areas of life have

been transformed into commodities. What it means to be in this world has become alien to us people in the industrial nations, especially to the Japanese. Presumably even the legendary girls' panties, coveted as fetish objects, are no longer genuine, but smell of artificial scents.

While I was still indulging in my Japanophilia, India was also setting out to join the club of consumer societies. As a result, you can find masses of reality refugees here, especially, but not only, in the broadband Internet-connected cities. Motorcycles, flat-screen satellite HD TV sets and smartphones can be found in almost all households; more and more food comes in plastic bags. This trend can be seen from the landscape, where discarded colourful plastic packagings have become an eye sore all along the road. Open brook beds in settlement centres offer a picture of ecological horror. Indians traditionally are not the kind who keep things. Practically everything has always been created – and disposed of – with the understanding that the subcontinent's climate and wildlife are rapidly decomposing it. What used to be thrown away has often literally been dragged away by animals, to be turned into

fertile soil. Today's disposable goods persistently refuse to disappear. They still catch our eye after decades, but that's something the Indians don't want to think about so far. If the garbage is up to their necks, they burn the stuff to stinking smoke. It seems to me to be a good sign that India's waste disposal does not function so smoothly, out of sight out of mind. Instead of hiding the consequences of overpopulation and consumerism in neat containers as in Germany, we are encouraged to finally wake up from our woolly consumer dreams of comfort by the rubbish that cheekily looks us in the face. Ah, India, the country of awakening... though not in a haste. Early bird catches the worm, but second mouse gets the cheese, I think to myself while humming the famous tune *I love my India*.

For forty years, India did not interest me much. I imagined its people as boring, dull and lazy. I came for the community I intended to join. Fate would have it that I soon lived together with a Tamil family who immediately began to straighten my head. Whenever I proposed German-style solutions to their challenges, they smiled, shook their heads and simply continued in their traditional down-to-earth ways. "Our culture is different," I often heard them saying. In the end I gave up trying to

convince them of German effectivity and orderliness. There is a wisdom to their way of being and doing that has helped me to decelerate, relieve stress and simplify my own life, more than I would have thought possible in Germany. To be able to surrender to any situation is one of the greatest, albeit least understood gifts of Indian culture. The pain felt by Westerners as a result of frustrated desires or disappointed hopes, all too often resulting in anger, depression and other psychological or neurological disorders, may, under the circumstances of life in industrial civilization, be a healthy response to a sick society. But they are not necessary if you have learned to let go of ideas. Then you may begin to see things as they are instead of what you fear or hope for. To shift one's focus from doing and becoming to just being, it liberates. Suddenly you are part of the real world again, a human among other humans, a being among other living beings. With it comes the kind of freedom that goes far beyond constitutionally granted rights. I'd heard about it; in India I began to touch into the real thing.

When I talk today about the trials and tribulations of life in Germany, such as factory farming, the geriatric care industry, the nuclear family or punching the time clock, I

always get a great deal of amazement. Smiling whimsically, I tell them how Germans usually don't like it at all when their relatives visit them unexpectedly and stay longer than a few hours. Our invitations run like: "Come right after lunch and be home by coffee time." My Tamil friends often find it hard to believe that you can't just stay for a week, that you're not welcome to open all the drawers, serve yourself from the fridge without being asked or wear the hosts' clothes. When my listeners sit with their mouths open, I add mischievously: "Our culture is different."

The Indian family is in decline, just like the German family, but far from as advanced. The average number of household members are significantly reduced, yet nuclear families are still the exception and the understanding of who belongs to the circle of loved ones is, according to Western standards, incredibly broad. The descendants of one's siblings are treated like one's own children; they are actually called sons or daughters. Since I was accepted into the family as a brother, my "sister's" daughter is also my daughter. So I may call her *Punne* instead of using her name, as is customary in their culture. Because she has already reached the age of

majority, I sometimes tease her by calling her *chinne punne* – little girl. In retaliation, she laughs at my funny accent.

Punne was reprimanded the other day because she caught a slight diarrhoea from the drinking water during some of her visits to her relatives. Unlike our people in the community, the villagers' water supply comes unfiltered from a well or pipe. The relatives in the village who are dubious about the activities in our international community now begin to suspect that *Punne* is no longer a true Indian. They suspect she's using toilet paper, just like those silly Westerners.

She would have been wise to claim she was of the nervous kind, like our cow *Heidi*. Heidi is a black and white spotted Indian village cow, who reacts very sensitively to all kinds of environmental stimuli. She always closely observes the activities around her. Her eyes, in which the white is always visible, seem to be constantly directed at the people nearby. Things that please or upset her immediately lead to increased poop production in runny quality and other nervous utterances. This makes it difficult to milk her, because manual milking

requires steady conditions. An *amma*³ who had just started with us and was not yet familiar with Heidi's irritable soul, once during a milking process with a quick hand movement and a shout expelled some pushy chickens from the place. Heidi jumped with fright. Literally.

Cow *Jenny*, on the other hand, is not willing to stop her feeding even in the worst of moments. One night, during a thunderstorm, we observed that a close lightning strike with its extremely loud thunder had not even provoked a blink. Calmly she continued chewing on her hay, probably wondering what to eat next. This could be taken as a sign of dumb-mindedness, but it is more likely that Jenny has simply set clear priorities.

Anyone who thinks cows, goats, chickens and other animals are stupid has never observed them more closely. When it comes to organizing something to eat, they can sometimes perform amazingly clever tricks. This includes savvy escape tactics. Food is the key not only to the stomach and heart of an animal, but also to its mind. Dog trainers or circus animal tamers will agree with me. However, the species they train are not the only species

³ Tamil word for a female worker; it also means 'mother'

that are willing to learn. For example, I taught chickens to jump for food, by hanging delicious spinach leaves in the bushes just above their reach. Other chickens were trained to listen to their names or to sit on my shoulder and let me stroke them. All bird, mammal and reptile species are able to adapt to human routines and perform rituals. Take our cow *Shanti* who has also developed such a ritual. During milking, she is accustomed to licking slightly moistened grain meal from a bowl. So much so that if she gets no food, she gives no milk. When she comes to the milking place in the morning, she looks at us with big eyes, nodding her head from time to time – her request that we fulfill our part of the trade. After milking, the bowl is filled with water. The grain can thus be consumed faster and most cows obviously enjoy this moment. They push their nose deep into the soup and beat it to blisters with powerful puffs. Shanti loves grain soup too, but her morning ritual is different: As soon as no one looks, she tips the bowl over with a targeted nudge of the nose. She does this neither with the dry meal nor during evening feeding or under observation. So first someone started to stay close by to make sure the bowl was emptied into the cow's stomach instead of

on the floor. But after a few sips of it Shanti just stops and looks her human guard squarely in the eyes. As soon as something else occupies his attention for a moment, – shoo! – she dumps the liquid on the floor. Not an isolated case, but a running joke that she obviously enjoys. We humans laugh too.

In some places it can be read that humour is a talent only inherent in humans and that the attribution to animals is an impermissible anthropomorphism, a humanization that is akin to sighting patterns in the sand, faces in the foliage of trees, or figures in the arrangement of the stars. I reject this. My own observations don't match with it, and I don't believe that man should take an exceptional position. All of our abilities are similar to those of animals. They have sensory organs that allow them to perceive the outside world, and they have brains with which to analyse their perceptions and then react physically, emotionally, communicatively. Spiders, crows, dolphins, horses, elephants, parrots and some others are known to be able to draw conclusions, to react flexibly, to have imagination and to plan ahead. Each animal has a distinct personality with individual likes, dislikes, fears and habits. Whether you believe that Sri Ramana

Maharshi's cow Lakshmi has found enlightenment as claimed is up to you. But if the theory of evolution is right about how species come into existence, then the question of how humans acquired their o-so-special abilities is an absolute no-brainer: from animal ancestors.

I believe that much of the low, objectifying opinion of our culture regarding animals – them being flesh automatons, things – comes from our self-chosen detachment from the non-human realm, for only in this way is it possible to exploit the beings around us for our own purposes, regardless of the consequences for them. Other peoples, for example in South Asia, are more connected to their livestock, are grateful for their role in preserving human life, and they grant them more rights and freedoms. On *Diwali*, for example, India not only celebrates its famous festival of lights, but also *Goverdhan Puja*, the festival of prosperity through cow dung. It pays tribute to the constant renewal of soil fertility, which, quite rightly, is equated with the survival of humanity. It is true that cows are often beaten to chase them away from fields or market stands. However, the idea that cows are only things whose lives can be taken at will is alien to Indians.

The German writer Arnold Stadler, for example, reported after his journey to the subcontinent:

*"I heard bad things when I got back. It was three words in a single piece of news: 'Minister of **Consumer Affairs** Künast [Green Party] ordered the **culling** of 400,000 cattle in a **calf destruction program**.' I was ashamed to live and write in a language in which such words and things are possible [...] But in India I heard that there were people and organizations thinking about how to save the cows threatened by the extermination program".⁴*

Humanitarian aid for cattle? Why not. As domesticated animals, they are an intrinsic part of the human realm, creatures in our image, to a certain degree. To many non-civilized cultures, those called "primitive," the idea that humans were superior to other species or were God's chosen children, sounds preposterous. Impairing the well-being of plants, animals, even places, is to be limited to what is absolutely necessary and requires a kind of penance or service. Anthropologists noted, for example, that wild peoples from all over the world ask beings killed for food for forgiveness and that they thank those beings for having sacrificed their lives.

4 quoted after Veena Kade-Luthra: "Sehnsucht nach Indien"

Once when I had killed three mosquitoes in one fell swoop, my *akka*⁵ commented dryly, "Three people dead". This may have been an odd expression, yet it gives an insight into the somewhat less strictly separated domains of the human and the non-human sphere in India. This refers also to reincarnation, from the Hindu sense that we are all on the journey through taking different lives.

Now I don't want to generalize too much, because for every true general statement on India, the opposite is true as well; nor is it my intention to give lectures on animal psychology, animal rights or cultural anthropology. India has more than enough environmental problems to solve. My main concern is to explain what we are guided by in the management of the land entrusted to us and the treatment of its inhabitants.

By their behaviours, animals show how we approach them and vice versa. Beginning illnesses, reproductive heat or exuberance become immediately noticeable if

5 Me and another German guy have joined a Tamil couple on the farm we live in, and we have become part of their family. Although I'm older than her, the woman calls me *thambi*, younger brother, and speaks of herself as my *akka*, an elder sister. Maybe that's so because you always got to have an eye on those silly foreigners, like with little children.

one places value on closeness rather than on distance to one's fellow creatures.

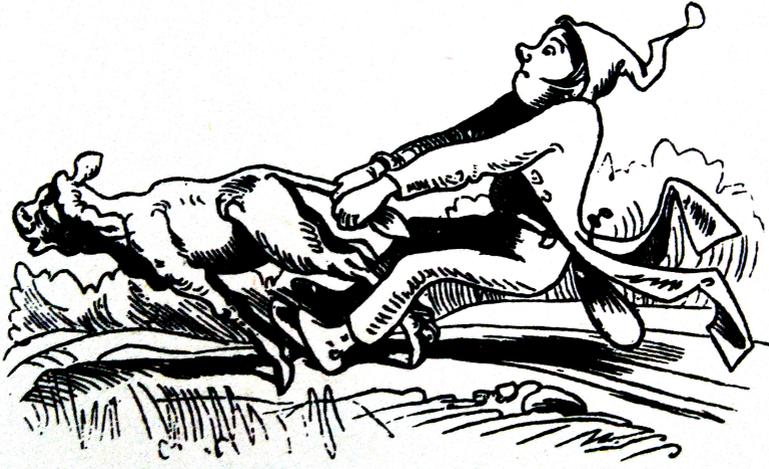
This is not far from considering farm animals, like pets or one's own relatives, as part of the family. There is a close relationship between individuals. One rejoices with others and suffers with them; one enjoys their presence, even when we sometimes argue or complain. A bad word, an angry "*Moo!*", and soon enough peace reigns again between the peoples. It does not require a jointly read proclamation, but stems from good intentions and constant exchange. This is completely different from the full-bodied – and in hippie circles frowned upon – statement, "The pigs are my friends", which an aged, rarely practicing agricultural student once made, right before leaving the care of the animals to voluntary helpers and paid workers. That's not exactly helpful, to say the least.

Our relationship with our livestock has not always been harmonious, though. There were animals who didn't like us right away or who had a history and wouldn't trust people. One of our cows was even racially inclined: she had never seen a *vellakara*, a white person. She reacted

completely in panic with every approach of a Westerner, even if one brought her delicacies. She only accepted them with pointed lips from the maximum possible distance. This situation did not improve even after months. That's why we had to part with her.

We do not always manage to adapt to the quirks of our protégés and free ourselves to some extent from our ideas of human superiority and control. There is a great temptation to impose human rule everywhere and at any time, but we have gradually learned to reduce interventions to a minimum in order to ensure order and safety. The animals understand this and usually comply.

This becomes critical in moments when the animal gives free rein to her enthusiasm for food, while a person is still attached to her lead rope. A calf suddenly races across the pasture at a horse's speed, while the slippers of his human companion fly left and right into the bushes in a high curve. Not a completely harmless situation. Often it is better to let go of the lead rope.



Goats, one might think, are easier to handle than cattle because of their smaller body size, but four tame goats easily drag a hundredweight of people to the zoo.⁶ They also have three things ahead of one calf: three additional directions to pull in. If you don't dare to let go of the reins, the walk from and to the pasture literally becomes a pull test to the human companion. I've gotten used to keeping only two of the animals at the same time. The others follow freely in sight. I don't have to worry about them running off as long as there are none of our crops nearby. As herd animals, they have little ambition for independence. They always remain in close distance. I

⁶ *Zehn zahme Ziegen ziehen zehn Zentner Zucker zum Zoo*, as the German saying goes.

also pay attention to the direction they indicate. Instead of pulling unwilling ballast with great effort behind me – their necks get longer and longer, my arm too – I just take the rough direction and give them the choice where exactly they want to graze.

Good relationships are no accident. You have to spend time together, get to know each other, listen to each other, and respond to each other. The number of close relationships which we can have is finite, limited by neurological hardwiring, on one hand, and by the amount of time and energy a human being can spend on maintaining said relationships, on the other hand. What I'm trying to point at is, our kind of farming cannot work at scale. You cannot respect and truly care for larger amounts of farm animals because you cannot intimately relate to them; they cease being individuals.

"One cow says moo, many cows mean much ado," they say. Indeed, the studied agricultural economist with his x-hundred "units" in the stable need not even begin to be nice to his prisoners. The inmates must deliver, without much *moo* or *baa*! Because tax and hygiene regulations require documentation, each animal is identified by a

"piece" number, or else the efficiency-conscious agro-economist would dispense with distinguishing individuals altogether.

That said, let's not point fingers at big farms and industries. As long as we value money higher than relationships – which is the norm in industrialized societies – it is money that makes the world go round, both for large producers *and* for customers. The fact that billions of animals have to live under cramped conditions is due to the fact that the "products" of cowcentration camps are selling best when they are cheap. The label may say "milk" but the white liquid in the plastic bag matches the definition for milk simply because that definition neglects the well being of the cow. You can taste whether an animal has a name or not. Put it to the test: visit a mountain farm in a non-EU country. You'll be surprised.

We already introduced Shanti's name. It comes from Sanskrit and it is very popular with parents of newborn girls in India. *Shanti* describes a state of inner peace even in the face of great burdens that lasts thanks to a certain understanding of life. In the case of our cow,

Shanti is more than just a name; it's a character description that applies. Shanti is cool, intelligent, has a sense for the right moment and is constantly gaining weight thanks to her lack of excitement. Because of her sturdy build (almost excessively so, compared to other Indian cows) she has got herself a nickname: *Kulaivande*.⁷

You don't want to insult anyone by calling them fatso. The use of the word *kulaivande*, short-legged, has a more bonhomous feel to it. At the *Mullai Yelle Farm* we have a *Kulaivande* cow, a *Kulaivande* dog girl, a *Kulaivande* chicken and a *Kulaivande* woman.

No goat, though. Not yet. But one may come soon, as *Zicke* is pregnant. For the last few weeks we have goats on the farm. *Zicke* is the oldest and largest of the four newcomers, with soft black fur and the longest horns of them all. She makes frequent use of them also, in order to reprimand her comrades. Together with the three calves, who were born half a year ago, they share a

⁷ Your typical Indian village cow looks like a mixture of M. Gandhi and Kate Moss: she is small in stature and you see her every bone. As opposed to the turbo-cows of the EU and the US which give 30 to 40 liters of milk a day, her average lies somewhere between 5 to 10 ltrs.

covered free-range enclosure, with water and the food during the night. Zicke treats the already much larger calves less roughly – unless they try to get their share of the tasty leaves of the spiny branches Zicke likes so much. Then she lowers her head and rams the food thief in full run. The calves quickly realized that they either had to keep a safe distance or march as a mob when it comes to food.

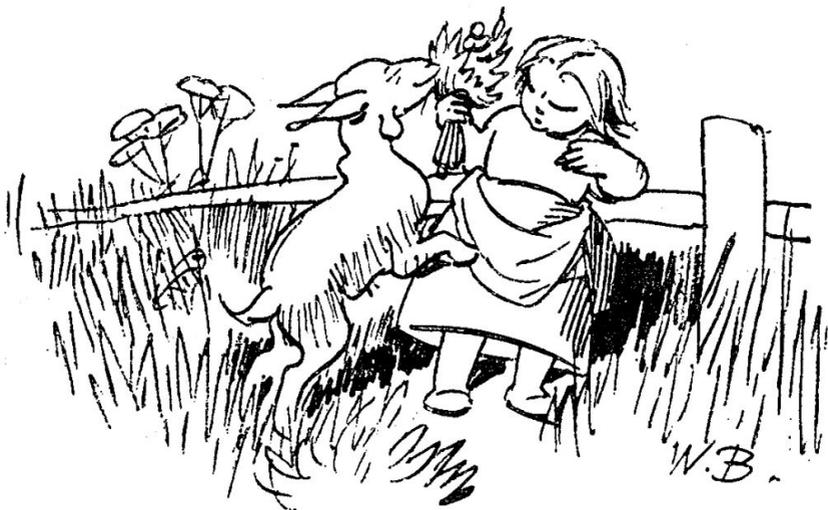
Normally, one would assume, it is the male goats that dominate the herd, but our billy *Böckle* has other ideas. He behaves relaxed and enjoys his special position as the only male at the hen party. He usually leaves governance business to Zicke. He only lowers his head to press it as a greeting against my fist when I approach – a male ritual. His horns are shorter than Zicke's, but all the more pointed. So you shouldn't really piss him off. His fur is black, his ears mottled in black and white. It looks like he's got a little mold on them. He also performs the above mentioned male ritual with *Atman*, our four month old young bull. There is absolutely nothing aggressive about it, no attacking an enemy, no grunting or bumping; just a bit of cuddling each other's skullcap the billy way. *Atman* seems to like it. In general, he has become more

and more goaty lately, is enthusiastic about hard foliage that other cows would flinch at, does leapfrogging, leans up with his front legs somewhere to get his head higher or starts to whine when his goat friends get out of sight.

It's not the first time I've observed cross-species behavioral adaptations. Many years ago my ex-wife and I had a rabbit, *Pepi*, who grew up with a dog. It was house-trained, i.e. it went for a walk in the house during the day and only returned to the cage to eat or to relieve itself. It was not intimidated by aggressive or stormy dogs, but was able to terrorize restrained dogs by intrusive behaviour. Pepi could also fetch beer coasters and crown caps. When it became apparent that Pepi would be alone too much, we wanted to offer him a playmate. Not another long-ear, however, because we feared not to get it house-trained, and also no dog, because this would have required investing a lot of time. We chose cats, because if they get used to other animals at a young age, they accept them as family members. Pepi chased the first two candidates onto the scratching tree or under the cupboards and she warned them by drumming with her hind legs to not show their faces again. Our last attempt was a newly born red kitten, *Liese*, who the rabbit

immediately took into her heart. No wonder that Liese soon became interested not only in veg food – carrot slices, mushrooms, potato peels – but also in retrieving.

Back to the goats, my idea of them was that of destroyers of everything green. When the Tamil Nadu government began giving goats away so that needy people could earn a small income, I threw my hands up in horror: The critters would flatten all the vegetation and then eat us out of house and home. Television reports about the role goats played in desertification had me believe that there was practically no plant they did not like to eat. And because no fence can stop them, there would be practically only large trees safe from them. Think of our lettuce.



Well, goats are both persistent and inventive when it comes to break-ins and break-outs. Just like most other herbivores, they are also busy all day filling their bellies with leaves. However, they do not proceed as indiscriminately as claimed. According to my observations of the local village goats and our own animals, they initially use only selected leaves of certain plants, here preferably harder, thorn-reinforced species. The branches themselves are usually spared and never stripped completely bare, so the goats rarely impair the plants' ability to regenerate. If, however, the animals are forced to stay longer in areas where food is scarce, for example by being tied up, getting introduced in higher numbers or left abandoned in a barren area, they become less choosy. With reference to such observations, goats have increasingly been used for landscape conservation in Central Europe in recent years. In our farm they are an excellent complement to the work of cows with mowing lawns and weeding. What one species despises, the other loves all the more. Of course there is no lawn to mow around here, only all kinds of wildly proliferating grass varieties and herbs. In organic farming, we do not know any vermin and weeds.

Each species plays its role in the web of life. When we "weed" a veggie bed, our goal is not the sterilization of the field or the eradication of certain plant species; we only give the vegetables a little head start. When the wild herbs sprout anew, they protect the bed from erosion and keep it moist for longer.

By the way, *Unkrautjäten* – weeding – was one of the first German words that my *akka* learned. I ask her about it once in a while because I like to hear her say it so much: with rolling R and a little bit robotic, just as you would imagine typical Germans.

The last two goats of the *Mullai Yelle Farm* which I haven't mentioned yet are two small, young village goats. They are called *Brownie* and *Blackie*, because of their respective coat colours. Brownie is completely dependent on the proximity of her mates. As soon as she gets the impression that they wanted to (or did) go to a place other than where she is, she starts complaining. If her fears turn out to be true, the great shouting begins. Imagine the sound of an angry older woman being mugged and robbed in the street, or a child of critical age if she doesn't get what she'd like at the supermarket. It's

the kind of screaming that makes everyone wrench his or her neck to see who's abusing their offspring.

But it would actually be Blackie who has reason to lament, because she is the lowest individual in the hierarchy of our goat group and constantly a subject to mobbing by everyone. It took several weeks until she didn't try to save herself from my attempts to make friends. Yet she learned her name just as quickly as the other three though, within a few days.

Brownie may call herself the loudest creature in *Mullai Yelle Farm*, yet not undisputedly. She is closely followed by the red-furred *Zora*, a two-month-old calf girl, who we almost named *Zara*,⁸ because of her deep, penetrating voice and who, like Brownie, does not appreciate solitude at all. She would prefer to stay in close contact with her mother *Susie*. If need be, she'll settle for Atman. Anyway, it appears as though a great sandbox love is about to emerge here; I've already caught them once, cuddling skull-to-skull!

Besides our farm animals – cows, goats, chickens, dogs and cats – as organic farmers we are particularly proud

8 after Zara Leander, a famous singer of the 1930s and 40s.

of all kinds of wild animals. Among many others we see mongooses, bats, chipmunks, vipers, bees, dragonflies, peacocks, toads, kingfishers, cranes, chameleons and funnel spiders on an almost daily basis. The normally quiet, unobtrusive farm people, the mixed planting, the temporary fallows' high grass, the many large trees and the long hedges, the shocks of old wood, the dung heaps and the rarely frequented forest on the eastern edge of the plot encourage humans and wild species to live side by side. There are even times when it becomes a bit too crowded and we are having a noisy row over who may do what, but in the end we go on as usual. Sometimes we meet unexpectedly. For example, a cobra raises her head out of the spinach, opens her hood and lets us know that the harvest has to take place some other time. A lizard notices too late that a person is approaching; he remains in his place on the tree trunk from where the human could easily pick it. A kingfisher flies past right in front of my nose; she lands on a post at arm's length. If I stay still, she remains seated.

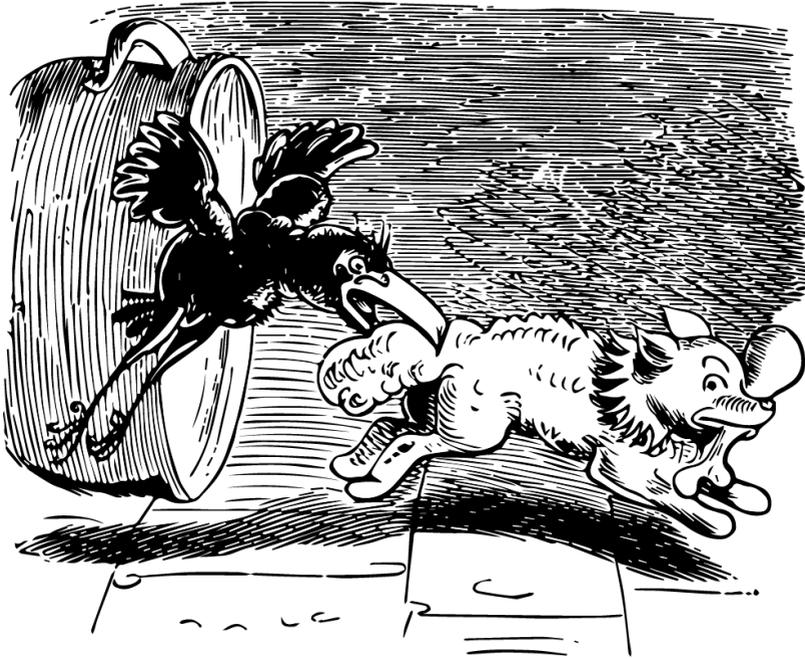
One morning a sunbird fell out of the tree, right in front of our worker Meko's feet. Meko took the dazed bird on his hand, where he remained without a motion. We built him

an ad-hoc nest of old pieces of cloth on a shelf, where he made himself comfortable all day long. He didn't leave until the evening.

Another time, the night had almost completely fallen, a young red-wattled lapwing crossed our way. Far and wide no parents in sight. We might have overlooked him, but our dogs had discovered him and were about to attack. We took him away, fed him insects, grains and worms and took him to the field the next morning. He stayed with us for a while. He was old enough to look for his own food, picking on the ground here and there until he finally decided to part with us, probably to look for his parents.

So much life everywhere, so much appetite in the world, so many mouths to feed. It always amazes me, this teeming life, this exuberant green, movement everywhere, sounds and tones all around us that testify to the activities of countless animals. Yet the earth as we know it is only a poor remnant of the world as it was before European expansion. Almost all vertebrate species have lost well over ninety percent of their populations in the last one hundred and fifty years. Every day between two hundred and four hundred species die

out, one every three and a half minutes because we transform their bodies into human bodies and use up, fragment, disturb, or poison their habitat.⁹



And yet – if, here in southern India, you don't watch over your food like a hawk it will be eaten in no time by someone else. Crows steal eggs, rice, vegetables; if you forget to keep an eye on the chickens, they'll go after anything that's not tucked away. Cats enter the house and open containers to get milk or dog food; dogs also

⁹ In 2010, the UN estimated 150 to 200 species going extinct per day. In 2014, the WWF estimated up to 400. Day by day by day.

grab anything we leave unguarded. Cows plunder the fields, the relatives of my *akka* plunder the fridge, squirrels plunder the granaries. Moths and ants puncture underpants, bandicoots eat soap bars, paradise flycatchers eat the fish from the ant channel,¹⁰ and when there is anything left for the mould, it makes for happy fungi. In principle, you would never have to wash your dishes. Cockroaches, termites, bacteria, fungi, dogs, cats, pigs, chickens and many other contemporaries would give money if they had it, to be allowed to lick our plates flawlessly blank.

In the tropics, food storage and preparation is a science in itself. Fortunately, there is plenty of food in these latitudes. Otherwise the lush flora and fauna could not exist. The opposite is also true: everyone who eats is food themselves, from the algae to the banyan tree, from e-coli to the elephant. Actually not only in the tropics – you can see it better there – but everywhere, up to one or the other pole and down into the deep-sea trenches. We do the ecosystem wrong, though, if we reduce these

10 A water-filled channel around the legs of a cupboard or fridge, or even around a whole house, to keep ants from taking away food that crows, cats, dogs, mice or my *akka*'s relatives could have consumed instead. The fish are there to eat mosquito larvae.

relationships to "eating and being eaten". What we have ingested in life, we return in the form of our excrements and corpses. Life and death are interdependent, inseparable, part of an eternal cycle of existence. We have only forgotten this because we live in our separate human bubble. Instead, we believe in a one-way process in which we are born out of nowhere and fall back to nothingness much too soon. We fill the meaningless time in between the two with hectic activity, always struggling with money issues. We are afraid of a premature release from our troubled existence, and we don't even know why.

Supposedly, the materialistic world view is rational, but it does not differ in anything from the creeds of the world religions. Britannica instead of the Bible. Professor instead of priest. An expert prays, we repeat after him. Have you ever measured whether the circumference of the earth actually is forty thousand kilometres long, as you can read everywhere, or do you simply believe in the books? I am by no means suggesting that the data gathered by scientists is wrong. On the contrary, it has given mankind amazing insights into the workings of the physical universe. But this in no way entitles science to

dismiss other forms of knowledge as invalid or non-material areas of reality as illusory. And it certainly does not allow scientists to draw conclusions such as that life is a purposeless phenomenon that is subject to the blind forces of physics and evolution. Haven't you ever wondered why there are millions of species when only the strongest survive? Why haven't all animal species developed large brains, when this is said to be so effective in helping us survive? Why does plankton still exist today, when mammals, especially humans, are supposedly so much more successful survivors? Are unicellular organisms perhaps the stronger ones? Then why didn't we just stay algae back then, before we evolved? Something cannot be right with the idea of "blind forces" of evolution, of the "fight of all against all" and the "victory of the strongest".

It is bad enough that this misbelief determines our image of the competition of creatures, when in reality symbiosis is the rule. Moreover, social Darwinism has become the basis of our collective life, and by no means only that of fascists. In Western affluent constitutional democracies of our enlightened age, honest hard-working people struggle with staying afloat and the wicked get delivered.

I simply *knew* that this cannot be right. The common explanations of how the world works became less and less convincing over the course of time. I asked questions – questions that required answers. I began to look around – and found what I was looking for.

I'm not here to give you ready-made answers. On the one hand, I have learned that the results of human search for meaning are closely related to the respective person and cannot be conveyed verbally. On the other hand, I do not want to pretend to know more than generations of hard-working researchers. I also don't want to take away the fun of you searching for yourself a little. Perhaps you discover, just like me, that the answers often don't matter as much, while the path to a deeper understanding can become quite interesting in itself; and that very often we are asking the question the wrong way – or we are asking the wrong question due to hidden premises, thus completely missing the point. For example, should members of parliament be obliged to always vote by roll call so that they can be held accountable by their constituency, or should they always be allowed to vote anonymously, to make sure they can follow their conscience? – Hey, wait a minute. Why don't we question

the idea of representation in the first place? We might come up with better ways of expressing the people's collective will. Let's look at it from a scientific point of view – or we spare ourselves the effort.

Scientific research can justify almost anything. Entire sectors of the economy thrive on the fact that the most absurd claims about a product are supported by expert opinions. That smoking does no harm, that a beauty cream smoothes wrinkles, that chocolate makes you slim – we've heard it all. You probably know (or suspect) that the field of nutrition in particular benefits enormously from the religion of experts. Millions of science believers sacrifice their hard-earned money to receive a wink from the goddess Scientia: shall I apply grandmother's recipes, Mediterranean diet, Ayurveda diet, fish diet, raw food, vegetarian, vegan..., and everyone claims to know the one perfect recipe for eternal health. I've tried them all. The result was always the same: food is great! I didn't get thinner or more voluminous, didn't feel healthier or sicker. If it were up to my body, I'd have to recommend the cola diet; three slices of peanut butter bread for breakfast, egg noodles with cream sauce for lunch, pudding for dessert, a bag of potato chips for dinner and

a bar of chocolate for quenching an odd appetite now and then. Each meal would be accompanied by a liter of Coke or iced tea.

The only diet I didn't like was the stuff some members of my ex- community dished up. When the Portuguese couple served lunch, they usually gave dry red rice, cooked without salt, plus roughly chopped carrots or other raw vegetables, no sauce. Your food had to be gluten-free, caffeine-free, cholesterol-free, lactose-free, sugar-free, low-fat, low-calorie, low-protein, and low-nitrate. Believe me, what I believed my stomach: If a lunch looks like gutter contents, you should be glad that it only tastes like cardboard. You thank the cook and make sure you find something nutritious elsewhere. At some point I turned my back on the community kitchen to fill my belly in the village canteen with the pretty name Solar Kitchen. That was about the time when the community began to disintegrate. No coincidence, I'm sure. I am firmly convinced that the way to your neighbours' heart is through their stomachs.

Those who have eaten well – and those who haven't – have to get rid of stuff again at some point. The water-

rinsed ceramic bowl used in First-World countries is also available here in India, but is frowned upon by the locals just as much as the toilet paper that is indispensable in Western homes. Secretly, one makes fun of the effeminate Westerners with their paper mania. In the countryside you spare yourself the wasted space in the house. Business is done outdoors: on the beach, in the bushes, on the meadow, at the roadside. Your average villager uses leaves or flat pebbles to clean the orifice and rubs his hands with sand. In public places and with wealthy people and urbanites they have a ceramic-reinforced hole in the ground for a loo, a water bucket for flushing by its side, and a water pistol hanging from the mains to clean you-know-what. Indians always use their left hand when it comes to that. Therefore food may only be touched using the right hand.¹¹

In our small farm there is a place for answering nature's call, which our grandmothers would immediately recognize: An outhouse, or, more precisely, a dry compost toilet. It is a palm leaf-covered hut with holes in

11 In South Asia and Middle East people don't use cutlery. In some Islamic countries they cut off thieves' right hand to mark the sinner's deed, thusly cutting his or her social ties as well; without your right hand you cannot participate in a common meal.

the ground. One ropes down one's brown gold into the chambers underneath and then sprinkles leaves, earth or sawdust over it, which dry it out and take away its smell. When a chamber is full, we close the pit for one year and we begin to use the second chamber. In the meantime, a dry composting process begins in chamber no. 1, leading to a product of the finest quality which is suitable to fertilise the fields. It resembles potting soil from the garden market and you can touch it safely. We collect liquid excrements in a separate container; they are also excellent natural fertilisers. To reduce the smell, halved lemons or charcoal are placed in the collection container. This saves 15,000 litres of water per person per year, corresponding sewage treatment fees and, instead of producing gigantic quantities of hazardous liquid waste, makes a direct contribution to the cycle of life. Many small animals are just as happy about the extra gift as the plants that are appreciating the human dung. In a sense, the land and its plant and animal residents become our offspring, our children so to speak, by incorporating the substances excreted from our bodies. We, in turn, who feed on the fruits of our labour, are the children of the land and its creatures. Farmers do not

(just) act possessively with regard to their land, they have family ties to it. No one who claims to love his office job has even the slightest idea of how deep love can actually go.

Like a real family, the farm needs a regular supply of fresh blood. It may look different in a garden that only provides personal needs, but a farm loses some of its vitality with every fruit that is being delivered to the big city. Despite all the cow pats, goat dung, rabbit pills, chicken shit and humanure that we collect with great diligence, tons of compost have to be brought in. Other farmers also have a need for manure. Finding good suppliers is therefore not always easy. In order to increase profits, some make their goods go further with excavated earth. Others collect manure from any source, such as the roadside, so that it is heavily interspersed with plastic waste and is probably also chemically contaminated. It is not suitable for organic farming.

Two years ago we joined forces with other farmers in the area to obtain organic certification for our fruits and vegetables, through a system called Participatory Guarantee System – PGS for short. One of the rules of

PGS required us to provide space for wild animals and wild plants: hedge rows, forests, long-term fallows and other non-farming areas on the plot fostering biodiversity. Unlike the so-called third party certificates, which are mainly based on checking the farm's business papers, PGS is based on mutual control of the farmers of a group. In order for the farmers to have time for this extra effort in addition to their normal work, the groups are necessarily small and the farms are at short distance from each other. The good thing about it is that it is not only cheaper than the commercial controls by accountants, but people who know something about the local agricultural practice visit the farms to see the situation with their own eyes. In India, PGS has gained acceptance even in tribal areas, because it invites the many small and mostly illiterate farmers. All they have to do to get certification is to show and verbally explain how they work. The meetings are a great opportunity for talking and connecting. Planting tips and useful addresses are exchanged without any special stimulation. But there can also be harsh criticism. Farmers are not exactly known for their subtlety...

In connection with the global climate disruption, heavy verbal ammo has recently been fired at cattle farmers. Based on figures from industrial agriculture, according to which each cow consumes enormous amounts of water, food and land and releases a corresponding amount of the greenhouse gas methane, it is claimed that cattle generally use an excessive amount of resources for food production and are mainly responsible for current greenhouse gas production. Sorry, I can't agree.



First of all, there is no standard cow. The turbo cow of industrial agriculture bred for meat and milk production releases three times more methane than the much smaller cows of traditional subsistence farmers in Africa,

for example. Satellite images show that methane concentrations in the ground-level atmosphere above Africa and rural India are significantly lower than in almost all industrialised countries in the northern hemisphere. Cows are not only sacred in India, but also ubiquitous; 190 million domestic bovines migrate through the countryside and the cities alike. How does that fit with the claim that they are walking climate bombs?

Also in land and water consumption, the traditionally kept cows of the South are far behind those of the industrialized countries. They graze, often nomadic, mainly on public land and along roadsides where no one ever irrigates. The same applies to wild cattle, which have been roaming the world in large herds for millions of years, and no global warming on their heels.

On our farm we irrigate the pastures once a month, unless rain has fallen in the meantime. On the balance sheet, our cows are on a par with vegetables or more economical in water consumption. That's because we're not about production. Instead of 40+ litres we are content with five to ten litres of milk per cow per day; the calves are fed sufficiently and we keep only as many animals as

the available land can cope with. Expansion and economic growth are not on our agenda. When greed or growth compulsion determine our behaviour, we lose sight of a healthy relationship with the environment.

So you have to look carefully before you talk, because there are differences in animal husbandry. Yes, some populations, such as Europe's factory farming, match the points made by greenhouse gas hunters. And yes, with 1.5 billion souls, the global domesticated cow community is a bit oversized. The climate is critical. Given an estimated 6-10°C rise in temperature by 2026, the biosphere – including us – is facing heat collapse.¹²

However, the domestic cattle is the wrong addressee for blame. The animals are not guilty as charged. They are kept and bred by humans whose number is not only five times higher than that of our horned friends. Humans are also responsible for overexploitation of groundwater, fresh air, metals, fossil fuels, forest areas, fish etc. Furthermore, our civilization is the only major producer of incompostable waste. Regardless of our individual consumption, our footprint is ridiculously bigger than that

¹² see Arctic News,
<http://arctic-news.blogspot.de/2017/08/temperature-rise.html>

of any other species on Earth; and we are basically too many for the carrying capacity of this world in the long term. While the mass media continue to bombard us with pop music, presidential elections and beauty queens, scientists of all kinds are talking about the imminent demise of civilization within this century. Arctic researchers like Peter Wadhams and Sam Carana have no doubt that several critical thresholds have been irreversibly crossed. Evolution and conservation biologist Guy McPherson predicts the extinction of mankind by 2030.¹³

Undoubtedly, we do not use our technology to heal the damage done. Instead of, for example, stopping the operation of cars, nuclear power stations, or trawlers, we keep going, polluting the air, polluting land and water and emptying the seas in the name of the sacred gross domestic product. Even if McPherson (labeled by some the Cassandra of modernity) was wrong about the date, under business-as-usual conditions it is only a matter of time before we reach the end of the rope. Because, contrary to better knowledge, we refuse to change our

¹³ see the [Climate Summary](#) on his page for detailed reference, or have 20 minutes of fun with the [Paul Henry Show of Nov 24, 2016](#)

ways, I am in favour of collectively awarding the Darwin Prize of 2030 to global civilisation.¹⁴

While some – certainly the overwhelming majority in industrialized places – continue to dream of the Golden Age, others are looking for ways to make a personal contribution to ending the untenable situation. Our village has become the annual destination of thousands of people who travel here to learn about alternative lifestyles or take yoga classes. Many, especially younger people, visit the farms as the local farmers have earned a reputation for doing good environmental work. Each farm practices methods developed individually over the years; from biodynamic to *rishi keti* there are all shades of "organic" farming methods. *Mullai Yelle* Farm uses mainly Tamil traditional practices, which we augment by individual measures from other cultures, such as intercropping or mulching.

All newbies certainly want to know one thing: “*Are you practicing Permaculture?*” – The answer is yes and no. If by *Permaculture* you understand the Gospel of Bill

¹⁴ since 1994 awarded to Individuals who, thanks to their stupidity die from the consequences of their ridiculous actions, thus sparing the human gene pool their contribution. The Darwin Award is therefore provided posthumously.

Mollison or Masanobu Fukuoka, and whether we imitate their techniques – no, that's not our thing. Those techniques won't do much good to the environment if you apply them while continuing to sip coffee from South America, chew apples from New Zealand and drive to the next corner with a motorised vehicle to pull yourself a pack of Turkish-American blend. Permaculture is more than just a toolbox of gardening techniques, even more than a lifestyle. Permaculture is a lived worldview based on an understanding so profound that one simply cannot help but live "in harmony with the environment" in every respect: in dealing with one's neighbours, in building accommodation... and also in gardening. Too often the attempt to live according to a "holistic" vision becomes a blind worship of certain gurus, while the failure in the garden is recorded as an "experimental phase", in which the so-called experiment has been performed so messily that it is not even possible to comprehend what went well or wrong with it for which reasons.

It is often argued that functioning models are needed to prove to the world that people can live independently of the supermarket. In view of the often meagre harvests of such model farms, which are run in two-week

permaculture workshops with young people who are stressed out by civilisation, it can only be noted that the proof has been provided a long time ago already. This experiment has been carried out every year for ten thousand years, always with the same result: yes, you can eat a varied, healthy and tasty diet from the garden behind the house. However, organic farms run by less than 2% of the population is not enough for maintaining entire cities. The idea that the majority of the population can retreat to islands of steel, glass and concrete, where they are evading their responsibility for the preservation of the web of life, is fundamentally wrong, because it does not work in the long term, as we now see. If people want health, sanity, community, nature, and good food back in their lives every household needs to contribute something to its own and the community's nutrition. Basically this means the end of our highly energy-consuming lifestyle, and that will come about anyway.

Only petroleum-based industrial farming has made the rabbit-like population growth of the last two hundred years possible. And as more and more people see the end of oil-supported prosperity coming, a billion-dollar agrotourism is developing, in the course of which young

people from industrialised countries travel to the last mud puddle in order to spend their holidays on a farm and train as permaculture experts in crash courses.

Our neighbours, for example, generated three times as much turnover as we did last year – with room rental and weekend workshops: biodynamics, do-nothing farming, windmill construction, martial arts, mental healing and Thai yoga massage. Despite many good words, first-class soil and more than a few volunteers, they have not succeeded in delivering a single fruit or vegetable to the community that provides the arable land in the last four years. This is a peculiar achievement in a country where even dropped branch prunings grow into new trees. Perhaps someone should find out how to make edible money so that these people can finally contribute to feeding the world.

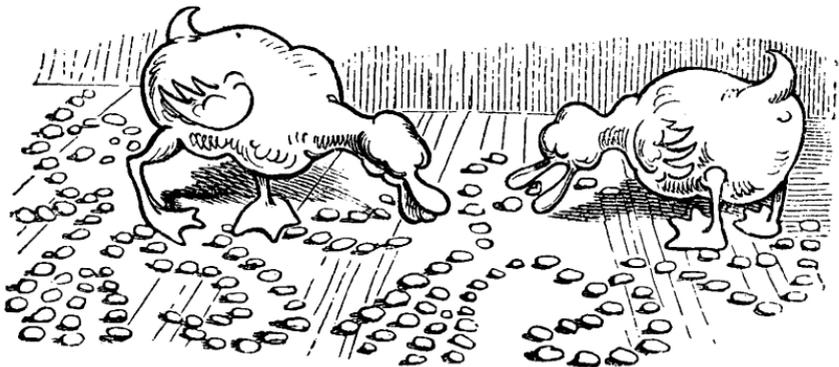
Nothing comes from nothing. Without a minimum of effort, endurance, plant nutrients and water, the plate remains empty, let me tell you! He who wants to reap must work like a farm horse. You have to get up with the chickens, collect cow dung, smell like a goat, and keep the work going, day after day, year after year. A cushion

farther who often sees me driving to the library late in the morning, where I catalogue books for a few hours, to compensate for the physical work on the farm, once disparagingly said about me: "No, he doesn't work on the farm. I only see him at the library." Well, when the good man crawls out of bed, I've already been shoveling cow dung for two hours, and by the time he starts his job, another two. And when he goes home in the evening to turn on the TV, I put two more hours on top to collect the night food for the animals. And on Sundays, while he lies on the beach all day, I continue in the same rhythm!

Some of the travelling farm volunteers may deceive themselves about how much work and expertise is needed for running a farm but they have one thing ahead of the local pencil pusher: they see more than just minor manifestations of agricultural activity, such as the salad on the supermarket shelf, the tractor that slows down the traffic on main road, or the farmer in the library. I have always enjoyed talking to the volunteers, who arrive with a thousand crude ideas of the city dweller in their minds, asking, "Why don't you do it this way or that way?" Soon enough we discuss many things that seemingly have nothing to do with cultivation, but everything with

alternative ways of living. In the beginning I did the very same; I was full of nonsense and wanted to taste simple life in the countryside for a few weeks.

However, it takes more than a few weeks, even more than a few months of gardening, to bring the mind alienated from the soil back into harmony with it. (Decades... is more like it.) In particular, it is not enough to discuss visions or cultivation methods. The greatest asset of a farm, after good humus and its own seeds, is experience: the kind of knowledge that can only be acquired through continuous manual work and precise observation. Our motto is therefore: *Do work, not workshops.*



For example, you should not save water in the wrong place. There is a ratio between watering and harvest

quantity. In organic farming, we strive for a balance between letting it dry out and drowning it. That's when farming and environment come into the right relationship; the plants show you the exact measure by the beauty of their leaves. If you want to save maximum water, you should eat forest berries and wild roots instead of chewing salad.

Environmentalists also like to save water on cleaning the body and the dishes. There is a reforestation project in our village, which at peak times accommodates hundreds of volunteers from the West. They are particularly proud of clever, handmade gadgets that dispense only a few drops of water, just enough to wash their hands or dishes. I have seen similar aspirations among our own volunteers and I must say that I find it a great thing for building a certain awareness of the importance of water and how little you can get by on. However, one should also be aware that the amount used worldwide for personal hygiene and nutrition is less than 15% of total consumption.¹⁵ The rest is consumed

¹⁵ In 2014, the average Indian used 25 liters of water per day, the average German 122 liters. German power plants and industry used up 72% of national water supply, followed by agriculture (14%) and a similar amount consumed by the productive sector. [figures from wikipedia]

by industry and industrial agriculture. Those who sacrificially save on washing water suffer without achieving a noticeable improvement for the environment. The scent of neo-hippie blends more authentically into the overall picture, though, with dreadlocks and a generally ragged look.

Depending on the weather, I normally use between thirty and forty litres a day for myself, not because I hold back a little, but because water is not always available due to the special situation on the *Mullai Yelle Farm*. I resigned myself to a situation in which four previously accessible shower places had become unusable for me, so that bucket wash remained as the only viable alternative. And since I generally live quite simply, I don't find a problem with it, even as I might be mistaken for one of the above-mentioned neo-hippies.

My home is a twenty-five square metre steel frame hut without walls, but with a Japanese looking grillwork, which my communards once aptly christened a *birdcage*. It is wonderfully airy, because unlike a solid dwelling, the architecture does not heat up, so I immediately benefit from the cooler evening and night air. Of course, I also

profit from the rain immediately when the wind picks up a bit... For years I used a solar lamp as light, because there was no electricity. Electricity would only have led the four volunteers with whom I shared the accommodation for a while to dilly-dally on cell phones or laptops and to turn on the lights in the middle of the night when they, tired of their romantic campfire sessions, returned to their beds. This is not to rail against computers; they are very practical. I still use them gladly and frequently, but everything in its time. To me, phones sucked already when I lived in the West. Annoying pests of tele-terrorist miscommunication! In their mobile form, they have become a pandemic disease. It is now almost impossible to have a conversation without being interrupted by all sorts of ringtones. Many Indians prefer not to eat dinner and spend their money in units rather than having their virtual line to the outside world cut off. I have decided for myself that talks will take place eye to eye or not at all. I like the stronger commitment that comes with meeting in person. At times when the community was a bit bigger, there was a telephone list that gave a number for everyone except me. Behind my name someone had written "*In the garden*". I love that kind of humour.

I mean, it doesn't take me slavish discipline to sustain simplicity day by day. None of this is a sacrifice to me, because it is entirely in line with my understanding of the world. I don't want more, I don't miss anything, I don't have to deny myself anything. What's more, I feel better when there is less of all the things that most people would consider indispensable. We often only realize how much ballast in the form of possession, time pressure, expectations, regulations and safety measures we carry around when it is taken from our shoulders.

Back to the farm: insofar as our cultivation methods come "from the inside" because they are part of the larger, meaningful framework, and insofar as these cultivation methods have been working for millennia, i.e. it is to be assumed that they can be used in the long term without causing permanent damage, we actually practice permaculture in the sense of "can be continued indefinitely". Our touchstone, the land, is more fertile, greener, and the topsoil layer thicker than twenty years ago. Traditional farmers know from experience that fighting against natural processes is pointless. If they often do, however, it's out of sheer financial necessity.

Some believe that permaculture has revolutionised farming. From my point of view, that's nonsense. Permaculture is just a twelve-letter word. Nothing about it is fundamentally new. Instead of wanting to control your environment and manipulate it according to your wishes, you live within the limits of the circumstances. What works works; the rest goes the way of everything that is transient: Bio-romanticism as well as industrial agriculture. You'll see.

Permaculture has emerged as a counter-movement to industrial agriculture, which in turn is a consistent development from older invasive cultures. Among those who propose rewilding it is considered a foregone conclusion that agriculture was the original sin of our civilization. Daniel Quinn, the author of the novel "*Ishmael*", on the other hand, does not blame agriculture as such for the profound destruction of large parts of the earth's surface, namely by clear cutting, soil erosion, changes in the groundwater table, water pollution, soil salinization, extinction of species, etc., etc.. Rather, as with permaculture, what we see as results of certain techniques, are the outgrowth of the world view from which each technique emerged: in the case of industrial

agriculture, it is the idea that everything around us is *our* resources, and only we humans should have it. No one else has the right to make use of it. Animals and plants that are interested in the things we use or produce are not simply chased away, as is usually the case in nature, but mercilessly pursued and hunted down. In our campaign against “weeds” and “vermin”, we even go so far as to take entire species into custody and specifically destroy their food basis in order to eradicate the “plague” as such and thus get rid of annoying competition.

Quinn calls this *totalitarian agriculture*.

Thanks to the huge surpluses generated by totalitarian agriculture, our civilisation went through a population explosion that literally overwhelmed the whole globe, and this development continues. The complete overload on all ecosystems testifies both to the destructive power of totalitarian agriculture and to the sheer number of mouths that have to be fed nowadays. But still we are not only convinced of the correctness of our way of life, we also believe we have invented the one right way of living and therefore do not want to acknowledge that there are other ways.

The choice of my current place of residence is motivated, among other things, by this very idea: to follow different, forgotten paths in a community of like-minded people, or to try something completely new. We take the best and do away with the rest – that's the general notion, at least.

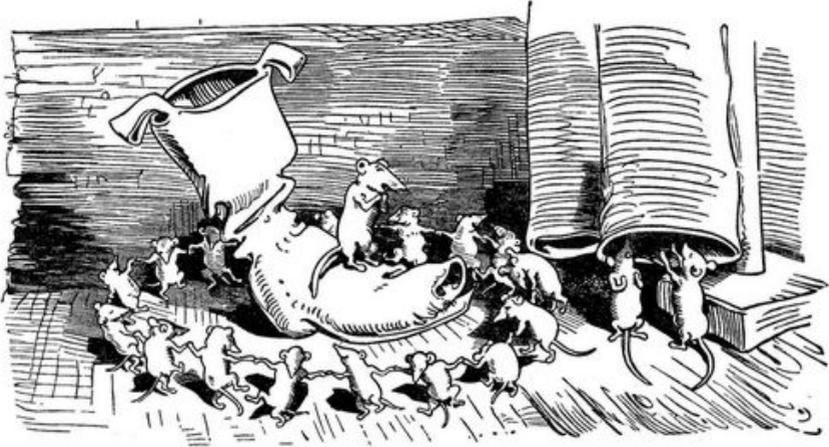
Sure, we're not exactly saints. We all come from this mentally deranged, destructive culture where no amount of things can ever be enough. We have been exposed to fear- and greed-based thought patterns all our lives and have grown up with them. To get rid of them requires conscious, sincere efforts, to start with. It is not always easy to be unconditionally honest with oneself and one's motives. But at least we give it a try. Often we confuse superficial enthusiasm for an interesting thought with deeper knowledge. For example, is it really animal love when my heart is warming in the company of my flock of chickens, but when I see the rats who have killed some chicks and eaten dozens of eggs, my rage gets high?

This question was answered one day when I killed one of the rats with a spade and looked the dying animal in the eye. I don't know what it is that makes me disgusted of killing, but at that moment I became aware of the finality

of my action. I had sacrificed a life to the idea that this rat had somehow acted immorally when she settled in our henhouse. She had only taken the opportunity to move into a nice home with her family, where the kitchen cupboard was always full. Who would have declined such an offer?

As the animal's eyes lost their shine and her muscles relaxed, I was deeply embarrassed. I don't regret much in my life. But I will never forget that day, because it taught me at the expense of another being that you either love everyone or none. Love that depends on somebody's good behavior is sick. We have to accept losses to our wealth in order for there to be room for everyone. It now only happens about once a year that we have to kill an intruder because he has done overmuch damage and will certainly come back. His life is as dear to us as that of our protégés, except that we have a responsibility to our livestock, as their ability to keep themselves safe is limited because of us. One snake or two calves? One cat or twenty chickens? There are only wrong decisions in this moral dilemma. We do what we believe will cause the least damage. Usually a trapped predator may escape, in a few cases not. We neither hate him for what he has

done, nor do we try to preventively decimate or even eradicate his kind. And it would be completely wrong to boast about the loss of his life.



Loving all living beings may sound preposterous to you now, but I assure you it's not quite as impossible and stupid as it seems. We can continue to disagree with others. We can still argue with each other. But we don't raise our self-interest above everyone else's. This planet is not just an accumulation of resources, life is not just a struggle for survival. Those who understand that the human domain is inextricably linked to water, soil, air and other living beings stop fighting or isolating themselves from the Other. Instead, the mind opens up to let it in.

The mistake usually made by Westerners is this hard-hitting, long-lasting, cold state of war against everyone we have once labeled an idiot or even an opponent. All their lives, children no longer talk to their parents, customers no longer talk to their suppliers, employees no longer talk to each other just because they once had an argument. Neighbours take each other to court over and over again for decades after a small matter of disagreement. Here manifests what members of Western culture consider to be fundamentally true: that life is a struggle of each against everyone else. How could it be otherwise when even our genes are said to be selfish? It is firmly believed that in this struggle for survival more for you is less for me, that the fittest always win, and that whoever gives in loses. We therefore have no choice but always to see ourselves in the right. In fact, we see *exclusively* ourselves. No wonder our communities are increasingly atomizing down to the family level.

The westernization of India destroys a completely different way of dealing with each other, especially in the family sphere and in relation to nature: a view that assigns the status of a family member to every living being. That, of course, is no guarantee of good relations

either. The big difference to the West is that South Asian people develop mutual relationships that go beyond "You give me goods, I give you money". You may smile at that, but in traditional Asian thinking there is a fifth element besides fire, water, earth and air: it is the empty space, nothingness. The world does not mainly consist of material things, but of the space between them. However, this space is not actually empty, but filled with relationships, and they are the actual substance of normal people's existence. While the members of European-American culture define themselves relatively abstractly through their possessions, their preferences, and their subculture, such as "Christian-liberal middle class" or "rocker", it is the sum of all direct relationships that constitute the personhood of an individual with a non-industrialized background, i.e. the embeddedness in a certain precisely defined group of persons whose *names and stories* one knows. One laughs and cries together, one is happy and suffers together, one is in agreement or argues vigorously; the kind of relationship in which one perhaps beats each other up, yet gets along fine again soon.

The worst tragedy is having no one to share your thoughts and feelings with. Therefore, it is rare for relationships to be completely broken off after something unpleasant has happened. In rural India they resolve disputes by untiring palaver, through the involvement of the whole family, or the whole village even. Theft, abuse, fraud or insults – not nice, but also no reason to call the police or to be angry with each other forever. Ultimately, people's understanding is that we are dependent on each other and cannot and should not eliminate each other physically or mentally. Virtually all cultures, with the exception of Western civilization and its modern acolytes, knew and still know ways of resolving conflicts without creating obvious losers. The example of Germany after World War I shows that losers can become like cancer cells of dangerous developments. More important than the concrete institutions for bringing about justice, however, is the belief that consensus is possible. Only this faith gives all participants the strength to engage in the long but necessary discussions.

Extremely large communities have a problem here. Wisely, you will want to argue that consensus cannot be reached at local level even, with the few thousand

inhabitants of a village, much less at regional or even national level. That's right. The appropriate group size of a human community is the family, the clan and the tribe. A couple dozen people. Beyond one hundred and fifty people, our natural ability to communicate begins to fail. Let us now think the apparently impossible: What if we broke societies down to human size again?

In every community there are things that should be decided by all inhabitants. In our village, which aspires for a kind of enlightened anarchy – the key phrase here is "aspires for", because the number of enlightened people, just as the number of true anarchists, is conceivably low – the Residents Assembly is the highest authority. Unfortunately, it is not possible to meet hundreds of people every day to discuss with great patience all upcoming topics from immigration applications to work distribution to building projects. To this end, working groups have been set up to deal with the unpleasant details of day-to-day micro-decisions. Unfortunately, a lack of trust in the goodwill of our fellow human beings has led to an unholy alliance of moralists, control freaks and pouch-cutters increasingly turning these working groups into government-like institutions.

I once thought I'd seen everything the local administration has to offer, all those groups hiding their pompous names behind funny abbreviations like STOP and NO and CASH. I am lucky to say that STOP did not stop me and that NO did not deny me what I needed (although CASH managed to rid me of my last savings), but I have heard about various other cases which suggest that I slipped through by chance. This became clear once again in several meetings with BOSS and KINGS, two institutions the mentioning of which has everyone roll their eyes. We have all had our experiences with them and we can all just shake our heads how those folks manage their – no, our! – affairs.

I spare you the longish rant I had included in former editions of this booklet, about the horrible details of my encounters with those groups. May it suffice to say they re-emphasized my understanding that there are two things which have no place in a simple life: money and power.

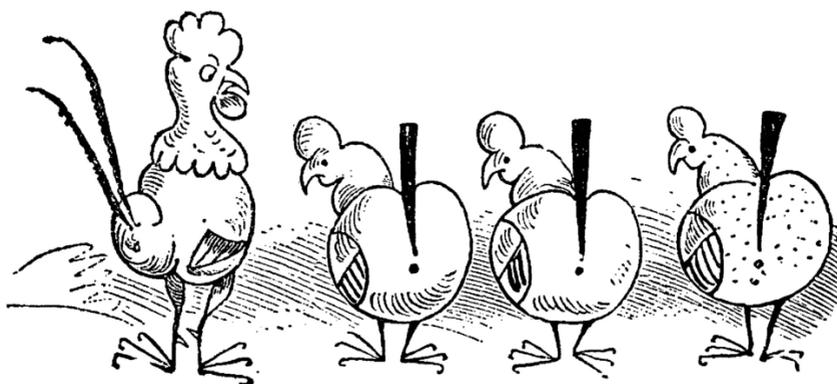
A completely different kind of horrible event took place one morning a few years ago in the chicken house. As I do every day, I went into the enclosure to open the door

to the sleeping and laying places and let out the poultry. Hens, cocks and chicks, instead of streaming out through the opening clucking loudly as usual, sat as quiet as mice in the outermost corners of the henhouse. The center of the strange scenery was dominated by a slender shape, which raised its head hissing when I arrived: *naja naja*, the Indian cobra, which is also called Spectacled cobra because of its neck pattern. The Tamils call it, no less trivializing, *nalla pambu* – Beautiful Snake.

"O fake!", I thought to myself, because I was less than two paces away from her. It's a great thing that cobras don't attack right away; first they build themselves up in front of you. The sight of it makes your blood run cold in your veins. A dead chicken in one of the brood niches enriched the scenery, repeating the already unmistakable message that I was as desired here as a dung beetle in a marble cake. The handle still in my hand I slammed the door shut again. – Sorry for the disturbance...

What makes a cobra in a chicken house so unpleasant is not her consumption of chicks and eggs, although it can be substantial. Once I found a snake that had taken thirteen eggs from a nest; still I let her creep off. The

problem is that one or two hens are sitting in the nest, defending their brood at all cost, catching a bite and laying their eggs in heaven shortly afterwards. Did you ever hear the sound of a cobra biting a chicken? It sounds like hitting an empty shoe or an old, rotten trunk with a stick. The hen's scream is unlike any other expression that chickens make. It's long, rough, lamenting. The bitten one runs a few meters, stops disoriented, sits down... and dies fifteen to twenty minutes later of respiratory paralysis, head rolled up, legs stretched out.



Chickens can get quite old. If they are spared battery farms, high laying performance and KFC, their life expectancy is in the same range as that of a dog. Their

natural rhythm produces one egg in ten days; they lay hundreds of eggs in their lifetime.

Eggs from the supermarket always come from mass breeding with tens of thousands of birds in a confined space, no matter whether the hens are kept in tiny cages, in a barn, or in a free range. Only through mass production can profits be made and the needs of the large wholesale firms and grocery chains be met. A flock of chickens in the wilderness or in a village consists of a manageable number of animals, usually up to a dozen. Larger numbers, especially if the animals cannot spread over larger areas, lead to stress, soon followed by disease and aggressive behaviour. In factory farms, the animals therefore receive plenty of medication shortly after hatching and beaks, claws and feathers are usually shortened or removed. After six months of growth and another year during which they have to lay an egg for nine out of ten days, they are exhausted. They get slaughtered and processed into dog food.

It goes without saying that our idea of chicken-keeping here is a little different. Experiences such as those with rats and snakes have shown us that the attempt to

protect birds in an open-air enclosure has led to exactly what should have been avoided: that they fall victim to predators. Our dozen chickens are running and flying (!) around the farm completely free. None of the above measures against aggressiveness is necessary. In one case we even saw that one of the cocks was taking care of an orphaned chick. There is no need for feed supplements or vaccinations: Chicks that grow up under the wings of a hen are less often ill than the host of fluffy orphans that are shown to us on television as chicks. The sale? We're not selling any more. Since the staff of the market cooperative complained about having to issue a bill for less than ten eggs a day, we are more often eating omelettes and fried eggs.

The cobra's visit ended as follows, by the way: A visiting young man grabbed a sack and a stick and set out to catch the snake. He made the mistake of letting her get between himself and the exit, while he saw himself pushed into a corner by her. It now fell to the frightened observers to lure the cobra out the door, but that failed. The snake and the man continued to circle each other, and then, suddenly, the guy took an opportunity to quickly bag his prey. Everybody sighed when the young man left

the chicken house. He carried the sack with the outraged animal to the forest a few hundred meters away and released the cobra.

Unless you are a cobra, chickens react to the invasion of their privacy with excited cackling or panic escape, even when you are known to them as their favourite human, the food donor. A brooding hen, refusing to move off the nest, will growl and pick at an approaching hand. But all the other birds start to run away fluttering. When you try to collect eggs in the evening, after all poultry has already mounted their roost to have a night's rest, you are in for a bad surprise. Once a chicken has flown right into my face as I walked in the door; since then I move a little more carefully on entering the henhouse. Another time I unexpectedly met a cock, who ran into my ankle at full speed. You wouldn't think it was a trifle. Two kilograms of meat and bones develop a tremendous force when they hit an obstacle at thirty kilometers per hour. Songbirds regularly break their necks when they fly against windows. And in aviation, encounters with flocks of birds are considered a safety risk. When poultry enters an aircraft turbine, this can seriously damage the blades, especially with larger specimens such as eagles or

geese. I think I read once about a test where they threw frozen chickens into a running engine; the jets had become completely unusable. Luckily I moved more slowly than a jet turbine. My ankle remained intact, but still hurt like hell for a few days. Chicken husbandry is a dangerous undertaking.

Talking of dangerous situations including chickens, I come to think of one of my oldest childhood memories. In the mid-1970s, and in some cases in the early 1980s, you could see free chickens on many village streets all over Germany. We lived for a while in a small town on the Neckar river, directly opposite the medieval town hall. The house, together with other houses, formed a closed backyard in which a neighbour kept his chickens. I could see them from the window of my room every day. Because children love animals, and because children are also curious, I found a way to join them, I don't know how. But the joy was short-lived: one of the neighbours had to rescue me from a rooster who had jumped at me. Strangely enough, I collected no psychological scars of the kind people catch in incidents with dogs. I'm not anxious of chickens. On the contrary. It is possible for me to like them and to empathize with them, and I suspect

this goes vice versa. I am a familiar figure to the hens here, yet they closely study what I'm doing.

Do you think it odd to say that animals are studying humans? Observe a cat or a crow when they think you're not looking at them... I must admit that it's rather people I find odd. The longer I stay away from the usual hustle and bustle in the rest of the world, the more people's views feel strange to me. Much of what is generally accepted as normal now seems to me to be downright bizarre. One example is the view that only scientifically proven facts really exist. It is simply a modern superstition that unfortunately often prevents people from dealing with some of the most important and interesting issues of human existence. Suddenly books about spirituality end up in the parapsychology section of a library just because the staff banishes everything that is denied by science into some shabby corner. Or perhaps you have noticed the many Wikipedia articles on metaphysical topics, alternative health care, or fringe political views, which have been paved with question marks, citation requirements, deletion threats, stilted language, and more of the likes, because the knowledge

described does not meet the requirements of a scientific encyclopedia.¹⁶

I've got news: We may have found out a hell of a lot about the world thanks to science, but that doesn't mean that truth and reality can only be found in or through it.

Besides materialism, which is blind to feelings, relationships, religion, spirituality, intuition, etc., civilised society has another obsession: the idea that humans occupy an exceptional position in the world. It says our inner life, our mind, our perception, our values, our rights are fundamentally different from those of animals, plants, landscapes and ecosystems. Despite a broad spectrum of findings to the contrary, despite Greenpeace and organic shops, we keep non-human life strictly separate from the human realm, and underneath we view other beings as more or less useful objects. This is also expressed in our language. To eat like a pig, to smell like a skunk, to bleat like a sheep, to be a stubborn donkey, a stupid cow, to be called a dog – nobody wants to hear such a thing, as non-human equals less-than-human. So

16 In its political articles, Wikipedia ceases to be an encyclopaedia. Wikipedia's bias, as has been well established for several of its language versions, comes systematically, deliberately.

you cannot have the same word for the same activity or state: Female animals become gravid, women become pregnant. Animal young are dropped, human children are born. Animals have a muzzle, people have a mouth; animals feed, people eat. Animals have fur, people have hair. Animals go down, people pass away. Animals end up as cadavers, humans as corpses. And so on.

All this to express that animals – not to mention plants – are different from us. As pointed out above, I have had different experiences with a number of animal species. Furthermore, researchers from Gustav Fechner to Jagadish Chandra Bose to Suzanne Simard have discovered conscious processes in plants. We may be better at mathematics or art, but that does not entitle us to deny every other species' ability to think and feel. Far from merely being feeding machines, animals show varying degrees of cunning, spontaneity, the humour already mentioned above and the whole bandwidth of emotions that we humans also claim for ourselves. If one dares to come into closer contact with them, one can observe all signs of being loved or rejected, whereby the latter rather rarely occurs if one treats animals well. Some of the calves and their mothers, as well as the

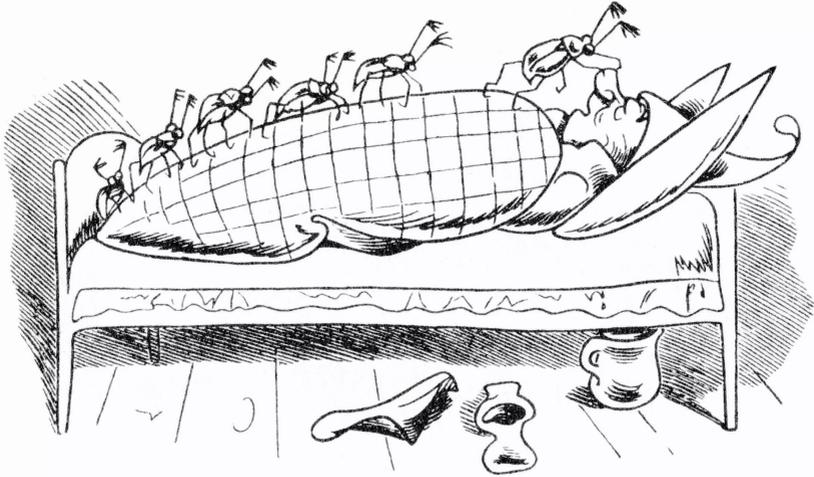
goats, seek our proximity. They look us in the eyes, want to be scratched or they lick our hands. To say that they are only after the salt of our sweat or want to beg for something to eat is like saying that children love their parents only for the food. Where does the notion come from that food and love were mutually exclusive? That I care, that it matters to me how the other person feels, that I help others to satisfy their needs – this is the essence of every relationship. It makes the other person feel good around me, makes them express their gratitude to me, and vice versa. We are talking about mutual support, empathy and communication. A small farm like ours can demonstrate how the relationship between its inhabitants is a real give and take, quite different from the violent expropriations that take place in factory farms, right up to the senseless mass killings of the slaughterhouses.

Of course, I accept death as part of a larger cycle. Everything that lives will one day be food for other living beings. I also see no problem in the fact that humans form symbiotic relationships with other species. But I find it intolerable to lock animals up, to press them into shape, to suck them out and then simply throw their lives away,

without uttering a single friendly word on the whole route, preventing the normal exchange with others of their kind even.

What if we went through a major change in attitude by which we not only re-evaluated the role of animals and plants, but also conceded to mountains, rivers, the atmosphere or the oceans the properties of living beings? All these entities undoubtedly make their contribution to the functioning of the entire Earth system, preserving human existence. For this reason alone, it might be advisable to be more careful about what we call the "environment" in our imaginary separation from it. Many cultures and subcultures go even further with their views: that these entities are sacred – not because some book tells them so, or for fear of negative consequences, but because people have understood how intimately humans are connected to them, and so much so that they indeed speak of a common identity. But here I advance with my utterances into areas that can only be understood through each own's experience. So let us leave it at the remark that by accepting the natural order of things we'll be better off in the long run than by wielding our technological crowbar, demanding that the world must

adapt to our ideas. The construction of accommodation may serve as an example.



Construction in the tropics is a real challenge. Torrential rains, which raise the humidity to just under 100%, followed by months of dust-whipped dryness under a burning sun, with sometimes over 40°C temperature in the shade, cyclones, termites, ants, goats, monkeys, human thieves, mosquitoes, mould. For the inexperienced *vellakara*¹⁷ there is much to do, if he wants to keep all plagues off the heels. The colonial architectural style, which arose from a compulsive need for security, is expensive and characterised by all kinds of

17 Tamil: white (guy)

complicated systems of control that require permanent maintenance.

The Indigenous people, on the other hand, alleviate the most annoying natural phenomena with simple means and otherwise live with the given circumstances. They do not build for eternity, but for current needs. It should be cheap and practical. Nobody likes to burden themselves with hours of cleaning orgies in unnecessarily large, impossibly shaped rooms. An Australian architect who lived through the early years of our village has developed an accommodation made of materials that are easily available everywhere and are also used by the poor: Casuarine beams, poles and slats, coconut fibre ropes, coconut palm leaf roofing and granite pillars. Within a week, these can be used to build so-called capsules, wonderfully airy single-room, lightweight structures on stilts, co-inhabited by all kinds of wild animals. The roof has to be replaced once every two years, the wood has to be replaced every ten years depending on care and weather conditions, the pillars can in principle last forever. Because everything is compostable and easy to remove, capsules are considered "green" buildings. And because coconut palm products are used practically

everywhere, from nutrition, brooms, cosmetics and screens to timber and firewood, we are finding more and more extensive coconut plantations that require irrigation. The ever-increasing demand for coconut products now ensures that palm leaves are harvested earlier than traditionally, which means that they disintegrate more quickly, which means that the roof of the capsule has to be replaced earlier. If one considers the overall balance – leaching of the soil through casuarine and palm monocultures, water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions from decaying plant matter, landscapes destroyed by quarries, etc. – it must be noted that so-called green technologies also leave much to be desired in terms of sustainability. The problem lies mainly in the sheer, ever faster growing number of people who need housing. Most everything in civilization is happening on an industrial scale nowadays, with all the resources depletion, pollution and environmental destruction that this implies (not to speak about the psychological and social consequences for people). What's worse, because everything happens solely for human benefit we rarely consider other beings' right to exist – with the exception of their disappearance causing us problems.

In the case of capsules, it should be noted that we are talking about covering basic human needs only. The problem is exacerbated in more densely-populated areas of the world and especially in the Western nations, where desires for convenience and luxury are to be satisfied. It would take four to five planets for all humans of the world to be able to live like Europeans or Americans. As long as the bottom line of every activity is always money, as long as every man fights for himself and as long as we see the world as merely an accumulation of resources – *our* resources – how can there be such a thing as effective nature conservation? Under these circumstances it can only mean that we will consume the planet to the last blade of grass.

Intelligence alone means nothing. Expertise means even less. All the necessary knowledge has been known for centuries, but it has not led to any change in behaviour at all. We are wasting more energy, more material than ever before; today in the form of "green" technologies. However, there is also good news. First, as you can see from other cultures, this behavior is just trained and not in our nature, which means it can be unlearned again. Second, we will definitely do so, because this nonsense

about the exceptionality of man and the requirement of never-ending growth will disappear within our lifetime, shocked into collapse by a biosphere that can simply no longer provide what we need to satisfy our needs and desires. And if we survive this, there is even a third piece of good news: We will learn to live like humans again. Contrary to the talking-heads' claims on TV, there are alternatives to democracy and a market economy, tried and tested ways of life that are not free of suffering, but by no means as *"lonely, nasty, brutish and short"* as I heard people claim. As far as I'm concerned, decelerated, freed from consumption terror and relieved from the pressure to earn money, I feel much better than ever before. Since, for me, the separation between personal life and business, home and workplace, man and nature, mine and yours has ended or been significantly reduced, since I can intuitively organize my day, I finally feel like a human being again, not like a machine driven by external forces. If I received a few bucks from everyone who envied my simple life, claiming at the same time that he could never exist under such primitive circumstances as me, it would even earn me a lot of money.

What I should do with the money, however, is not quite clear to me. As a phoneless cyclist, sober non-smoker and TV-free wrist watch abstainer who is indifferent to fashion, I have little opportunity for spending money in everyday life: I live on less than two dollars a day. There is a public library, a no-charge cinema, a free-store of clothes. I own five electrical devices: a solar candle, a lightbulb, a tablet, a laptop and a camera. My cabin looks fantastically empty. It makes little sense to fill the *Birdcage* with things that would be soaked during the next storm. Now don't you think I get soaked with every little rain shower; I have, of course, water-repellent curtains attached, so that in the case of horizontal rainfall I'm like in a shower cabin... the water stays outside, though. Moist air, on the other hand, flows freely. It is therefore advisable to keep the place empty in order to prevent mould. In case of a cyclone like the one in December 2011, however, the curtains have to be removed. Everything should then be packed in containers and stored in fixed buildings. When *Thane* arrived, the *Birdcage* had only been in use for two months. Our workers had been announcing the storm, but we did not take the warnings seriously, because in Tamil Nadu the

word *cyclone* stands for thunderstorms as well. By the time we realized its true extent, it was too late to take precautions.

It was evening, already dark. With a somewhat queasy feeling in my stomach I went to sleep. Some time later, heavy rain set in, which flew horizontally through the hut. I tugged the sheet under my head and body so the wind wouldn't tear it away. Slowly it began to get wetter from above, which was a nuisance but safer than to leave the place. The *Birdcage* stands in a grove of rain trees, fast growing giant trees whose porous wood does not have much strength to oppose the wind. Even in fair weather conditions, biomass constantly drops from the sky all year round: leaves, small twigs, seeds, bark, sometimes entire branches. The hut's steel frame provides shelter but you don't really want to walk around out there in a storm, with pieces of wood coming down left, right and center. So I grit my teeth and waited. Outside the wind was howling louder and louder, the soundscape became wilder and wilder. At the height of its potency *Thane* roared with over 150km/h through the farm. Now the completely soaked mattress began to flutter. I tried to estimate whether it might not be worth a try to cover the

hundred meters to the next solid building, but you could no longer see your hand in front of your eyes, loose things flew in a mess and the overall wind direction promised that the trees neighbouring the *Birdcage* would not let themselves fall on the hut. So I stayed till morning. That was a good idea. By then, the storm had weakened drastically. In the first daylight I saw what had become of our farm: a debris field. Although all buildings had withstood the forces, practically all roofs were down or severely damaged. The roof of the compost toilet had been blown away together with one of the walls, the chicken yard fence had been shattered by falling branches. In the cowshed, a bull had been flattened to the ground by a roof beam; fortunately it left him enough space to breathe; the bull escaped with no more than a scare. The water stood knee-high in places. All the larger fruit trees, papayas and banana plants had snapped or been uprooted. It was impossible to move even ten yards without having to climb over branches or debris. It started right outside my front door. The branches of the tree that shaded my hut had been bent more than 90° over my roof by the storm. They broke and then fell down by the side. That was a bit of luck! No luck, on the other hand,

was the fact that my roof was the only one in a wide area that had withstood the forces of the wind. Instead of unfolding its dangerous suction, the storm had rustled unhindered through the grates of the *Birdcage*, had plucked a little at the corrugated iron and then attacked another victim. Except for a few ruined textiles and books, I lost nothing; they were lying in the mud outside the cabin. The sight irritated me strangely. In that moment I realized how vulnerable life can be, and how meaningless the stuff we surround ourselves with.

Apart from the above-mentioned palm capsules and my steelworks cabin you can find yet another kind of accommodation building in our farm. Because of their *Mullai yelle* character, their construction history deserves a more detailed description. They were planned as lightweight structures, but the somewhat improvised designs required repeated reworking, so that, eventually, they became two heavy monsters on shaky legs, four columns of compressed earth. At a height of almost three metres, these columns have been connected by a belt of four concrete girders, each weighing 500 kg. Ten further 300 kg concrete girders lie on top of these; they hold a slate floor over which the upper floor rises. As you can

easily imagine, the construction is quite top-heavy. Much less planning went into the construction process. The most advanced piece of technology used was a pulley, introduced only after the Tamil construction team had left us suddenly, without announcement. The building process took not only two years to complete, but also consumed a huge amount of money because of the cumbersome, poorly organised way of working.

The casting of the beams required a larger smooth surface, which, however, did not exist here. For this purpose, behind the henhouse, at a distance of over one hundred metres, the workers created a new platform. They painted its concrete surface with oil, placed the casting mould on top and poured concrete into it. The sand for this lay halfway between the construction site and the platform, the cement lay elsewhere under the open sky, where it had twice been rendered unusable by rains, and the mixing took place in yet another place. When the builders had finally made a concrete beam after much ado, the casting was removed. Thanks to the oil, the beam could be easily separated from the ground.

Transport to the construction site, on the other hand, proved more difficult. Four strong pieces of timber had to be found, which were brought in from the side. Two men with crowbars then tilted one of the concrete beams on top. Then it had to be pushed to the middle of the timbers before the really exciting part started. Twelve people, including some *ammās*, several community members and two underage bricklayers, lifted the piece and carried it all the one hundred meters to the construction site. We practiced this a few times and broke multiple pieces of wood that were less suitable for this work before the master builder finally accepted our proposal to use a heavy-duty wheelbarrow.

Even more unbelievable tricks were required to manoeuvre the girders to their intended positions: Between the columns, instead of a scaffold, two rows of plastic barrels of four were placed over which transverse boards were laid. Then the beams were lifted from the floor to waist level and from there across the boards on the barrels; as already mentioned everything happened without technical aids, only with wooden pieces and the muscle power of the above mentioned persons. They then climbed up onto the boards on the barrels, lifted the

beam to hip height again, then with another jerk to shoulder height, in order to finally lift the thing overhead in a last exertion of strength. To make matters worse, each beam had to be fitted with precision so that it could be screwed to fittings.

Those barrels were a damn shaky business. If even one of the participants had become weak or had made a mistake, the result could have been fatal. Because no safety precautions had been taken, I insisted that at least holding lines should be used for the next piece. This triggered a major discussion with the builders. The master categorically rejected this measure: "*This is not how it is done in Tamil Nadu!*", he proclaimed. The farm manager in charge at the time just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't want to look like a wimp in front of his builders. He was sorry the very next day: One of the helpers buckled, the beam slipped and began to fall. The manager's forearms prevented the worst; they have earned their fortnight's covering in bandages.

He really has not learned from it. The hunchbacked buildings – unbelievable but true – still stand today; they bear the bio-romantic names *Bamboo* and *Blue Lagoon* (I

myself prefer *Hell* and *Damnation*); the manager, on the other hand, was removed from office years later because of continued irresponsible behavior. This saved our part of the community, which had made efforts to curb the blatant mismanagement, from expulsion, but not from years of quarrelling with the man's followers.

Finally, in order to save world peace, an arbitration panel decided that the farm should be divided; the administrator can continue his (in my view) questionable practices unhindered on his side of the fence – and I hope he will be happy.

Happy people don't wage wars.

* * *

Well, we have arrived at the end of the preface, with no main part to follow it as a justification for its existence. Back in 2016 when this booklet has been originally published I promised to deliver a sequel; it actually came out in mid-2018 and carries the title, "*Mach was!!*" ("*Do something!?*"). It expands on the multiple crises in today's world and raises the question what – if anything – can be done to make things better.

If you want to get in touch with me to exchange a few words, or if you want to comment on this book, write an email to hallo@paxton.de

You will find my blog with philosophical musings and download options for this and other books at www.paxton.de

Emails and blog comments are always welcome.



Films & Literature

- *The Story of Stuff* (a presentation by Annie Lennox)
- *Arithmetic, Population and Energy* (a talk by Al Bartlett)
- *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and the Spirit* (a novel by Daniel Quinn)
- *Columbus and other cannibals* (an indigenous perspective by Jack D. Forbes)
- *Nine Lives* (Indian characters described by William Dalrymple)
- *The One-Straw Revolution* (Masanobu Fukuoka on natural farming)
- *Endgame: The Problem of Civilization* (Derrick Jensen)
- *What a Way to Go: Life at the End of Empire* (a documentary film by Tim Bennett)
- *Climate: A New Story* (Charles Eisenstein)

