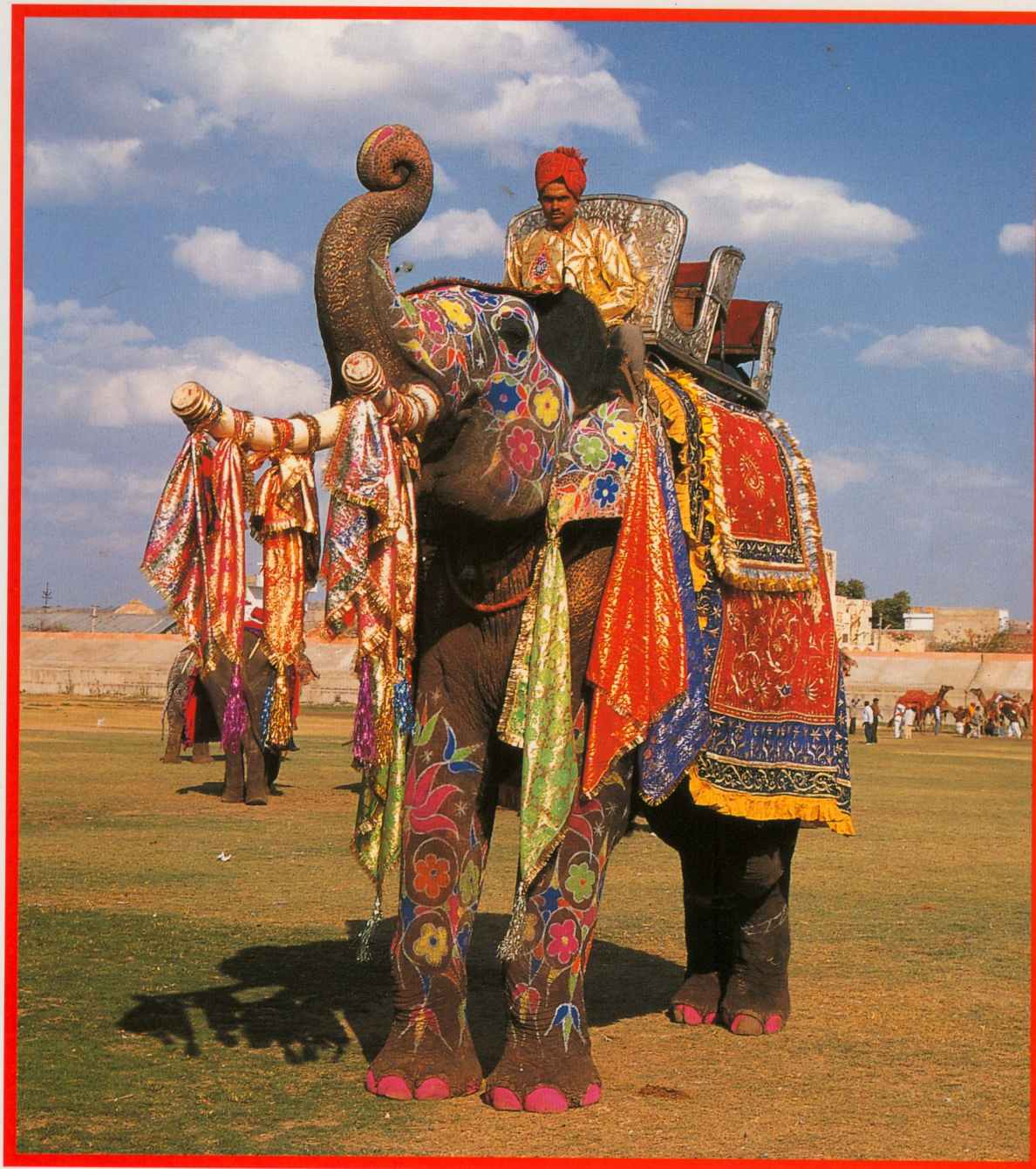


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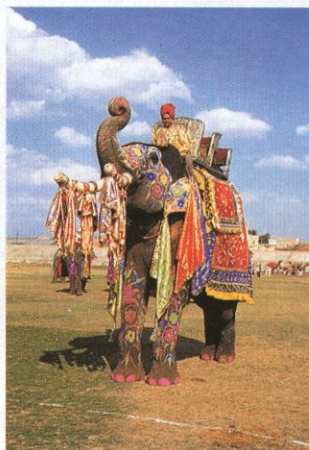
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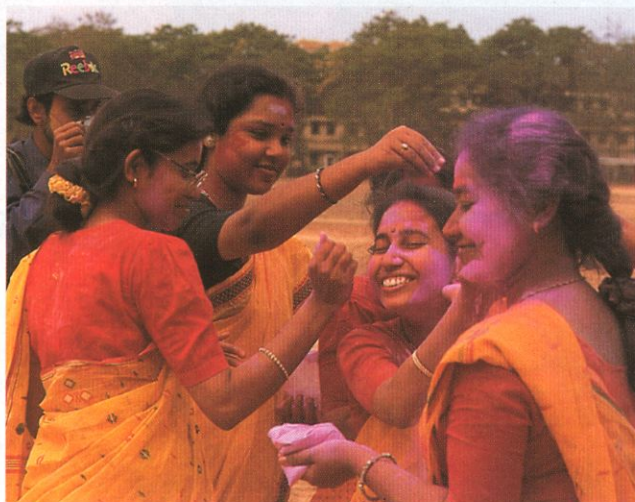
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The Tradition of Feeding Animals

Text and Photographs: Nihal Mathur

A *aaaoo... aaaoo... aaaoo* (Come...come...come...) the man called out aloud. Recognizing the call, the meandering cows converged for the fresh green feed tied to his bicycle. As he fed the cows, an elderly couple arrived to buy their bundle from a man who was selling the green fodder heaped high on the pavement. In the early morning, the empty street presented an organized scene of people turning up to feed a random herd of approximately 60 stray cows.

The cow is just one of the many animals that are fed by the people in what is a living tradition in India. Indians also feed a whole range of other animals like the monkey, the elephant, the bull, the rat, a variety of birds, fish, turtles and yes, even ants. And these are not all. There are yet other animals that are fed by the people, routinely or on festive occasions.

Ask anybody and the first response would be, "It is a matter of *dharma* (piety)." It isn't hard to see why, considering the cow has almost a divine status in Indian scriptures and many other animals like the black faced monkey, elephant, cobra, rat and peacock find themselves in divine company. In some cases

All around the world people love to feed animals for the sheer joy of it. But in India the reason why people feed animals goes beyond joy to something more intangible.

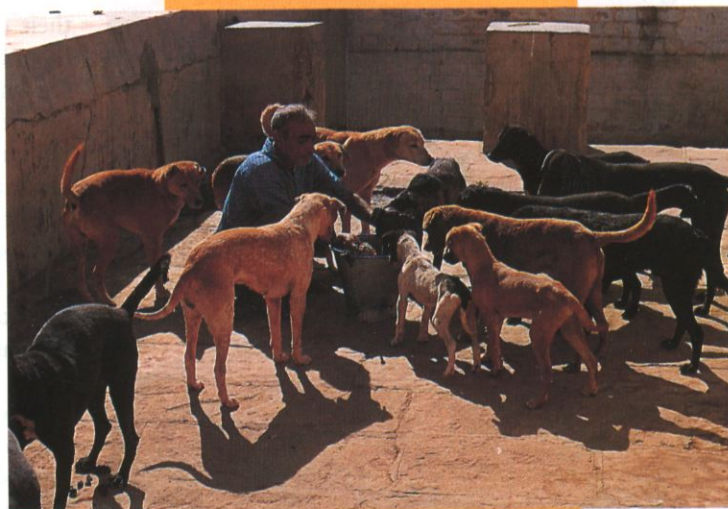
Something that is very intrinsic to Indian culture.

In India it is considered an act of dharma (piety) to feed animals.

the animals also come to symbolize the deity itself. Intertwined with religion and mythology is a vast folklore of diverse Indian castes and tribes. So whether it is the cow or cobra, crow or crocodile, there are different reasons and perspectives for feeding the animals. However, there is one predominant sentiment of *daan* and *punya* or simply, charity and virtue. Believe as Indians do, in life after death, the central idea behind feeding animals is an aspiration for a better station in the next life.

So indeed, it is a moral duty to feed and look after the cow which is not only closely connected to Krishna, one of the principal gods in Hindu mythology, but also because it is understood as *Kamadhenu*, the wish-fulfilling mythical mother.

Roving bands of black faced monkey, better known as langur, are fed by devotees of Hanuman, the monkey faced god in the Indian epic *Ramayana*. This denizen of the wilds has taken well to the growing urbanization in India primarily because public sentiment never allows it to be molested. On the contrary, the monkeys are usually fed before being shooed away. It is quite a sight to see the reverent with their children feed



peanuts, bananas and other fruits to this fascinating primate.

The elephant too finds religious sanction primarily because of its association with Ganesh, the elephant headed god of Hindu pantheon. It is in the south Indian states that the elephant is the most venerable animal. Almost all the important temples there have a few elephants of their own and those that do not have them, hire them for festive occasions. Devotees visiting the temple pause to feed the elephants with choicest bananas and even *payasam* or sweet rice pudding.

Milk is offered to the cobra, the poisonous hooded serpent which is shown wrapped around the neck of Lord Shiva — one of the Hindu Holy Trinity. Symbolic of various things like time, death, fertility, rebirth and creative energy, the deadly cobra is generally held to be a guardian, providing divine protection under its spreading hood. In fact, during the annual festival of Nagpanchami the cobra is actually worshipped by the people. Therefore it is not surprising that people do not endorse hurting or killing the cobra when encountered with. It is either caught by the snake charmer and taken away or milk is kept out in a bowl to appease the serpent.

Surely a rat is a pest anywhere in the world, best exterminated. Not quite so in one corner of India where thousands inhabit the unique temple of a folk



The elephant is propitiated for its association with the elephant headed Hindu god, Ganesha.

goddess called Karni Mata, near Bikaner in Rajasthan. Patronized by a traditional caste of bards called Charans, the local legend tells a tale where the rats within the temple are tied by the cycle of life, death and rebirth, to the Charans. It is believed that when the Charans die, they are reborn as rats, known as Kabas, within the temple. Conversely, the dead Kabas take rebirth as Charans! Hundreds of followers throng the temple each day to pay obeisance to Karni Mata and feed the scampering rats with sweets, coconut and milk.

Among birds, it is the pigeon which is fed in the cities on account of its numbers.
(Amlan Paliwal)

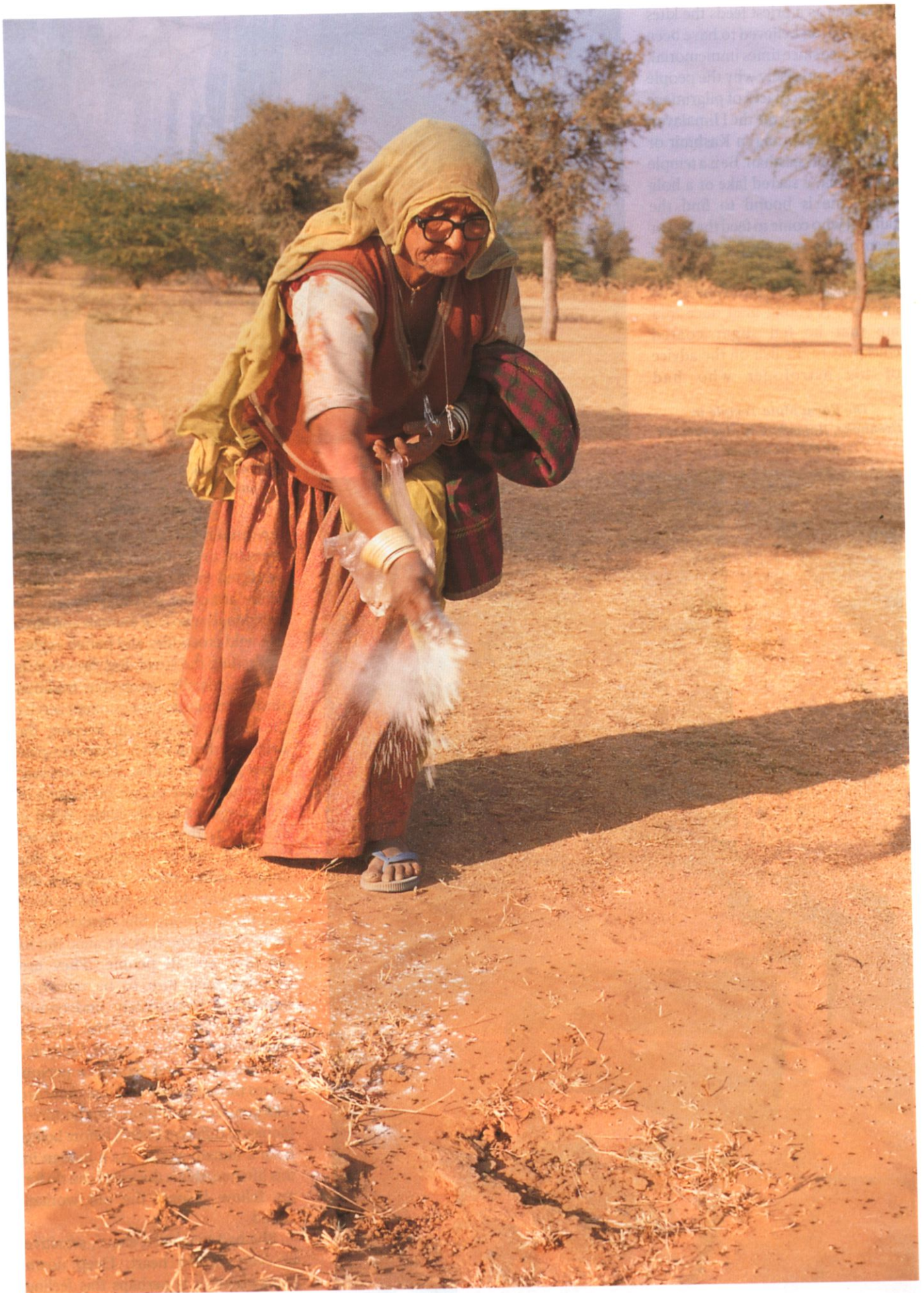


Like the Charans, the Bishnois from western Rajasthan are another caste of people that are known to feed the blackbuck that roams wild in the surrounding desert. In the hot summer months of May and June when foraging is scant in the desert, large herds of blackbuck flock to Bishnoi hamlets where feeding the animals is a community commitment. This beautiful antelope which is persecuted for its meat by almost all other desert bound communities, has a special place in the belief system of the Bishnois that preaches principles of conservation.

One tradition that is found across the length and breadth of India is that of feeding the birds. Every morning people scatter grain for the birds either on their rooftops or courtyards or go to some public feeding patch where it is an organized affair with grain sellers offering different types of feeds. In the cities pigeons predominate but in the rural areas, a whole lot of other birds are also attracted to feed. In the Bishnoi village of Khejarli, I counted 13 species of birds including doves, mynahs, munias, parrots, partridges and of course, peacocks — a sacred bird, protected not only by a religious sentiment but also by parliamentary statute since it is the national bird of India.

Although the lowly crow has no such exalted status, it is nevertheless a very special bird in India that is fed all over the country for a variety of different reasons. But chiefly, the crow is identified with the remembrance of ancestors or *shraadh*s — a period of time that comes each year when people recall their departed relatives and offer them food by feeding this winged scavenger. Evocative of ancestors, the crows are routinely fed in the Hindu burning grounds where the dead are taken to their funeral pyres.

Special mention must be made of the sacred kites that are fed every day at noon on top of the hill called Tirukkalukundram, near Chennai. It is said that the kites are actually saints who feed and rest here a while on their daily flight between the holy cities of Varanasi and Rameshwaram. A big crowd of pilgrims gather each day to watch

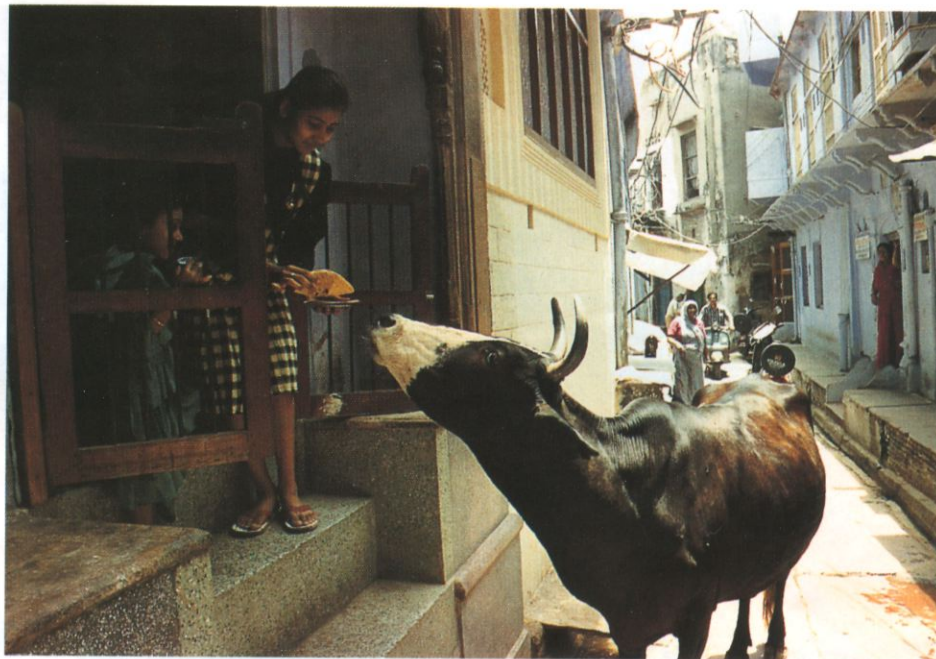


Old woman sprinkling flour over an ant colony.

the scene as a priest feeds the kites in a tradition believed to have been in practice since times immemorial.

That is precisely why the people feed the fish in places of pilgrimage like Rishikesh in the the Himalayan foothills, Anantnag in Kashmir or Pushkar in Rajasthan. Be it a temple water tank, a sacred lake or a holy river, one is bound to find the faithful who come to feed the fish or even turtles as a simple matter of piety. But talking to people sometimes elicits typically personal answers. A young man once told me that he fed sugar coated chickpeas to the fish on the advice of his astrologer who had

The Karni Mata Temple in Deshnoke, Rajasthan is also famous as the rat temple.



The sacred cow is one of the many animals that is fed by the people.

(Amlan Paliwal)

recommended this as a remedial measure to counter a mishap he had predicted in the young man's future. There are other personal reasons for individuals who feed animals and birds like wild crocodiles and pariah eagles.

Feeding the street dog, however, is a more socially acceptable tradition since it recognizes the yeoman service the canine provides in keeping the neighbourhood watch. There are quite a few places in India, where devoted individuals have organized feeding of stray dogs on a daily basis. What is amazing is that even the tiny insect world of ants is a recipient of this unique Indian ethos. I asked an old woman why she was sprinkling flour over the ant colony. She startled me by replying, "To you they are ants. But to me they are all people. They are awaiting their turn to be reborn a human." I immediately understood what she meant. In the Hindu conception of the human lifecycle, between death and rebirth, a person passes through what is called *chaurasi lakh yonis* (eight million, four hundred thousand different births) before being born a human again. "As a human in this lifetime, this is the least I can do for my fellow beings" the old woman added.

She had touched a chord, sensitive in every Indian heart. Deep down somewhere, it is perhaps this feeling that keeps alive in India the ancient tradition of feeding animals.

