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We Need Them. They Will Do Much Better Without Us. A Review of *Survival at Stake* by Poorva Joshipura

Potrzebujemy ich. Oni poradzą sobie bez nas znacznie lepiej.
Recenzja książki autorstwa Poorva Josipura pt. „Survival at Stake”

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There is reward for kindness to every living thing.
Prophet Mohammed

‘Zoo-ethics’ is a subset of bioethics, and zoology may be looked upon as a subset of ecology... that is how the review of *Survival at Stake*, by Poorva Joshipura, falls well and truly within the scope of this journal. There is also an interesting link between this one and another review of a book steeped in science, published recently by this author (Venkatesh 2023), as well as a book of poems published by this author five years ago (Venkatesh 2019). *Survival at Stake*, on the other hand, primarily, has a moral, ethical, and practical force embedded within the scientific. This is understandable when one notes that Joshipura is an animal welfare activist associated with the NGO, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and committed to the cause espoused by it.

While the pangolin, civet cat, bat, butterfly and monkey make their way into the chapter titles, a very extensive menagerie is featured not just in the cover-image, but also in the ‘prose with a purpose’ which runs through over 200 pages (excluding the long

list of references/notes), organised in 12 almost-equally-long chapters.

Pseudo-Superiority

‘We are all animals,’ the author reminds us... social ones with the creative power to co-exist harmoniously with Nature. Once we know that we are part of something – Nature in this case – we would think twice before indiscriminately lording over it. Harming Nature is tantamount to harming oneself, just as harming another human soul, is tantamount to causing pain to your own, as all souls belong to that common pool called the Supreme Soul. Covid-19, she points out, was one of Nature’s warnings – hitting back at errant humans silently (but powerfully), through tortured and ill-treated animals as media. Readers who listen to Tarot readings, will appreciate the role of a ‘tower moment’ – when you are forced to mend your ways (Hobson’s choice), if you do not do so willingly when you have the time and wherewithal to do so. Those who dabble in Environmental Life Cycle Assessment will at once notice that the book tightly couples two of the three end-point (damage) indicators – Human health, and Ecosystem/



Picture source: www.amazon.com

Biodiversity loss, through the anthropospheric activity of wildlife trafficking (and culling) to satisfy a whole range of human needs – food, fur, skin, horn, tusk, experimentation in labs, entertainment, traditional medicine, and even ‘protection from evil spirits’ (a common deplorable superstition in voodoo religions).

They can what we cannot, just as we can what they cannot – we tend to ignore the first fact while exaggerating the latter all the while. So how does that make us ‘superior’ to them? They exhibit a whole range of emotions – just to give one example, milch cows and their calves grieve visibly when separated from each other by ‘anthropocentric’ humans keen on just fulfilling socio-economic needs in the anthroposphere. ‘She would sit, cry and call out for her mother,’ has been said of a baby gorilla separated from her mother who was poached by perverse profiteers. A mother orca, the author has remarked in a later chapter, kept her deceased young-one close to her for 17 days. Well, animals have been seen helping others of their own ilk, and at times, even humans (think dolphins for

instance)! If we are social animals, they, in Joshipura’s words, are also ‘persons of a different sort.’ Knowing the vital roles the fauna plays silently in global ecosystems, is a prerequisite for appreciating that we *Homo sapiens* owe our existence, survival and well-being to them.

Various Viruses

Covid-19 and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) are the primary foci of the first chapter. Both originated in Chinese wet markets (in Wuhan in 2019; and Guangdong in 2003, respectively), where animals of different species are stacked in cramped cages, cut and diced and sold, with their body fluids splattered around, mixed and commingled – conduits for dangerous viruses to ‘hop, skip, hitchhike and jump’, and pass on ‘zoonotically’ to unsuspecting humans out there purchasing meat. Bats, the author states, were the immune sources of the corona viruses causing SARS, MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) and Covid-19, with civet cats, camels and ant-eaters being the corresponding intermediaries or the ‘mixing vessels’ *en route* to human beings. She castigates the butchering of donkeys in Kenya, black and brown bears in South-east Asia, imported Amazonian yellow-footed tortoise offspring in China by misguided (and almost certainly, devious) humans, to extract body parts/fluids of supposedly medicinal value to fight Covid-19; and recalls that all civet cats were sterilised, electrocuted and burnt in China, post-SARS; just as chickens were massacred en masse in 1997 in response to a bird flu epidemic. She writes about dogs, monkeys, porcupines, deer and eels being sold in India in illegal open markets as food and reveals that the ‘pull of the palate’ is so strong in China and its southern neighbours that even civet cats, pangolins and bats (the primary sources of the viruses and the ‘mixing vessels’) made a comeback in 2021!

There is a reference to a host of other zoonotic pandemics/epidemics – bird flu, swine flu, Ebola and HIV, among others,

which are discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. Tracing the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), which causes AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) to the SIV (Simian Immunodeficiency Virus) in Africa, in the second chapter, and attributing the breakout of HIV to human consumption of (infected) monkey-meat and experimentation with monkeys as specimens in laboratories, she couches the narration in the stories of the death of one HIV+ friend, and the struggle of another against the infection – a very effective story-telling approach which succeeds in locking readers in, not just by providing them information, but also by influencing and motivating them to unlearn, relearn and change their ways. We learn that there are two types of HIVs, 1 and 2, the latter traceable to green vervet monkeys in western Africa; and the former to apes, gorillas and chimps in sub-Saharan Africa, which have also been identified as the ‘mixing vessels’ for Ebola pandemics in western Africa. Can you guess the natural host? Yes, yours is as good as mine – bats again. Fruit bats, specifically, this time.

More Meat than Before

‘Factory’ farms (the focus of the third chapter) slaughtering over 92 billion land animals annually, have emerged to sate the ever-increasing appetite of humankind to gorge on animal flesh (humans consume twice as much meat per-capita today, as they did fifty years ago). Joshipura notes that the pulverized remains of other (sometimes-infected) animals are fed to cows, pigs, goats and chicken, in such farms to cut costs; thus, making cannibals out of otherwise-vegetarian creatures. Pumping in over 75% of all the antimicrobial drugs available in the global market into these animals, has resulted in the emergence of antibiotic-resistant superbugs which also make their way to the soil and plants through manure, and affect vegetarians too, in the process. Bad news for human health in the future, in a business-as-usual scenario which would

sustain these so-called ‘superbug super-incubators’! There are many cases of chickens losing their lives to fires breaking out in cramped, noxious, filthy, stress-inducing spaces in farms housing millions of them.

Nature hit back first with the mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalitis), and followed it up with the swine flu pandemic of 2009 which fanned out of a ‘factory’ farm in the USA. Interestingly, pigs had contracted the 1918 Spanish flu from humans, who had gotten it from birds (chicken, more precisely) – winged ones there again, akin to the culpable bats! The risk of another swine flu pandemic (a descendant of the H1N1 from 2009), as well as the threat of another dangerous bird flu pandemic (H5N1 and H7N9) looms large, at the time of writing, as warned by the author. Time then to give up eating meat, I suppose, and join the virtuous bandwagon of vegetarianism or even veganism?

Loss of Biodiversity

There is a poem by Robert Frost (not referred to in this book, though) in which he wonders whether it would be fire or ice that would decimate humankind for good eventually, before concluding that both are equally capable of doing so. In ‘Code Red’, the third chapter, the author begins with an account of the Biblical flood and Noah’s Ark, before writing about the ongoing sixth mass extinction and the unnoticed disappearance of several vertebrate species in the Anthropocene. She explains how flora and fauna mutually support each other and harming one impacts the other adversely. How many readers know that farmed animals – which [here, the author would use ‘who’ instead to give animals a person-status] have proliferated thanks to factory farms and large-scale deforestation to make way for pasture lands – and human beings account for 96% of the world’s mammals! The remaining 4% has not just inherent value, but is vital to life on Terra Firma, in ways known but not appreciated (rather taken for granted).

Lambasting the lack of political will be necessary to promote responsible eating habits, Joshipura urges readers to take ‘personal environmental responsibility’ (on the lines of CSR), to go vegan, and truncate – in aggregate – the global greenhouse gas footprint. In the fourth chapter, which she begins with a tragic account of whaling, she reminds readers that looking seaward is not going to be a durable and sustainable alternative to the factory farms on land. Whales, she points out, are intelligent and emotional beings, tremendous carbon stores worth thousands of trees and nutrient sources (via their excrement) to phytoplankton at the base of the marine chain – a message to the Japanese, Icelanders and Norwegians, *inter alia*, who have not ceased using their harpoons!

Indeed, meat-eaters may wish to become vegans eventually, and end up being pescatarians for a while, en route. Overfishing (often illegal, unregulated and under-reported, with the concomitant unused ‘bycatch’) has been a concern too, decimating marine life gradually, affecting nutrient availability adversely and drastically reducing the capacity of marine flora to sequester ‘blue carbon.’ The wonderful delicate balance in marine ecosystems powered by numerous symbiotic (mutualistic and commensal) relationships among the species, has been irreversibly damaged by heartless humankind. We learn that the imperilled coral reefs have the highest biodiversity among all types of ecosystems on earth; housing 25% of marine life.

Just as terrestrial farms have made carnivores of herbivorous livestock, aquaculture force-feeds fishmeal to phytoplankton-eating fish, with disastrous consequences in the medium-term, both for the farmed fish themselves and for the wider marine environments. The author discusses, no-holds-barred, about the gruesome torture fish, seabirds and cetaceans are put through, and urges readers to not perceive marine life as something different from land animals which need to be protected from extinction.

She then trains her lens on the subject matter of entomologists, apiologists and lepidopterists – insects, moths, butterflies, wasps, bees etc. – pollinators, nutrient-distributors and soil-aerators, which play an extremely crucial but unappreciated role in the existence of life in general.

To Be(e)...

Even to think of ‘*Not to be(e)*’, is a scary proposition. The author begins the chapter on insects with the monarch butterflies which famously journey from the USA and Canada to Mexico in the winter months – on what is observed annually as All Saints’ Day. While discussing their cultural and spiritual significance to ethnic Mexicans, Joshipura points out how anthropospheric ‘bads’ have resulted in a plummeting of the monarch butterfly’s population drastically over the years. ‘As with the monarch, so with the subjects (read, other species), and by extension, as with the butterfly-kingdom, so with the realm of bees and other insects.

The annual ecological services provided by insects, in the US alone, if expressed in monetary terms, comes to around USD 57 billion, reportedly. However, Joshipura wants readers to appreciate the insects not just for their ‘economic value’ but also for their intelligence and their distinct ‘personalities.’ They are both similar to and different from us, at the same time (if that makes sense), and do different things, differently, thanks to being endowed with sensory abilities which we humans do not possess.

Holy Cow!

The author turns back her focus to drug-resistant tuberculosis (TB) bacteria in India and traces the genesis thereof to chickens and livestock being reared in factory farms for meat which subsequently is improperly cooked in households, and inadequately-pasteurised milk from cows. Livestock and chickens, as also referred to earlier, are infused liberally with antibiotics, some of which are also administered to humans suffering from TB!

Cows are revered in India...supposedly. Is sufficient attention being paid to their welfare? The author's account introduces readers to the pathetic state in which cows spend their lives in dairy farms in the country. The male calves are abandoned, starved to death, or slaughtered for veal (the calf-counterpart of the adult-beef) – in a twist of fate, while the female of the human species is looked down upon (think female foeticide) in the country, it is the male bovine calves which are unwanted! While highlighting the health risks which bovine milk may also pose, she questions the need for continuing its intake well into adulthood, when the nutrients therein can very easily be obtained – and in a safer way too – from other vegetarian alternatives.

Animals, we know, are also reared for fur, wool and leather (skin, in other words). These may be the conventional livestock (sheep, cows etc.), and also the more exotic minks, silver foxes, alpacas, rabbits and crocodiles. The global fashion industry which panders to the senses of the rich, while raking in enormous profits, is accused – and rightly so – of turning a blind eye to animal welfare, climate change concerns and the environment, all along its supply chain which reaches far, deep and wide into the developing-world countries (China, Brazil, India and others). Animal torture in factory farms is not endemic to just the developing-world countries which are often unfairly pulled up first, but also to Scandinavia, the USA, Australia and many European countries. Readers would recall the massacre of the 17 million minks in Denmark during the Covid-19 pandemic. If there had been no demand for mink fur at all, these cramped farms would not have existed, and there would have been no need to sacrifice so many of these animals. Sadly, the Danes have gone back to their old ways at the time of writing. Is the next SARS-type pandemic lurking in mink farms?

The author presents Stella McCartney (the Beatle Paul's daughter) as a bellwether for fur-free and leather-free fashion. It is not

just the environment which takes a beating, but also underpaid labourers (even children) in tanneries for instance, who are exposed to a plethora of hazards (hexavalent chromium being particularly culpable)! Just as holy cows are harassed in India, the holy Ganges is polluted. Respect on-paper, abuse on-field. Augean stables all over...

Let them Live in Peace

Monkeypox, which was first detected in long-tailed macaques, compounded the Covid-19 crisis in 2023. The author pins the blame on laboratories using monkeys as test specimens for drugs and cosmetics, and fears that there is a huge risk for Ebola-type pandemics breaking out of such test labs anywhere in the world. Misuse animals to promote human well-beings, and Mother Nature will hit back in ways, humans will not be adequately prepared to respond to!

Monkeys are not just intelligent, but also empathetic and hugely social creatures. When kept isolated in cages for lab-experiments, and deprived of what is natural and important to them, they experience high levels of stress. Joshipura rightly claims that using animals for experimentation in labs is just an old, die-hard, lucrative habit helping many businesses, which often defeats its own purpose as animal toxicity studies are not always good predictors of the toxic effects of drugs on humans. On date, governments in Europe and the USA have resolved to put an end to lab trials conducted on animals. Let us wait and watch, and hope that tissue-on-a-chip models, in-silico methods and micro-dosing, put an end to atrocities committed on animals for the supposed advancement of science.

Their Pain, your Gain

Using the book *Hunger Games*, as an entry point to the chapter on inflicting pain on animals for the sake of human amusement – in the name of 'culture' and 'tradition' – she paints ire-evoking images of gladiatorial contests in ancient Rome, where lions, panthers, hippos, tigers etc., were butchered

in the arenas, at the behest of the emperor. There is a shift in time to modern-day Tamil Nadu (southern India), where bull-fighting (not dissimilar to what the matadors do in Spain) was first banned and then re-permitted (simply for political mileage). (Pit-bull) dogfights and cockfights are pretty common, the former in the west, and the latter in many parts of rural India for instance. This sadistic tendency to watch the plight of animals hurting and wounding each other, spills over to what we see in human society too – crowds gather around two individuals who are at each other's throats, for fun, waiting for the policeman to arrive at his own leisure! Shame on us. Well, YouTube is full of such videos, each one attracting a million-plus hits!

Breeding dogs for human entertainment and then abandoning or euthanising them en masse, is what has been happening for a long time. There is a limit to the number of shelter homes which can take it cats and dogs and take care of them, while some lucky ones get adopted. Joshipura points out that zoos are veritable prisons where animals do not feel safe and secure – caged for human amusement and zoo-owners' profit, made to endure 'zoochosis', and culled for want of space (European zoos cull up to 5000 healthy animals annually).

The author writes about an interesting (partial) correlation between cruelty towards animals, and atrocities towards fellow human beings; and provides disturbing accounts of many serial killers with histories of animal abuse. She lets readers wonder how likely it would be for slaughterhouse workers who are desensitized to the pain and agony experienced by the animals they butcher, to commit violent crimes against humans. Robert Pickton (Canadian serial killer) and the as-yet-unidentified Jack the Ripper are mentioned en passant, the former a pig farmer and the latter most likely a slaughterhouse employee. Why just slaughterhouse workers, even some highly-placed (paid and funded) academic researchers in American Universities, working with

animals in their labs, have turned out to be rapists and/or murderers, and are languishing in prison. Sadly, some are even shielded by the university administration which is keener on not losing all the funding which comes in, courtesy their research for the 'advancement of science'!

Take-Home Messages... to Act Upon

This review would be incomplete if I do not list the messages which Joshipura gives to the readers in the last chapter. Here they come:

- Do not do to animals what you would not wish to be done to you (by your fellow humans).
- Reduce meat-eating en route to veganism.
- If you see crimes being committed against animals, speak up, and report them.
- Build empathy for animals in the minds of school-going children.
- Do your bit to promote bio-ethics and animal-friendliness in your workplace and society.
- If you are entrepreneurial, cash in on your ideas for a 'green, circular, vegan economy'.
- Invest as far as possible in shares issued by firms which are committed to the cause of animal welfare.
- Beware of greenwashing and humane-washing, and dig deeper to verify claims.
- Donate to animal welfare causes, and if you can, remember them in your will.

I am certain that if you pick up a copy of this book and read it, you may start rethinking, unlearning and relearning, and become better guests (vegan maybe, or at least vegetarian?) in this world of animals. And more importantly, you will appreciate the fact that we cannot do without them, while they will actually be far better off if humankind vanishes from the surface of the earth. To quote Jane Goodall from a LinkedIn post, "Animals on the brink of extinction can now be given a chance to bounce back."

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