

PART VI

OUR ANIMAL FRIENDS

All Creatures Big and Small

Accha House had its share of cats and dogs, but none had it so good as Laika, for long its sole canine resident. Laika was a droopy-looking, floppy-eared Beagle coated all over in brown and black who had been at Accha House as far as I could remember. It had been gifted as a pup to uncle Suranjan who named it Laika after the more famous canine of that name sent by the Russians into space way back in 1957. Unlike its more famous namesake, however, Laika had its feet firmly on the ground; and it was a male unlike the high-flying Russian bitch.



Grandma's family loved dogs as could be seen from these photographs of canines from her little blue album

A shy, retiring sort, its usual lair was under a chair, while every once in a while it would get on to a chair below the grilled window in the hall fronting the road to have a peep at

the outside world. That was about the time the municipality lined the middle of General's Lake Road (Sir James Pieris Mawatha) facing our house with cat's eyes, luminous glass gems that gave out a greenish glow at night which may explain why it so often stared at the road. These would, in a couple of years, disappear, but not so Laika's gaze. It often had such a doleful look that one would think it were in mourning.



Greenish cat's eye like this once lined General's Lake Road

Though a lazy, dreamy dog, it was a good hunter and was quick to offer its services to catch vermin, for Beagles despite their calm gentle disposition and short legs make great hounds, especially for hunting down hares. Accha would cry out whenever she spotted a mouse “*Catch, laika, catch!*” and it would quickly spring into action to bring its quarry to bay in the corner of a kitchen or bathroom, and to reveal, neatly sandwiched between its jaws, a bloodied mouse dead perhaps from shock. It would however not touch the *hik-miyas* or musk shrews, a little mammal like a rat with a long snout that gave out a disagreeable smell wherever they went.

Laika was usually addressed in English by our largely Sinhala-speaking household. Those who are quick to judge my

Sinhalese kin might hastily conclude from this that they held the English language in such low esteem that they thought it fit only to address their dogs with. The fact is that the Sinhalese hold the English language in such high regard that they subconsciously believe that even dogs understand this 'international language'. This I am quite sure of, having lived in such a household and given some thought to the matter. Laika was among the dearest friends of the family and they would only address it in a language they fondly believed it would understand – the language of choice was clearly English!



Uncle Suranjann with little Laika and uncle Chandana with cats Vadiya and Humbaya before we came to Accha House

To us Muslim members of the household, Laika's residence meant that no angels would be visiting us as Islamic belief held that angels did not visit homes where there were dogs. No one thought of asking that it be lodged outside the house in a kennel to let the angels in, not even father. Domestic peace also mattered after all. There was however one occasion when Laika became a bone of contention between the family

members. That was when our Karu kinsfolk from Kenya were staying there during the December holidays. Laika, an otherwise passive fellow that would never bite unless provoked, had suddenly lunged at cousin Rajiv and bitten his hand until blood oozed out. He was rushed to hospital by uncle Karu who was told by the medical staff there that the dog might be mad and that they badly needed its head to determine whether it had rabies.

Understandably, this did not go well with the rest of the household, particularly uncle Suranjan who kept on saying that Rajiv had provoked it by pulling its tail. And so uncle Karu sat fuming in the hallway with a long face, fulminating that everybody was blaming the child and not the dog who had after all taken the first bite. "*This family is mad. They're more concerned about the dog than the child*" he was heard to mutter. The others would not budge; after all, it's a dog's life they reasoned. Thankfully the matter ended at that. Rajiv did not catch the dreaded disease and Laika was left alone.

This is not to say that Laika was not vicious. It was, at times. One afternoon, we were having lunch seated round our large dining table and one of us tossed a piece of beef at a little kitten we were fondly bringing up at the time. Laika happened to be near and thinking that the kitten was after his meat, gave out a quick growl and swiftly sank its fangs into its tender throat. We looked on helplessly as the poor creature quivered and gave out its final gasps of life. Mother went on that there was nothing we could do about it, and true to her words, it was dead in less than a minute, lying in a pool of crimson blood.

The shy, retiring type it was, Laika never liked it outdoors and I can hardly remember an occasion when it went out, except to answer a call of nature when it would resort to the backyard. The threat of a dogcatcher catching it was therefore out of the question. There were rumours circulating at the time that mongrels were fast disappearing from the streets of Colpetty, the result it was said of Far Asian resident workers' exotic tastes. The disappearances were thought to be the work of South Korean workers busy putting up Liberty Plaza, a large

shopping mall along Turret Road closer to the Colpetty Junction undertaken by construction giant Keang Nam. How far it was true could never really be established since nobody had actually caught the fellows in the act. At any rate Laika, a rather meaty fellow with a body somewhat like a sausage, was fortunate not to have ended up in a platter of a hungry mongol gnawing on its bones with canine relish. It passed away around the mid-1980s after a brief illness, probably a result of old age. We buried it in the sandy stretch near the front steps leading to the house. Uncle Suranjan wept inconsolably like a little child comforted by his wife Priyanthi.



Liberty Plaza in Colpetty was built by South Koreans working for Keangnam who it is rumoured ate dog meat

The cats that made Accha House their home were quite a number even before we Husseins entered the scene. There were two cats, Vadiya and Humbaya, perhaps part of a larger litter, that had made Chitrangi their home when Laika was yet a puppy. They were no more there when we Husseins arrived on the scene, though our coming seems to have attracted more cats to the house. Accha was not particularly fond of cats except for a solitary Persian uncle Lalith brought home. She would often grumble that cats or *pooso* as she called them,

made unlucky - to use her words *muspentoo* – noises. She was referring not so much to the usual *meows* our tame lady cats made when they were hungry, but the calls of the vagrant big-faced tom cats, who, perched on rooftops and other high places sometimes let out a weird, mournful howl which even a pen could not capture but went something like *eeeeee...ooooooooo*, perhaps a mating call of some sort.

She would moan how nasty-smelling the crap they buried under the sand of the graveled square in our backyard was, while waxing eloquent on dog droppings which effortlessly dumped on the surface simply dried away. That cats were health freaks that washed their coats clean with their tongues and had even better toilet training than humans, going so far as to bury their bodily waste in subterranean graves they themselves hollowed out with their paws, was lost on her.

Those I remember best was a quartet of lively kittens with white coats speckled all over in black, so alike that hardly anybody could tell the difference, except for one, the runt of the litter whose coat was a bit fainter than the rest.



We had four B & W kittens just like the ones in this picture

We named them after that class of highly reactive chemical elements known as the halogens – Chlorine, Flourine, Bromine and Iodine. Those were the days we were deeply engrossed with our chemical collection and so the quads were given these rather elementary names. In fact we had two of their namesakes in our lab, Chlorine which came as a strong smeling white powder, stable stuff compared to the deadly yellowish-green windswept mists the Germans had unleashed at Ypres in the days of the Great War, and Iodine, grayish-looking crystals that gave out purple fumes when heated.

Iodine, whom we believed was the youngest, but only because it was smaller and paler-looking than the rest had another name the rest of the household called it, *Salmon*, as it had once got its head stuck in an empty can of Plaza brand mackerel or some other tinned fish (indifferently called salmon locally) while trying to lick the little bits and pieces inside. *What a frivolous name* we thought and insisted on calling it by

the more profound name we had originally bestowed upon it shortly after its birth, *Iodine*— the last of the halogens.

Later times saw the arrival of a Persian kitten, a stately little moggie coated all over with fluffy white fur uncle Lalith received as a gift from a friend.

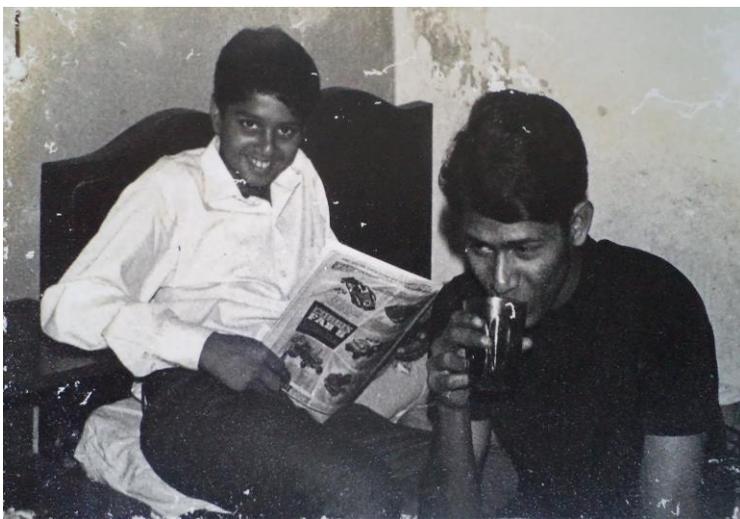


Accha n little Lakmini with Persian kitty on uncle Lalith's bed

Proud and placid like all Persians it could not endear itself to us, but got on well with our breadman, a fair, pleasant-looking fellow with a rimmed khaki hat who would arrive in front of the house on his bicycle laden with a large box containing loaves of crusty, freshly-baked bread and other goodies such as sponge cakes. That is, until one evening when it made away with a bun, after which there was no love lost between the two.

Accha House would have been home to a horde of rabbits if not for a sad incident before we Husseins entered the scene.

Neighbour Dr.Zain Cader once gifted uncle Suranjan, then in his teens, a she-rabbit. His uncle Justin procured it a partner from a shop at Colpetty that sold rabbits for the table and within a year they were a happy family with little baby rabbits gamboling about. The lad could not enjoy their company for long as he caught a bad bout of diphtheria, leaving him hospitalized for three months. The physician who treated him blamed the sickness on the rabbits, and the lad's uncle who had in the first place brought home the stud, was told to rid the house of the lot, He sold them in the market, though the lad was told they were abandoned near the War Memorial near Vihara Maha Devi Park on a patch bristling with scrub jungle.



Uncle Suranjan seen black shirt caught a bad bout of diphtheria

When we were very young, father used to rear a couple of bantams in a coop in the backyard. We woke up one morning to find that a mongoose or palm cat, a nocturnal feline known to feed ravenously on fowl, had slipped through the mesh and killed a fowl or as we were told at the time “*sucked its blood out*”. Birds we loved and the three of us used to improvise a bird house by boring a hole into a cardboard box and filling it

with straw to attract the occasional bird that found its way into the house. No matter how much we tried, we could not get our feathered friends, the *ge-kurullas* or house sparrows, to move in and eventually abandoned the scheme. As for butterflies, we had plenty of them breeding nearby in a shrub in the graveled side path closer to the arched doorway that led to the backyard. Here, hanging perilously from the tiny leaves or stems like little mangoes and looking rather like giant dewdrops glistening in the morning sun or diminutive fairytale lanterns coated all over with mother-of-pearl were these iridescent silvery chrysalises of some species of lepidoptera, perhaps of the Common Crow Butterfly, judging from an illustration of butterfly pupae given in our *How and Why* book on *Butterflies and Moths*. The shrub, which was about two or three feet tall later failed to attract the creatures and was cut down by uncle Chandana.



Illustration of chrysalis of Crow Butterfly from our How & Why book on butterflies

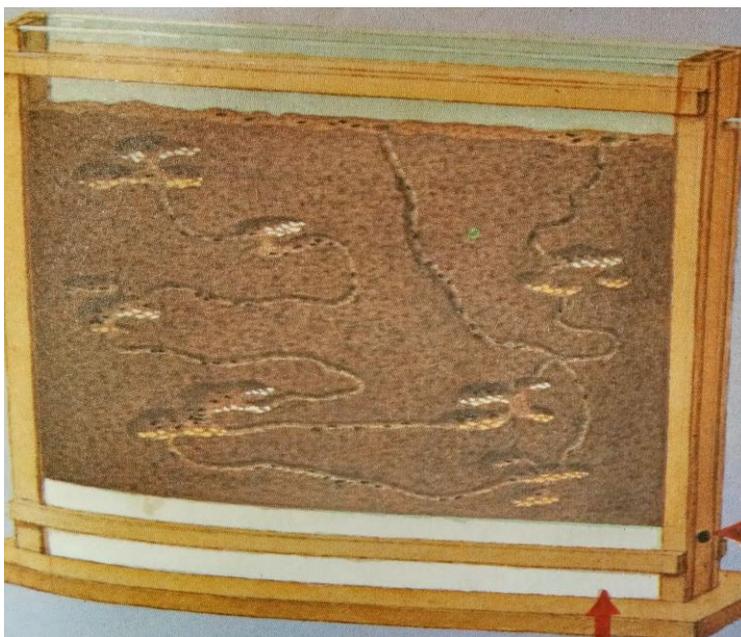
Not so welcome were the myriads of red weaver ants known as *dimiyas* that had made the mango tree in our backyard their abode, forming its long leaves into *gotu*, spherical receptacles in which they would live and conveniently direct the affairs of their arboreal kingdom, sheltered as it were from sun and rain. Hordes of the Huns could be seen in our backyard, marching up trees and scaling the walls. We would send a strong stream of water, laser-like from a red and white plastic water spray to dislodge them as they scaled a wall or tree. No easy quarry, they would tenaciously grip the wall till the force of the jet of water, this time nearer and stronger, threw them off balance to plummet in free fall.

Snails were a common sight, though the only ones we ever saw were the African land snails saddled with brownish purple conical shells. These were fast breeders originating from East Africa. They had been introduced to the country only around 1900 before proliferating at the expense of native species like the tree snails.



Snails like this common here were originally from Africa

Asgar conceived the ingenious idea of building a home for the lazy louts with a wooden box. He fed the sluggards with chilli leaves after he learned that they were voracious eaters of the leaf. Before long the entire thing began to smell of crap as the bumpkins began emptying the contents of their gut all over their living quarters. It all ended on a sad note. We had just returned home from a long trip and Asgar rushed to let his eyes gaze on them when he found the box overturned, the shells of the snails scattered all over. It was very likely the work of a ravenous red-eyed, coppery brown plumed Coucal or Crow-Pheasant which is known to voraciously gobble up the gastropods. It could n't have found a better meal, for African snails are a particularly nutritious source of meat, containing, it is said, as much protein as beef.



Asgar was probably inspired by this illustration on how to house an ant colony from our Ladybird book 'Story of the Ant'

Cockroaches too we saw plenty, especially when Accha and her brood got into spring-cleaning mood, focusing all their energies on the row of multi-coloured cupboards that lined two sides of the pantry wall. The cupboards very generously gave refuge to rodents and roaches, pockmarked as they were with mouseholes and little apertures from which they could forage for scraps in the dead of night.

The racket would send the roaches scrambling for cover from grandma's broom or a cat that lurked nearby. These we did not bother with until one morning while clearing some old stuff near the dining room we noticed a little albino roach which we chucked into a glass bottle, only to find its whitish body gradually turning brown. It led us to conclude that all cockroaches were natural albinos and that it was exposure to light that gave them their dark colour. Little did we know then that what we had caught was a newly molted cockroach nymph which is usually white but darkens to the normal colour within a few hours, though I still wonder whether not exposure to light had something to do with it. Curiously enough, the fair-skinned members of the Burgher community are sometimes called in Sinhala *kerapottas* or cockroaches which seems to have originally applied to albinos who are sensitive to light.



The little white roach looked a bit like this

Roaches were mild compared to the mosquitoes that every now and then plagued our house, exposed as it was to the outside world through the front and rear. The winged vampires often arrived after dusk and preferred to act under cover of darkness to accomplish their nefarious task. It was not just that irritating whir as they hovered about in flight or their insatiable lust for blood that irked us, but more particularly their painfully itchy bite. We eventually declared war on the bloodsuckers though at the beginning Asgar and I were very selective in their killing, crumpling only those we actually caught going for our blood. With time this selective approach changed as we realized they were all the same. They needed the blood to propagate their species and we simply couldn't give them enough. Mosquitoes are about the only creatures in the animal world besides leeches, vampire bats and Jewish mohels that actually go for one's blood; compulsive bloodsuckers who cannot take no for an answer.



*Mosquitoes were always a nuisance. A Baygon Advert.
Sun newspaper July 1983*

However there came a time when the pests left us alone for a week or two. That was after the great Malathion stink of late 1985, the result of an industrial accident. A fire had gutted the government Malathion stores at Mulleriyawa, causing some 5000 boxes of the substance to smoulder, which was only contained a day or two later by dumping large volumes of sand over them. The fumes even reached our house judging from the mercaptan odour that found its way to our noses, making us wonder what it was, only to find the following day that a Malathion store had caught fire. It did have its after effects though, since we hardly had any mosquitoes bothering us for the next couple of weeks. It seems the Malathion, an active ingredient in mosquito repellents had done the trick.

Respect for Life

Although we had an Islamic upbringing amidst a largely Buddhist background, our respect for life seems not to have been a direct result of either, for as far as I could remember, it was a spontaneous development, or as would later come to believe the outpourings of a Divinity whose All-encompassing Mercy is even reflected in the mercy His creatures show others, even to those not of their own kind.

True, Islamic teachings prohibit the taking of life save for the pot or to save one's skin, but it was never instilled in us as a formal religious teaching in our early years. There was no occasion to, for we did not see any unnecessary killing around us such as for sport, either by our parents or by father's Muslim kinsfolk or by mother's Buddhist kinsfolk amongst whom we lived. That is, except for the solitary exception of uncle Lalith, who had not as yet stepped out of his teens. He took animal life with a pinch of salt or even less, such as when he gloated about dissecting frogs at college, or impaled ticks lurking in household furniture or burnt alive a hairy, rather scary-looking greenish or yellowish caterpillar he espied crawling along a mango tree in our backyard, conveying it all the way to the kitchen at the back of the house to shove it into a nest of red hot embers and smugly rest his gaze on it as it writhed and withered in the inferno.

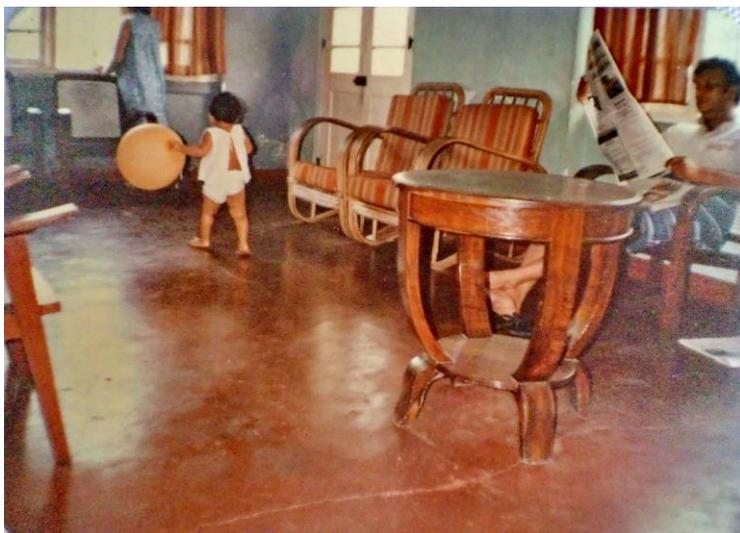


A poor caterpillar like on our mango tree this perished in the inferno under uncle Lalith's watchful eye

The lad's actions would have been looked at with askance by any good Buddhism since Buddhism condemns the taking of life for any reason whatsoever which makes it even more stringent than Islam. Uncle Lalith was probably only a nominal Buddhist at the time, which explains why he became a Catholic so easily.

However, I must confess that there were those rare occasions in our very young days when we did take life, and that was when influenced by the only one who could have us do this sort of thing, - none other than uncle Lalith whom we fondly called Lala uncle. That was when we got into this killing frenzy against the ticks that hid in the recesses of our chairs. The chairs, though framed with wood, had their backs and bottoms done with cane laces that formed a sort of mesh. The little holes through which the laces passed gave refuge to countless ticks who would every now and then come out to take a bite off our skins, especially in the area about the thighs. So uncle Lalith came up with this ingenious way of ridding the lot by heating a needle or safety pin in a candle flame and while still hot, thrusting it into the little holes before withdrawing it, often with a tick sticking on the point, impaled as it were. It did not bother us then, either because we were too young to understand the value of life, or else felt relieved to be free of tick bites, which coming like a sting on one's legs or buttocks was quite painful.

In a couple of years, we had come to respect animal life including vermin. We even disliked killing mosquitoes since for some peculiar reason they did not bite me or Asgar in our early years. They took a liking to our blood only much later, about the time we were circumcised at about the age of ten or so, after which none of us had any qualms about crushing the little vampires. They were after all after our blood.



Some of the chairs at Accha house teemed with ticks

Little brother Altaf was however prone to mosquito bites and devised this ingenious way of ridding the environs of the blighters. He dissolved rigifoam in petrol and poured the gooey mix over the little water bodies the rains had formed in depressions in the cemented parts of our backyard or on to the tops of some metal drums that lay idle breeding mosquitoes. The flimsy but firm film that formed would swiftly spread like a transparent sheet over the little pools containing mosquito larvae and pupae, worm-like creatures commonly known as wrigglers and tumblers that every now and then somersaulted in their watery abode. They would, upon hitting the surface, get tangled in the mess and perish.



Rigifoam dissolved in petrol forms a goeey mess

Asgar and I would not brook it and would holler or clobber him if we caught him in the act. We even had a soft spot for mice and I remember once weeping during a trip to the south when mother said that she planned to use some mice bait to kill the vermin that plagued our little kitchen. The poison she said would do the job by '*bursting their hearts*'. This greatly moved me and I wept, prompting father to reply that I had a *golden heart*.

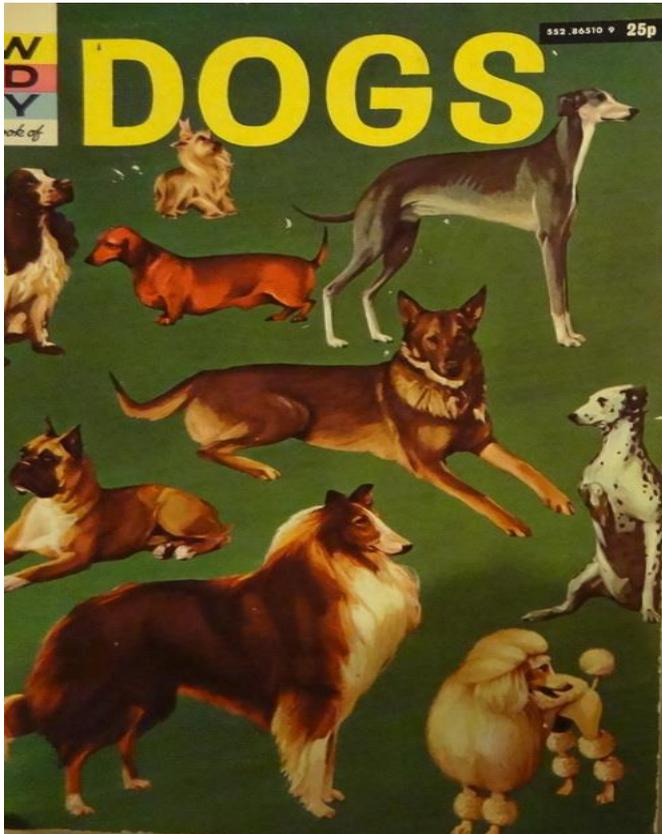
Our concern for animal life including those of the unborn was seen during our visits to the family home of Zameen aunty, our parents' Auction Assistant, which was at Ratmalana not far from the Kandawala Estate of Sir John Kotalawela. Near the house was a meshed coop which housed about a hundred hens to whom we sometimes paid a visit. Zameen Aunty, upon espying some freshly laid eggs conspicuously lying on the gravelly ground, would tell us *Go get them!* We would hesitate, not because the hens were broody and ready to meet any intrusion with a peck, but because we really believed, as most kids do, that all eggs gave chicks. Taking them for the

table, we reasoned, meant that they would be killed even before they hatched, and that too in boiling water or the frying pan. Little did we know then the role the male of the species played in fertilizing the egg. Nor could we be enlightened on the secrets of sex at that young age. Strangely, we had absolutely no scruples about eating eggs, but taking them ourselves and snuffing their lives out even before they were born was a different story.

Though we loved meat, whether beef, mutton or chicken, we disliked the poor creatures being slaughtered for the table, though at the same time there was nothing we could do about it, except on one occasion, when at a family function at uncle Firoze's parental home in Kandy, we secretly hatched a plan to release some fowl awaiting slaughter for the feast. Needless to say we could not implement it due to obvious logistical reasons. That was no place for a chicken run!

Eventually we came to accept the fact that it was alright to take life for food. That was something we would have to stomach if we wanted a great meal on the table. Meat was something we had gotten so used to, that it was difficult to do without, even at that tender age. Perhaps it was meant to be that way. Man, nay even the child of man, has canine teeth, which marks him as a carnivore and had God willed him to be a herbivore munching away at plants he would have simply given him a set of molars. There's an old saying: *God gave teeth, He will give bread*. One might as well add to it *God gave canine teeth, He will give meat!*

True, the Western way of life we generally admired, but there was one thing we could never agree with, even then, and that was taking animal life at one's whim and fancy or for convenience sake. I recall reading this book on pets - cats or dogs I do not remember - which counselled its young readers not to attempt to destroy any unwanted young of a litter themselves, but to hand them over to a vet who would destroy them 'humanely'. This was advice given to little children.



A book like this advised children to kill animals humanely

There was also this English television series, one episode of which told the story of a pet dog an old woman wished to have buried with her after “putting it to sleep”. When we told mother about it, assuming that *putting to sleep* was to let it doze off and then bury it alive with the old hag, she explained that it was an euphemism that meant killing by lethal injection, which horrified us all the more. Such incidents drove home the fact that all that came from the west was not necessarily the best and that we in this part of the world still had our values.