

ARTICULATIONS



P Samson Victor

Space for everyone

Animals have feelings, they have a mind, and perhaps a religion too! Isn't it time we treated them better? Thoughts voiced by someone who has been closely associated for a major part of her life with animals, chimpanzees in particular. Primatologist Jane Goodall speaks to JAYALAKSHMI K on a subject close to her heart

and an open mind, her sombre challenge to the scientific community to take up a study of spirituality among the animals, couldn't have failed to strike a chord with the audience.

Today when Jane speaks on chimps, everyone is all attention. Chimps live up to 60 years, they form long and enduring bonds between family members, they have a long childhood dependency period of five years. They have the same kind of blood that courses through our body. They can sadly get infected by human diseases. They have a brain structure similar to ours and are capable of sign language though not able to speak (which is due to lack of vocal chords necessary for this). They have non-verbal communication patterns - they pat, they kiss, they hug and punch, they kick and tickle, they laugh, and they wonder! And it all means pretty much the same as in humans. We have Jane Goodall's word for it.

In experiments on chimps in captivity it has also been found that they have amazing memories, can plan, use abstract notions, recognise themselves and have a sense of humour!

Jane recalls the exciting moment when she first saw a chimp picking grass or leaf and making a tool of it. "It is still vividly clear in my mind. When I informed Leakey, he said 'so now we redefine tool, or redefine man or call chimps as human'."

Chimps can feel

happy, sad, angry and vengeful, as Jane witnessed. The brutal side of their nature was evident when males of a dominant community systematically hunted and let to die a whole community. When Jane first reported signs of this, she was criticised by the scientific community for touching upon something which would mean that aggression and

Reaction to death among chimps mostly borders on fear and curiosity and they have been seen to listen for heartbeat in the dead. The worst mourning happens though when a mother loses her child or vice versa, notes Jane. It is most heartbreaking.

Perhaps the most revolutionary of her suggestions based on observations is the one on spirituality among the chimps. "Often when passing through a stretch of the jungle you suddenly come upon a large waterfall with water gushing through the rock faces and falling in a spray. Coming across such a cool and thunderous falls, I have seen the hair on the chimps stand on an end. And then they would start dancing in a swaying motion. If vines are around they will swing on these, basking in the spray. I have seen them just sit and watch the water coming and going and still coming! Such ele-

when I have sat admiring a sunset and seen a chimp doing much the same, staring at the sun."

Could this sense of awe and wonder not be a sign of religion, Jane asks. Wasn't it a sense of the same wonder that set off religion in the first humans? Simply because they do not have a spoken language and cannot sit down and teach the young ones of the distant past, just because they can't make plans for the future or discuss ideas, why should the answer be no? If they had all this, perhaps this sense of wonder may have transformed into religion? "I think yes," affirms Jane. In fact it is when one removes words from the mind, when analysing takes a break, that one can truly feel oneness with nature, she says. Is it not possible that a truer/purer spirituality is possible among the chimps? Do we dare examine something like this?"

Today, a central theme of Jane's conservation efforts is that every individual matters and so also, what each of us can do to make this planet a better place for all living creatures. To quote her, we MUST.



mental rhythmic displays can also be seen when there is sudden rain in the jungle. First you hear a distant patter and suddenly it is on you, roaring. There have been times



(We are into the animal welfare fortnight, and for animal lovers it has not been good news. India's most vocal votary of animal rights Maneka Gandhi has once again been at the receiving end. Removed from her position as chairwoman of the government's Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals, she sees the move as one propelled by scientific establishments who would like to see her out. Under her leadership the committee has been conducting raids on scientific institutions and found that most of these did not have basic facilities for the care of lab animals. Maneka has been critical of the use of animals in research in the country, and been quoted as saying that most of it was duplication of work done abroad and mostly useless.)

An animal lover who has represented the voice of animals at international conventions, Jane, who was in India for the first time, is quite versant with the scene here. "There are so many problems here I know I will have to be back."

She is unequivocal when it comes to animal experimentation. "It is unfortunate that we even thought we were so important that we had to use animals for experimentation. Most of it is useless, counterproductive and thirdly, a matter of ethics when you realise that animals have feelings and a right to their lives. With our amazing brain let's try find some other ways for these experiments without using animals. There are many alternatives like tissue culture, organ culture, computer simulation, not that I am an expert but I know enough. Anything is possible if we put more money

into it. Work on alternatives is being pushed aside. Don't forget this is a multi billion dollar industry. I say let's find other ways as quickly as possible."

Regarding the clamour for animal rights, Jane

says, "I think it is great people are fighting for animal rights and the fact that lawyers are prepared to do pro bono work on animal rights is good. It makes people think differently. But I personally prefer to stress on human responsibility. All over the world human rights are so abused and if we can't get human rights right, I am not going to struggle for animal rights. But I am going to push for human responsibility - helping people understand what animals feel, that they have pain, their own personalities."

Coexistence of people and nature has been another thrust of her programmes in Africa. To how successful such a programme can be at times when natives and locals at the behest of outside forces have begun to exploit resources, Jane acknowledges the problem in India where encroachment and populist approaches of governments may be causing damage. However, she points to the Gombe programme which concentrates on women, giving them primary healthcare, education. All people around Gombe park are helping us to conserve chimps because they know we care about them too. We are now ready to replicate the programme."

At a very young age she had been fascinated by wild animals and the jungles. Little Jane dreamt of going to Africa and writing books and kept this dream alive till she could work and earn some money. As a waitress earning tips, she saved money - money that would take her to her dreamland. Once in Africa she met reputed anthropologist Louis Leakey who offered her a job at the Natural History Museum. Leakey was busy looking for fossil remains of prehistoric humans in and around the Serengeti. It was a place ruled by animals, lions, rhinos, giraffes and one could occasionally see the Masai. Here Jane was allowed to go alone, and to visit the Gombe national park. When Leakey first suggested she take up studies of chimpanzees he was looking for ways in which to get an idea of the early man, especially his behaviour. The forty years since have proved him right in how they resemble humans in biology, genetics and brain structure, as also in physiologies. And Jane Goodall's studies have been an immense help, a

tomb of information about the great apes, especially the chimpanzee. Watching, never interfering, she spent a major part of her life alone in the thick jungles of Africa, spurred by her love and passion. "How lucky can you get as a child who had dreams which came true? Everything was new, and exciting," she says of her initial days. Coaxed by Leakey to pursue a doctorate to facilitate funds, Jane who had no degree went ahead and presented her papers at Cambridge university. There was resistance. For one, it was not considered scientific to talk of animals as having minds and emotions. And then, the fact that she had given her subjects of study names, and not numbers, was considered unorthodox! However, as Jane notes, the boundaries of science keep changing. Today it is no more taboo, and today what Jane says is listened to carefully, which was why perhaps the SSQ meet thought it appropriate to invite her as one of the speakers. Her impassioned plea for an era of spiritual elevation arising out of enlarging limits of science