



THE ISLAND OF THE BLISSFUL

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Some ideas swell up in my head into such beautiful wraps that I have to almost forcibly inject them with a dose of reality – even though I know that reality is invariably a hammer-blow that flattens fantasies fashioned by the finest chiselling tool.

The cow does not fare well in India, especially in the cities. Often, one sights a cow standing apathetically at a crossroads, with the hoot of traffic in its ears, a cocktail of exhaust gases in its nose, metal dust in its pelt, plastic waste on its tongue. Or lying in a bed of rubbish, fragile and rickety, with leg injuries, rashes on its skin, and patiently chewing on a red-and-blue cardboard box that once carried a Domino's pizza around the world. You don't require to be a cow whisperer to guess how damaged the body and psyche of these animals must be.

No one has as yet been able to explain to me why these cattle are in the cities and are subjected to such torment. Should these cows remind us that India is basically an agrarian society? Do people want to express the spirituality of the country? Are they there to calm traffic? Or is it that people can improve their karma by feeding some kitchen waste to the poor cows?

Even in the countryside domestic cattle have it hard, especially where they are used as workhorses. Well, they are safe from the butcher's knife in most places because a devout Hindu does not slaughter a cow. *Bos taurus* is *Aghnya* in Sanskrit: «the inviolable». But, alas, this does not mean that the animal cannot be thrashed: In no other country have I seen so much anger unleashed on the backs of cattle as I have in India. In a fairytale forest in



the heart of Odisha, I witnessed a scene that still brings tears to my eyes when I recall it. A farmer was driving a pair of bulls through the village, with a yoke and a drawbar but without a cart or a plow. The bulls got tangled in some rubbish, panicked, and started running randomly through the street. The farmer, a haggard boy, started to yell and hit one cow on its back with a big stick. This traumatised the bovine pair further, and the two bulls hit a mound and got stuck. The boy kept beating one animal till it collapsed on the ground, with all four legs extended backwards and its jaw lying flat on the earth. I got the feeling it was not just dead, but that it had died of fear. But the farmers standing around simply laughed.

And then I heard about this island which is believed to have been formed when the waters rushed out north of the Hirakud dam near Sambalpur. The local farmers, who were desperately struggling to salvage their household goods from the flood zone at the time, simply left their animals behind on a hill. The hill turned into an island and the cows were left to their fate. Instead of perishing, as strays and abandoned pets often do, they proceeded to do magnificently well, multiplying joyfully and gaining in strength. They became larger, developed more powerful horns and a strong white coat. They also learned to move through the forest swiftly and skilfully. After a while, the farmers tried to recapture the feral animals, but the cattle deftly avoided them. The story of this Cattle Island is told in every guidebook that describes the attractions in the province of Sambalpur and the place is called a «natural wonder». The idea of huge cows brimming with health and moving through the woods at lightning speed is fascinating, especially when one thinks of the dreary image of the city cow. Anyone who has ever seen cattle being released into the meadows for the first time after a long winter in the barn, knows what joy these animals can exude.

I knew at once that I had to see this island of blissful cows. And so I took the train from the capital Bhubaneswar to Sambalpur – the journey takes six hours – and I arrived shortly before midnight. The next day I sat in two dark offices of the Tourism Board; later I spoke to officers in the Town Hall; then I consulted three officials of the dam authority and finally got myself the blessings of the

police. Everyone knew about Cattle Island, but no-one had ever visited the island. Nobody could tell me how to get there. But everyone agreed that it would be best to try by boat from a place called Tilia, with the help of local fishermen.

At first I hired the services of a taxi driver who, as soon as he realised where we were headed, abruptly brought me back to Sambalpur. The second expressed his willingness to drive me, but after about fifteen minutes he received a phone call that forced him to turn back for reasons unknown to me. Only the third fellow actually ferried me out of the city – in a taxi protected by Sai Baba, whose benign face was stuck over the speedometer, and a flying Hanuman dangling from the rear-view mirror. It was evening soon and we honked through the golden light past heavily laden trucks, coal mines, steel mills, and nuclear reactors to Belpahar, where we spent the night. The next morning we set out early, driving a long time through sparse forests, past rice fields and coal fields, crossing countless little hamlets before we finally reached Tilia, which lay on the bank of the reservoir but some kilometres away from the water. There were no fishermen there. And nobody knew how to get to Cattle Island.

My driver considered his mission accomplished and wanted to promptly return to Sambalpur. But I stuck to my guns; finally we agreed that he should drive me at least to the dyke behind Tilia, from where I'd be able to see the island up close. We drove over roads that were getting tighter and tighter. Then over ragged country lanes that became increasingly potholed and slopey. Finally, over rugged slopes that differed less and less from the surrounding landscape. At last we reached a temple complex called Guja Pahar, and headed for the shore of the lake, where a few mighty boulders prevented any further journeying.

And now I'm sitting there in the shade of a large shrub with dangling brown pods somewhat reminiscent of tamarind. My driver has parked the car about 500 metres away, under a mighty tree, and is waiting impatiently for me to return. Dogs had followed us on the last kilometre, peacefully, without barking, probably out of sheer boredom. Goats joined them a bit later and together they trotted after us in the dust. Now the animals are standing or lying around the car, which is hot and



belching petrol fumes. I have left my equipment on the back seat in a bid to assure the nervous driver that I will return shortly. He had made it clear to me that, for him, the only possible continuation of this expedition would be the return to Sambalpur.

Well, I cannot get any closer to the Island of Happy Cows. A few metres away from my perch is a boat parked on the beach, and for a bold moment I consider hijacking it and rowing across to the island. But I lack the derring-do for such an adventure – and, what’s more, the boat probably has no paddles. Above the barge, a low-slung headland floats into the picture and, right behind it, my island rises into the sky, surrounded by a light haze. I’m too far away to see the details. I have sacrificed nearly a hundred hours and a few thousand rupees to see this island. Now, it’s right in front of me, but the cows that are meant to be lustily romping through its bushy terrain are no more real than they were four days earlier.

As I’m preparing to get up and leave and release my chauffeur from his zoo, a peculiar couple shows up before me: a girl of about ten leading an old man by the hand over the narrow path leading from the beach to my seat. The old man could well be about 100 years old – although I must

admit that I always consider all withered old people in India to be centenarians. The elder’s lanky body is wrapped in white shawls and his forehead draped with a saffron-coloured scarf. With his right hand he holds up a black umbrella that protects the two from the sun. His snow-white beard flutters in the wind, his lips are tightly pressed together, and his eyes move up and down rapidly: it seems he is blind. The girl wears tracksuit trousers, a pink Snow White T-shirt and a pair of headphones that she removes carefully from her ears when she spots me.

«You’re here to see the cows, aren’t you?» She says in effortless English, plucking at the old man’s arm, making him halt in his stride.

«Is that Cow Island?» I ask, pointing to the island on the horizon.

«Yes. My grandfather used to fish off the coast of that island every day.»

»And did he see the cows?»

«Sure!»

«How old are you?»

The girl turns to the old man, whose lips have widened into a smile. He chuckles and starts to speak very fast, in a melodious, slightly feminine voice. At the same time he sways his hips back and



forth, swings the umbrella with one hand, gesticulates with the other and shrugs his shoulders repeatedly. He appears to me like a pantomime artiste – only the eyes that he now has closed do not fit the role.

«There were many cows, many hundreds of them,» his granddaughter translates solemnly. «They travelled in herds, often scurrying through the forest like ghosts. Sometimes they came ashore to drink and bathe. Did you know that cows are good swimmers? After bathing in the water, they would roll in the grass on the banks, and often lie down with all four legs in the air. Have you ever seen cows lying like that, like dogs? Sometimes they would laze there for a long time, warming their wet bellies in the sun. Sometimes they would also perform real dances.»

The old man closes the umbrella, clamps it under his arm like a horn and starts to rotate around his own axis with small steps: once, twice, thrice. Then he stops and opens the umbrella again.

«If I put out my nets early in the morning, when it was still dark,» the granddaughter continues telling his story, «then all I could hear was their voices and I felt as if they were shouting something to me. Sometimes I would come back ashore, but

even as I approached the shore, the cows would disappear into the forest.»

«And you? Have you seen the cows?» I want to know from the girl.

«No, I was very small when they suddenly vanished. Grandfather says there was either an epidemic or they were finished by predators. Nobody knows for certain because nobody dared visit the island. But from the day the cows disappeared, grandpa was unable to catch any fish off the island. And soon after that day his eyes started to go.»

Are there cows on the island even today, I want to know. The girl shakes her head: «No, but who knows, maybe they just became invisible. Do you have a candy for me?»

I hand her my pen. She shrugs, reaches for her grandfather's hand, and pulls him away.

I go quickly to the car to fetch my camera. But when I get back the two are already too far away. I take a few pictures of the landscape. Oddly enough, the island looks even farther away through my telephoto lens than it did to my naked eyes.

My driver is visibly relieved when we finally commence on the return journey. He honks merrily through the afternoon traffic back in the direction of Sambalpur. Without braking he opens the car



door a bit every now and then and spits a vivid orange beam of betel juice onto the street. Hypnotised by the image of Super Hanuman dangling from the rear-view mirror, I sink into a short sleep on the back seat. I dream of a cow that is lying with all four legs in the air, only it's dead and bloated. Suddenly a monkey with a blood-red face slips out of the cow's stomach. He grins at me, purses his lips to make a loud farting sound, and jumps away. Gasp-

ing for air, I wake up. Some stories just do not end well. I really should have made it to this island. Or, I should have simply stayed content with the idea of it. But now, in a way I do not comprehend correctly, something dark and discomfoting has come to mar the image of the island. But, who knows, perhaps that's simply the dynamics of the blissful.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.