

A RURAL REMINISCENCE

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In my early boyhood, half a century back, marriage between 'bata' (Ficus bengalensis) and 'aswastha' (F. religiosa) ceremony gathered round the ritualistic planting of the two saplings to grow up coalesced together in lifelong embrace and appear, as they grew, like one tree with properties of both, properties that would bestow multiple benefits to man, beast and bird -- the deep shade of 'batabrukshya', the soothing whispers of 'pipal', the nourishing leaves and figs of both and addedly for many birds, beasts and reptiles, their homes. For man, it would not be the comfortable microclimate alone under their cool shade in summer. It would be much more. Together they would grow and spread out a microenvironment, salubrious, relaxing and refreshing enough to draw him in quieter moments and for friendly rendezvous. Such sobering influence of the silvan couple would lift the subconscious human feelings to higher levels of ethics. Planting and care of trees would be the empirical issue of such elevated feelings. It would inculcate a sense of trust for the future generations. The trust would then be handed down as a tradition. And the tradition would inevitably transcend over wider horizons of natural areas in the surround of our village homes.

We were born to such a state of rural living associated with octogenarian and centenarian couples of 'bata' and 'aswastha' planted by our forefathers, a rationalised way of living that was by tradition integrated ecologically with the wildlife as our neighbours and their habitats in nature. Productive consumption of wildlife resources had favourable alignment of tolerable demographic impact and traditional ethics of conservation. Benefits of such compatible living with nature were multipodal and multifaceted -- rarely recognised -- usually taken for granted because of their natural flow in renewed abundance.

Sustainedly measureable benefits of wildlife come from their prominent spread in the forests. The term wildlife covers both plants and animals.

The wood, bark, latex, roots, foliage, flowers and fruits of plants provide materials for more than five thousand different products including cellulose, paper, spirit, furniture, lacquer, rayon, plastic, tiles and so on (1). In rural India -- more than 80% of our people live in villages -- trees form the backbone of environmental harmony and rural economy -- health, home, hearth, food and fence, all included. They do more : in stretches as forests, they support stable agriculture, nourish agricultural land, regulate humidity province, may influence precipitation and maintain a clean and refreshing atmosphere. Measurements reveal that in temperate zone, on a warm sunny day, one hectare of forest builds up 120-150 kg of new organic substance absorbing 220-250 kg of carbondioxide from the air and turning out 180-220 kg of oxygen. Forests can absorb almost all the carbondioxide contained in a layer of air 45 m thick. In one year a single hectare of forest can filter out 50-70 tonnes of dust from air (1). In tropical climate, sunny and warm almost through the year, these functions are far more dynamic and productive all the year round. This country has principally a tropical climate.

Animals grow on these year-round productive plants by direct herbivory and/or through indirect routes of carnivory. Like trees, many of them yield important products for the sustenance and comfort of human beings, including flesh, hide, horn, antler, peltage and plumage. The turnover potential in animals far exceeds that of trees. A seedling has to grow through many years to become a mature tree. A fawn becomes an adult in two years, a chick in just one year. Petrid and Swank, (1965) calculated the productivity of African elephants at 0.34 kcal/m<sup>2</sup>/ year from a standing crop of 7.5 kcal/m<sup>2</sup>, respective values of beef cattle were 0.86 and 7.5 and for white tail deer 0.64 and 1.3 (Davis and Golley, 1963). The data on saiga antelope (Saiga tatarica) of Russian steppes (Bennikov, 1961) analysed by Fredric H. Wagner (2) reveal a yearly increment of 0.20 kcal/m<sup>2</sup> from a standing crop of 0.26 kcal/m<sup>2</sup>, i.e. nearly 80 percent. The turnover potential would be more in the deer and antelopes in this country and far more in birds

Life equation studies on the Chilla cheetal (Axis axis) opposite Harwar in U.P. by my students in 1970 through 1973 indicated an annual percentage of established increase as high as 45, assessed from the rates of fawnings and their recruitments into the stable yearling stages having the longest life expectancy. And much of these, I would emphasise, were the croppable animal growths after covering all natural drag factors in the total mortality including predation by tigers and panthers. Consumable annual removal for human benefits, here, could be easily one in each three of the adults.

The range was optimally populated by cheetal, inferred from its estimated capacity in resource production and the forage-hectare requirement of cheetal. Discreet cropping alone would stimulate and maintain such high rate of growth. Else, there would soon be overpopulation of this density independent species which will overrun the habitat. The resultant increase in stress conditions may ultimately lead to the inevitable crash. The range decline was strongly suspected at the end of those studies. However, the local jackals who in the meanwhile picked up the habit of pack-predation on cheetal fawns and pregnant females might have applied the brake, later. But the point is; Should the nonontogenic new predator, the scavenger jackal, be so allowed to coregulate, unwisely thus, to suck up the flow of croppable benefits? Given such scope he would seriously cripple the growing end of the population and very soon spread his ammensalistic curb on the predation success of the tiger and the panther. This is the little recognised but highly significant difference between ecodevelopment through productive conservation of wildlife with educated insight and wisdomed farsight and the more popular but largely wishful concept of sessile preservation.

The former is the crux of Theodore Roosevelt's principle of 'Conservation through wise use', that the living resources of the land, in wildlife, could be knowledgeably motivated through conservation to produce consumable benefits

which could be derived indefinitely by consuming only so much as would be replenished by the growth. Further more, the two principal consequences of such purposeful conservation accepted in the draft for 'A World Conservation Strategy' compiled by IUCN in collaboration with UNEP and WWF are as follows.

- (a) Physical and biological changes are only important if they affect human interest in any way; and
- (b) the standard against which any action should be assessed is its lasting effect on human well-being.

The conservation principles enunciated by Roosevelt at the turn of the century and the conservation strategy proposed by IUCN et al more than half a century later converge at the penultimate, the lasting benefits to human beings. But, no conservation effort will have any lasting success without the active participation of the local people. It should induct them not only to participate in conservation efforts but also to realise its material benefits like it used to be in my village in those good old days. We had then <sup>seemingly</sup> unending flow of wood and meat and numerous other useful matter produced by plants and animals. Every weekend I alone used to get one animal, kakar, cheetal, sambar or wild boar, of which half went to our fellow villagers and the other half shared equally between me and my trackers. There were a few other hunters too from neighbouring villages who cropped the benefits. And we also used to have about a dozen sportsman from the cities who brought the urban currency to the rural homes for services rendered for their permitted huntings. We had in those forests the elephants, the gaur, the tiger, the panther and also the wild dog. And we used to get one or two tigers and equal number of panthers every year, mostly in sports hunting and sometimes to eliminate a cattle-lifter or man-eater.

With all these seemingly heavy cropping, there was apparently no evidence of depletion in any of the structural components of that ecosystem which continued to provide us with

consumable wood and animal. Moreover it kept the streams alive throughout the year and it also nourished our crop fields with the rains runoffs enriched by nutrients carried in the disintegrated dung and detritus from the forest floor. The abundant flow of fertile water generated flourishing populations of fish, crab and snail all of which were high proteinous food for the people who ate them fresh through the rains and dried or smoked fish long into the winter. Ours was indeed a very peaceful and happy community life, well integrated into the natural ecosystems around us.

And, then came the second world war, and with it the repeater and automatic weapons, the jeep and the spot light. The local gun-man saw the impending deluge of depletion and he too lost no time in plunging into the competition. And in the process he and his covillagers very soon lost all count of traditional values of the ecorationales in their behaviour with nature.

By mid-50's all was gone, the animal first and then the woods. The nature surround of my village has then on became an increasing expanse of dreary destitution, of howling barrens and tangled weeds. The streams have dried up. The transition ecosystems of dynamic properties in crop fields with their former abundance in aquatic life have been sterilised, for animals with heavy application of stable weedicides. Grain, <sup>& insect</sup> eating birds and their predators have been affected. Productivity of the land here has been channelled principally to increase high yielding, not necessarily resistant, races of crop grown largely in medicated laboratory conditions, not by harnessing the appropriate ecological forces of lasting virtues. Flow of protein in the water has well nigh dried up. And life in my village has changed drastically to the worse, centripeting from its wider community outlook to narrower individual greed and competition.

A sad reminiscence indeed, of one who grew up with his eyes open and ears attentive to nature. A village lad then.

Now a professional forester on the verge of retirement. A sample reminiscence of what has happened in just one brief life time, a moment in nature's infinite time-scale. A sample, by and large, true to most villages in this country.

The genesis of the problems is obvious in that history of the ecoretrograde in my village. Factors and influences that accelerated and expanded the degradation are apparent. These have been stated with the backdrop of what the conservation potential is in this tropical land to yield unending benefits to the rural home and also the urban life.

The young man, Sanjay, with subtle sensitivity to nature who conceived of the main key to the remedy, sleeps peacefully at Santiban. The only way to reindulcate the traditional care for the tree which he visualised is : Plant them, plant them more and more at every available space; plant the ontogenic indigenous, not the exotic from far away lands; make more land available to the trees; curb your demand on land by cutting down your own rate of growth; take the practice to the people at state cost; induct them to participate; and raise it to the sanctity of a ritual. The trees will take care of further reconstruction to provide appropriate niches for the wildlife. And no niche in nature remains vacant unless the related species has been totally wiped out. It is a slow process both with the trees and the people, slow and long protracted in human measures, not in nature's, nor in nation's. May we not remain oblivious to the obvious : Animals in this planet exist only, and only, because of trees.

References:

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