

Forests: Thrillers, Martyrs, and Healers

Introduction

Forests are a treasure of tranquility, a symbol of integrity, source of diversity and a place of unity. We can find plenty of flora, fauna, trees, animals, birds and species living together with abounding love in the forest. Mixed fragrance, pure air, healthy herbals, roaring streams, descending falls and moving beings make a forest a lively playground of peace. Above all, its serene presence always leads into a celestial experience of all who enter in and experience it. This essay is an exploration of the contribution of forests to the welfare of humankind, and human response to forests in order to understand the present scenario and reflect on the future of human-forest relationship.

Forest as Thriller

From my childhood onwards I was indoctrinated about forests through various ways. Most of my childhood bedtime stories started with “there was a deep forest in which...” In addition, heroic adventures and especially thrillers are shown in movies from forest contexts. Christian missionary organisations often portrayed forests and tribal people more like people who were in danger with evil beasts, living in a threatened environment. In addition, Indian literatures mostly portrayed forests as appropriate places for hermits and as a place for divine mediation to escape from the chaos of this world. Being fed with this kind of imagery, I was led into believing that people who lived in forests, particularly tribes, lacked any culture. So on the whole, I was partially educated that forest is a dangerous place and the people who were living in forests were also dangerous. These kinds of notions and inputs led me into a kind of anti-forest sentiments until I took my intensive fieldwork in Similipal forest range in Orissa in August 2007. The 25 days stay at Similipal forest range and a life in the forest with the people of the forest changed my perception about forests and helped me to live and experience the real situation, rather than living in a strange imagination.

Forest as Martyr

Forest always stands for human welfare and benefit. Everything found in the forest is used by human beings for sustaining their lives. For example, major deforestation took place in

India beginning from 1853 to start railways; numerous trees have been cut down to make “sleepers” and simultaneously used for fuel too. Flowers, fruits, roots, leaves, stems, and seeds, everything have been given to human, but the question persists, as to why human are concentrating on cutting trees, and destroying their lives? Trees have life by themselves; they live, bloom, and grow; how unethical is human attitude towards trees in the forests! We, who call ourselves educated people, need to learn something from the people living at the grassroots.

The Dheever caste of Bhandara district of Maharashtra never catch fish going upstream on spawning migration, although they are exhausted and easy to catch. There are entire sacred groves and ponds in which no plant or animal is damaged.¹ During my fieldwork with tribal people in Similipal forest range and throughout our stay, we could not get milk for consumption, though there were numerous cows found around. Once, we asked a lady who owned two cows, “Did you get milk from cow?” Immediately she replied, “How can I get milk from the cow? Cow’s milk is the life of its calves and it is unethical to suck one’s life to nourish ourselves.” I then understood why they didn’t drink cow’s milk; they were only using cow dung as manure in their fields. It is very important for us as literate human generation to ethically look into the issue of deforestation; we have been taking each and every product of the trees, we have been cutting the generous friend, God given gift, that is, the tree itself, out of our utter selfishness. Certainly, we should regard all the trees as martyrs as we get rains through them, we get good air through them, good food through them, and so on. On the whole, when we acknowledge the sacrifice of trees simultaneously, it is our commitment to save and sustain their life in order to create a greener and healthier world.

Forest as Healer

Human atrocities over nature have increased, consequently, human and the earth, both have become ill. Climate change is one of the worst effects in this regard. It is the time to heal our earth as well as the human generation. When South Asian Tsunami devastated South Asia in 2004, the major reason found for the damage was, the eradication of mangroves forests and coral reefs in the sea shore area by the shrimp industries. Now the Government and NGOs are planting mangroves and making coral reefs in the sea shore. From this example it is very clear that tress

¹ M.Gadgil and K.C.Malhotra, “The Ecological Significance of Caste” found in Ramachandra Guha(ed.), *Social Ecology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). 36

are not only martyrs, but also the healers. If we grow trees we will get good rain, we will be saved from tsunami and thus save the world from climate change. Trees and forests are the hope of the world; they heal human, enrich their life experience and give them peace. Poet and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam, who was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr., in his book *Touching Peace, Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*, describes a human-nurturing tree-ritual:

Ten years ago, I planted three beautiful Himalayan cedars outside my hermitage [in France], and now, whenever I walk by one of them, I bow, touch its bark with my cheek, and hug it. As I breathe in and out mindfully, I look at its branches and beautiful leaves. I receive a lot of peace and sustenance from hugging trees. Touching a tree gives both, you and the tree great pleasure. Trees are beautiful, refreshing, and old. When you want to hug a tree, it will never refuse. You can rely on trees. I have even taught my students the practice of tree hugging ...In the same way we touch trees, we can touch ourselves and others, with compassion.²

Yes, trees are our friends. They listen to us, care for us, speak to us through their soft leaves, kiss us with beautiful flowers and feed us with kindness through their fruits. How sweet it is!

Conclusion

The main challenge is to connect human and forest. The social understanding and the so called development theories have clearly divided people from forest. It is very important for people to understand that forests are part of our world and that they should be taken care of by us. For example, my stay at Similipal forest range in August 2007 was quite strange and scintillating. Deep forest, no mobile phone tower or television, low voltage power; just a transistor, which received programmes from *All India Radio*,³ and a few people. Every night when I went to sleep, I often checked my bed and nearby places fearing the presence snakes. That much did I feel uncomfortable, and filled with hatred towards the forest. However, after 25 days, I realised that it was the most peaceful place in the world; a pure world of nature, and people with nature, and this learning experience led me to care for trees, because of which I am

² As quoted in Howard Clinebell, *ecotherapy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1960). 220

³ All India Radio is the only Government-owned radio service provider in India.

now concerned about nature. This is the real scenario of 75%-90% population of India towards the forest. This is my sincere suggestion that the Government and institutions should concentrate on their youngsters and teach them the reality of forest and its life and work for humanity. If they witness this truth no one would harm trees and they would promote forestation and also begin to nurture nature. Practically speaking, school and college children should be taken into the forests and given a chance to explore its beauty and appreciate its nobility from their childhood, through excursions, study trips and picnics. Misinterpretations and wrong indoctrinations about forests ought to be stopped. Only the tourism department of India is advertising Indian forests to foreign tourists to generate wealth but local people are poorly aware or informed of forest tourism. This has to be rectified. Media, such as newspapers, radio, television, and so on, promote the importance of forests throughout their programmes. Tribal people and their good social values and practices need to be imparted to the mainstream. Philosophical and religious understanding of forests should be reconstructed with optimism and hope. Above all, as committed human we should spend much time in promoting forestation and eradicating deforestation collectively. I believe these things would create a greener environment and help us to enhance the existing forests and to create more. To conclude, I would like to say that, when we enjoy forests and its resources we should always remember our responsibility of caring for forests and pass it to the coming generations, inviting them to express their solidarity with us in this noble mission. In a nutshell, the idea of forest as a thriller should be enjoyed, forest as martyr should be remembered, and forest as healer should be practiced.