

# Dispatches from the Plant Underground

## No. 11: Elephants, Aliens and the Litany of Consequence



Jan 22, 2011

Dear friends,

Thank you to very many of you, for your kind responses to Dispatches 9 and 10 and your cheerful greetings. Some 300 communiques have come in. It is overwhelming. I usually only anticipate a note from my mother!

###

I begin this dispatch with the light of the first full-moon of the new year. I am on the tower. It is bright despite the rush of clouds moving south. I can see my charcoal scribble on a sheet of scrap paper, now dimming, now brightening. The mountain is faintly visible, a black mountain-shaped hole in the smoky sky. The constellations appear and disappear too: Orion, Taurus and Cassiopeia: as the golden umbra of the silver moon waxes, then wanes.

It is quiet but for a night jar, a mottled wood owl and a dog baying in the distance. A few bats flit past my head.

I stand by the tower-rim cupping my hands to my ears and listen to the south and west. I listen long. The crickets at the river are audible now through this simple action, as are the rustlings from the delicate breeze.

I'm listening for the elephants.

It seems they are gone far upstream. There are a few shouts from people living there, and once a trumpeting.

###

It is 3:00 a.m. now. I've been woken up several times. First, a snoring dog, Then the muted moonlight through my western window. Then the sweetest of sounds, dew dripping from the trees to the roof. And then the muse, calling upon me from the depths of silence. I write for awhile with a pen in a notebook and then turn on the laptop. The muse disappears.

A lone cricket keeps up his high note.

I listen again. No elephants, it seems they have gone.

###

It's now sometime after dawn. I head out with four dogs on a walk, guitar slung on my back, mug of coffee, binoculars, notebook and pen. The light is radiant through a grey misted swirl dense with the tiniest motes of moisture, the sun an indistinct blaze of white in the southeast. All trees, all grass: effulgent, alive.

I walk down the re-moulded trail. Thump thump thump, each step of mine in a giant elephant step. Sandy's lovely trail is decorated with large shallow circular imprints now. I measure one. It takes two of my size 7 feet end to end.

Elephant poo. Big poo and little poo. The dogs have their daily manic orgiastic roll in a pile. There are so many piles to choose from. Piles of different ages too. Three days, four days, or five. Walks are even more fun these days, such delectable material to play with, tear apart and go mad over.

Dog ecstasy involves scoots, barks, groans, lolling tongues, rolls and wiggles, chase and play. Oh to be a dog, with all this elephant poo.

The trail is kicked down in places. The earth cuttings have huge scrape marks, toe marks. Some bits have just collapsed under the tonnage. And everywhere the imprints, the large and small circular imprints, the cracks in the earth, the squashed vegetation, the torn limbs of trees, the ripped, chewed and cast aside areca palms, the bark of jackfruit trees peeled off, trees pushed over, one or two uprooted, new crisscrossing trails over the hill and down to the stream.

Some say there were 20 in the herd. Others say there were 9. We know there was at least one baby if not two, one tusker, and some cows. Anna saw the tusker close up. Anna had quite some adventures with the elephants this time.

###

The elephants came into the Manisseri valley, our second and larger valley three nights in a row. Last Friday night, we had a lot of action at 3:00 a.m.

That night it was G in his shack on the tea hill, who called us by mobile phone to say there was one just outside his door, heading towards the grassland. He whispered the news lest the elephant leaned on his flimsy walls.

We were up and out in no time. Fire torches fuelled by kerosene, an assembly line and relay between Leela, Suma, Laly and me. Two to make a torch with jute sack wrapped around a baton then doused with kerosene. One to carry the first distance, one to carry the second distance, while Wolfgang did the actual chase, walked the extremities, flaming torch in hand.

Laly and I stood a long time by the vegetable patch, straining our ears for the movement of elephants. It is one thing to meet elephants by day, and quite another by night. Extraordinary things happen to your senses.

We waited there, straining our eyes and ears, hyperaware. Waiting for Wolfgang, waiting for belly rumbles and whooshing breaths, waiting for cracking twigs, waiting for every faint sound and movement to materialize into a large brown body, our own bodies poised to run.

Around 4:00 a.m. they were away and down at the river, and perhaps even across. Wolfgang came back to where the rest of us were waiting and quipped, "I'm getting too old for this", grinning as he said this. It was a lot of running and shouting for one night.

As for me, my legs were giving way. More from the adrenalin charge than anything else.

###

But all this elephant chasing is a shame really, and unforgivably rude. This land, and all lands, is theirs to roam. They have right of way, for they've been here longer than any humans.

I think to myself again and again: only a few thousand elephants are left in south India, wandering between the habitations and farmlands of several hundred million people. Between truck filled highways, electric fences and trenches, shaved mountainsides and monocultures, resorts and dams, slum towns and plastic dumps. I hear that elephants are dying from herpes and

tuberculosis, that they suffer from mental illness, that they crowd in unnatural numbers from desperation for water and for food.

###

I believe the elephant to be doomed, as is the tiger, whose end is approaching unbelievably fast. Kids born ten years from now will speak of the tiger as a mythical beast.

Sacred animals both: the tiger and the elephant, revered for millennia, now plastic idols in tinsel wrapping. Virtual gods in virtual worship of a virtual culture, caricatures really, of the great animals that once filled these forests. Now on death row.

###

That being said, it seems the Sanctuary lands can indeed accommodate passing elephants as our forest grows up. It seems we can provide a little for them too, so long as they keep out of the garden! It is amazing how lightly they stepped through the land.

They know they have it easy with us. We won't leave papayas stuffed with explosives lying around, or boards with upright iron nails to stick into their feet, and we won't use fire-arms nor fire-crackers. Our fence, electrified briefly many years ago, has become a gesture. It was flattened in a number of spots this week.

I send my silent and heartfelt thanks to all those who helped to grow this baby forest, so the elephants too could drop in. I know I welcome their giant presence, their beautiful presence that energizes and gifts this forest in so many ways. I feel their deep affect. I want them around.

So long as they step lightly through the garden.

##

Once again: the litany.

The elephant is doomed, the tiger is doomed, orchids and ferns are doomed, the rivers are damned and doomed, the forests are doomed, the land is doomed, the climate is doomed, and humans are doomed.

This is the real news from the Sanctuary. We've been saying this since we began, but we didn't have the science to back up our hunches. No one believed us when we said: orchids are confused, trees are dying from strange causes, extinction rates are much higher than officially acknowledged, there is far less forest on the ground than what is claimed on paper, that invasive exotics are a dangerous sign. All this was said 25 years ago. But we were dismissed as hippie gardeners growing useless plants.

So we went ahead with the plant ark, which then became a bird ark and a frog ark, and a shieldtail ark and a butterfly and damselfly ark, and a nilgiri marten ark and now perhaps even an elephant ark. There's two and two of everyone, and more!

The ark of course is doomed, tiny and fragile as it is, swamped on every side by the deprivations of development, dependent as it is on a few fragile humans, and the climate.

Doomed. Like everything else that is alive, wild and free.

Unless.

Unless what?

Unless, modern industrial civilization and the current economic system collapse. Unless this omniscient juggernaut of insanity implodes, or is stopped, it will devour every corner of the living earth, every being, every human.

For 25 years we here and many others elsewhere, have repeated this litany: unless this collapses, nothing will be left but a murdered planet.

Unless, we act fast.

Unless.... as a friend of mine, Claude Alvares, a veteran of many battles, recently wrote to me..... unless we fight back.

Now the latest science says it's all a lot worse than we thought. Please see the accompanying article. It really is a lot worse than the climate-gurus have been admitting. In one hundred years great parts of the earth could become uninhabitable if current rate of growth of CO2 emissions continues.

What upsets me is this. Even without climate change (and the forever cautious and underestimated predictions of climatologists), the destructiveness of modern humans would rip the earth dead anyhow, devour the landbase, desertify continents and fill the oceans and rivers with toxic waste. Even without climate change, industrial civilization would finish everything, including itself.

###

I'd like to change tack now. I have some other things in mind.

The (sometimes strange or funny or sad or horrible, or just-so) weave of human and non-human stories from the jungle. Tales, some very tall, but nevertheless part of the place. Tales remembered in my bones, yet when I look back I feel as if I'm imagining things!

For instance:

###

I was remembering the time we had a visitor from the Pleiades.

No joke. You heard me right.

We once hosted a visitor from the Pleiades (also called the Seven Sisters, that cluster of stars you see near the V of Taurus). Or was it instead the Andromeda cluster? My geography of those parts is vague. No, I do think it was the Pleiades. We were visited once by an extra-terrestrial, an alien from Pleiades.

Hang on, we *know* of one alien who visited the Sanctuary, but there may have been more. Apparently aliens can recognise each other but earthlings cannot discern aliens from earthlings. Apparently, there are a lot of aliens on earth. Apparently, George Bush is an alien (our visiting alien later announced).

Anyway, it was tea-time, that favourite daily community ritual at 5:00 p.m. Students from Centre For Learning were here on a two week stay. A man walked in. He was looking for Wolfgang.

Hang on, I'm still assuming today it was a he. Just because aliens can take perfect human form, and have regular earth names and regular man smells, doesn't mean they have gender. So should I use "it" instead?

(I think I'll say "he" and "him" for now. "It" sounds so gross!)

He walked in, reached out to shake hands and said, with an English accent: Hello, my name is Kevin and *that's why* I'm here. (Thereupon getting first prize for the best self introduction ever!)

He then rushed on to say that he had come all the way to ask for Wolfgang's advice about setting up an export-import business in organic vegetables from India to Cornwall, UK. (Not from India to the Pleiades. Just from India to UK)

That evening at the dinner table in the old kitchen, Kevin—the-alien, via Cornwall, showed us astonishing drawings with beautiful colours and symmetries, drawn, he said, by Pleiadians. He had all kinds of explanations proving all kinds of things.



He told us that 27 space ships held the earth from wobbling over on its axis. And that these same space ships would ensure that the planet would not get annihilated. And that we didn't really need to worry, as aliens were looking after us.

Meanwhile the CFL teens were rolling their eyes. They started talking about the amazing creepy crawlies at the Sanctuary. They told some very cool tales about leeches! And spiders and snakes. Kevin- the-alien started to get alarmed. They noticed. The creepiness got creepier. Out came the tarantulas and the scorpions. The giant wood spiders and earthworms, the kraits and cobras.

His questions got more nervous. And then we saw him disappear to his room, and found out he had crawled in to his sleeping bag with his hat, jacket and boots on.

I guess they don't have creepy crawlies in the Pleiades. Or for that matter in Cornwall.

###

But the point of this alien story is not about fear, or even about aliens.

It's about tourism.

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While Richard Branson of Virgin Airways and Virgin Travel prepares earthlings for space tourism at \$200,000 a trip (I bumped into his spokesperson Will Whitehorn at the Outsider Festival in Scotland), there are alien tourists here already.

###

I'd like to do some debunking now. Here is my favourite subject to debunk. Eco-tourism.

I'd like to challenge the notion that eco-tourism is environmentally friendly, respectful to cultures, sustainable, a great boost to the local, regional and national economy (read the definition of Ecotourism on Wikimedia commons), which I declare to be a falsehood no less absurd, indefensible and self-serving than the notion that dams are carbon-neutral, or that genetically modified foods are good for the earth or that mined sites can be restored to pristine forests, or that cement, petroleum and mining industries care for their environment just because they run advertisements in well known environmental magazines.

All these are lies that have great currency with the middle class.

###

Maybe I'll share my rant instead, jotted down during my last trip. I was going to rewrite it for the dispatch, but I think it's better in the raw.

###

I watch Wayanad day by day getting wrapped up in jewellery billboards, roads, mini plazas, hyper-mega supermarkets, cell phone towers, hotels, resorts, waterparks. Hundreds of land deals happen locally every year, thousands even. Land prices are rocketing out to stratosphere. Hundreds of resorts are being registered.

An acre of farmland is bought, quartered, and then sold again, for twice or three times the purchase value. Then quartered again, then sold again.

I think tourism is a big player in this escalation, eco-tourism especially, that oxymoron applied to activities in a natural (in our case forested) area.

We now have several resorts in our village. One with the name: Elephanta.

I'm going to draw a link here that some of you may object to.

Tourism – prostitution what's the difference?

"To prostitute" is derived from a composition of two Latin words: (preposition) *pro* and (verb) *statuere*. A literal translation would be: "to expose", "to place up front". (I want to emphasize that I do not judge individuals who choose prostitution, sex-work for their livelihood. I am talking of the conditions that force the choice, where there is no choice),

Tourism makes its money from the exposure of the land, people, animals, views, farms, trees. Prostitution exposes....well we know what it exposes.

Tourism involves travel and a lot of placing up front.

To me this is one of the worst violations of the inviolable, because it appears benign, it appears beneficial even, it appears as if it is for the people, for nature, for the mountains.



There are as usual many sides to the same thing, and many causes: brutal often: such as the demise of a rural economy and subsistence farming. Such as insane economic policies that make it impossible for people to live from the real wealth of the land. Often people are forced into it, because they really have no other way to make some cash, and these days, you cannot survive from the land alone, you need cash, because food, basic food now comes from elsewhere.

So eco-tourism is the new mantra, the new promise, in a flood of broken promises. It seems a better option than to sell the land, or move, or succumb to wage labour. It has that apparent independence, that entrepreneurial self sufficiency lure.

I'm not talking about those people who ensure that land, wildlife, humans benefit. I'm not talking about those who truly put their profits into the earth for the earth to flourish. I have friends who back the land with their bodies, their earnings, their work, their knowledge, their love, and the evidence is in the land, in the resurgent energy of life from the land.

I'm talking about the shadow side that looms up after the first initial innocent moves, when anything small and local becomes an industry and global, when the numbers of players shoot up, when "stake holders" run legion, when ecosystemic and landscape level changes are imposed. Often very rapidly.

Besides, tourism is an industry, like the media, that objectifies everything. Once you objectify and remove it from its meaning you can sell.

Mass murder tourism: objectifying history. Red-light district tourism: objectifying women. Nature-tourism: objectifying nature. Cultural tourism: objectifying human cultures, especially old cultures and indigenous people. Organic farming tourism: objectifying the farming practices of poor farmers in poor countries (we had 10 Swedes visiting recently). Development tourism: objectifying poverty.

Whatever the object, there are very few rules concerning its continued existence, i.e. its actual welfare, yet we are assured repeatedly, that all these forms of tourism bring economic benefit and vastly improved livelihoods.

For a time, maybe. For a few, maybe. Again, take a look at the phenomenon, the industry. Take a look at what it unleashes.

What would continued existence mean here? We can discuss this only if we take away the tea and tinsel shops, the roads and trucks, the accessory industries, the buildings, the infrastructure. Take away concrete, tar, glass, plastic. Cease the extraction of water, tree, plant and animal. Cease the fragmentation of the land. Cease the fragmentation of communities, cease the thrust of industrial values into fragile rural hamlets. Halt the pressure of a doubled or tripled or quadrupled urbanized human presence in a highly fragile and endangered ecosystem.

Only if all this is brought to an end, can we look at issues of sustainability, health of land and people, real wealth.

Besides, the logic is weird. Don't tourists travel far to see what is there, in its natural form? But what they get is distorted beyond recognition, captive, chained, restricted, crowded out, boxed in: be it history, culture, indigenous people, spirituality or forests.

Besides, here in the Western Ghats, tourism is "eco" only because it is in a forested area. There are no regulations to ensure that any of the "eco-resorts" are actually ecological. No regulation on how many constructions, nor on numbers of people.

On paper, yes. But, not actually.

There is only one way to tell if something is ecological. If the land flourishes. If the land is better, healthier, happier, more whole because of your action. Without the well being of the land, you cannot have the well being of humans. It's as direct and simple as that.

###

Instead,

I see the billboards popping up, spreading out over the vistas of the Western Ghats. I see waterfalls chained in. I see penetration of deep forest with concrete, tar roads, mobile phone towers, buildings, vehicles, loud and crass humans who think, "the jungle is a deadly place to booze, yaar".

I see disease spreading like wildfire, industrial world diseases. I see crowded and frightened animals. I see hammered forests. I see SUVs parked like a swarm of bees around a waterfall. I see icecream shops. I see broken beer bottles. I see demoralized adivasis, drunk. I see grief, despair, humiliation.

I see rivers (read, sewers) of bright-coloured buildings: purple mosques and pink cathedrals, blue and yellow homes: the Asian Paints revolution is raging through Wayanad, through Kerala.

I see homestays, hotels, resorts, camps, lodges, spas, holiday homes, inns, restaurants, bars, bakeries, ad infinitum.

I see exhibition, exposure, extortion, extraction, expropriation, extirpation, extinction.

And then what? What of the thing we tour so far to to see? What remains?

A mountain of plastic. A forest of cars. A river of poison. A land of resorts. A slum of insane animals and humans.

###

I read the stats on tourism's contribution to GDP and the stats on prostitution's contribution to tourism. Both quite significant! I read that prostitution is a sign of poverty. I read that tourism is very important for poor countries.

Of course, I hear the success stories. The places where people, land, animals, plants and rivers benefit. Where zero-impact is achieved.

I hear that these often exist within very specific boundaries, that often they are surrounded by scenes of abject degradation.

Someone has argued that tourism is a right. The right to access the jungle, to sell it to outsiders. The right to watch animals mating. The right to put up signs. The right to expose something that itself has no rights.

###

Have you ever walked in a forest unescorted? Have you ever walked the wilds on its own terms? Have you ever been quiet by a river? Have you stood under the spread of trees, in the company of animals and birds, without cameras, vehicles, alcohol, chocolate, cell phones, other humans?

###

Stay home folks (ye who travel from distant shores). India is no more. Stay home folks (ye who travel from Bangalore and Chennai). Wayanad is doomed.

The elephant is doomed, the tiger is doomed. The land is doomed. Humans are doomed.

Stay home.

###

I have another (and last) note for this dispatch.

How was Christmas for you?

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17 of our adult male neighbours, were in jail this Christmas. Our immediate neighbourhood was dark and silent. We had our first ever local gang war, the first ever vicious big fight in these parts.

The night it happened I was quite scared.

Earlier that evening, I was up on my favourite bench a long while after sunset, watching the clouds playing with the gibbous moon, listening to the lapwing and the owl. Then the muezzin called, then the church blared its loudspeakers briefly, and then the voices began to rise in anger. My romance with the moon was aborted. Within half an hour it all rose to fever pitch.

That night over dinner. Suma, Leela, Sandy and I half joked with each other about the vazahaku (altercation), and how it had been ages since there had been one, yet we all noted the difference. Between a small dispute (even drunken) and an armed gang fight.

The thing is, it really was much ado about nothing. Tempest in a teapot. But the workings of power and violence and gridlock is now manifest in rich gory detail here just as it is on the world arena.

Once the fight begins, neither party can back off. They have to go to the end. To back off is a sign of weakness. Of course, it would be best to not fight at all in the first place, or to stop in midstrike, but the nature of anger, especially one that has been simmering for ages and is looking for that hair trigger excuse, is that anything, anything could light the fuse.

And yet, there is still a difference. These people have few masks, they cannot hide behind others, they pay with their lives, these small lives in paradise, for the mistakes they make. They wake up in the morning to the lives that they themselves wrecked, pick up the pieces and carry on.

The outcome was known only the following morning. How many bruised and broken bodies, how many trips to the hospital, how many cycle chains and sticks, how many party henchmen, how many days in jail.

A gang fight. Vicious stuff.

###

I know this dispatch has been a long one, and perhaps a little all over the place. I struggle to string together these apparently disparate themes and yet the connections are so obvious to me. It is all part of living here, in paradise, in God's Own Country, where you find Great People with Great Smiles.

I have an announcement before I end this one. Next week, in the little town of Moodbidri, there will be a three day gathering organized by the Save the Western Ghat Movement, hosted by the Alva foundation.

It is at once a celebration and a clarion call to awareness and action. It will end in a rally with 10,000 students addressed by Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna.

Today's mail from the Western Ghat google group contains a draft of a resolution that some members of the movement want to pass.

It reads:

*We resolve that all development activity in the Western Ghats including the coastal zones should be banned. By development activity we mean:*

*Stop all dams*

*Stop all power projects, thermal and nuclear*

*Stop all oil refineries*

*Stop all mining*

*Stop all transport of mining products*

*Stop all SEZs (Special Economic Zones)*

*Stop construction of multi lane roads, railway lines, petroleum oil/gas pipelines and power transmission lines that go through the forests of the Western Ghats.*

###

I, of course, fully endorse this.

###

But, those of us, who call for this will be termed unrealistic, counterproductive and negative. Trouble makers.

Others say, and there are mails suggesting this: let us think positive, find solutions, alternatives. After all, we need to think of humans also.

###

I agree that we need to think of humans. I just don't want to think about the well-being of corporations and governments, who force so-called development in the name of the people. The well being of corporations negates the well being of humans.

Is there an alternative to modern industrial civilization? One we can find immediately? I vote for this.

An alternative that springs from the earth, from the living beings of the earth, from free forests, free rivers, free mountains, free oceans, free humans.

What will it take to bring all this back?

###

On, this note: to sleep.

I started this dispatch in the night. I end it in the night, 48 hours later. Polenta (half-dacschund, barks). Crickets trill outside my room. I see the moon rise through the fluttering canopy.

I hear no sign of elephants. I hope they are well and safe.

I hope you too are well, and safe.

Until next time!

Best wishes

Suprabha