

# Dispatch from the Plant Underground

## Dispatch 5: Thoughts from the Belly-button

26<sup>th</sup> July, 2010



The old crinita pond, or the navel of the Sanctuary!

My dear friends,

Thank you to all who wrote those lovely letters, I've just been reading them. They warmed me up immediately. Some made me chuckle, there are accounts of people "thigymorphing" their plants! Thank you also for some incredibly sweet thoughts. I've heard from friends in Edinburgh, Bangalore, Tokyo, Yale and Tiruvannamalai among others. Dispatch 4 seems to have touched a lot of people.

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If only you could see me now!

Shivering, with cold and bloody feet. Sitting on a wooden chair in a dank room, with a wet dog sneezing underfoot and both of us dropping leeches by the dozen. If I don't collect the engorged and slippery darlings now and chuck them out, they will get sucked dry by the terracotta tiles. By morning there will be stiff and brittle leech corpses all over the floor, caught in macabre poses. I saw one yesterday that looked like a melted man stuck in tar, hand outstretched. I feel sad when I find a leech who died like this. It's a better death for them if we feed them to the eel when we pick them off.

I've just come in from a walk along Sandy's beautiful new trail that goes all the way around the Manisseri valley. Although I didn't see any fresh spoor, I like the thought that I've been in the steps of boar, sambhar, mouse deer, barking deer and jungle fowl. Sandy and Suresh have been telling me about those who walk the new trail (other than humans and dogs). Maybe Nilgiri marten and civet run up and down the trees along the trail too. I saw a quick movement in the foliage that made me think of them. The dogs went crazy of course. But I have bad eyes, I don't see very well and I don't wear glasses, so I don't know what it was.

It's been a wild and windy day. Not much rain, but it's dark. Cicadas have been thrumming for hours. Out on the trail, while I sat for awhile on a fallen Albizzia tree, I was sure my ears were being damaged, the cicadas were so loud. They get even louder as the rain approaches. This build up and tension whines into your skull, displacing all thought, and then suddenly falls away. I had to clamp my ears shut several times.

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I've been in the belly button of the Sanctuary today. If the Tower is the crown then the old Crinita pond is definitely the navel. This is perhaps my most favourite place in the garden. It's

heard many stories from me, it gets a lot of Dylan tunes as well. Wolfgang, Sirish, Lily, Laly and I made it together, some 15 years ago.

It is also a habitat for some rare plants, a natural hollow further down the hill in an area that was never cleared, but had some selective felling done, so it was open and bright, but with trees. It was a cardomom patch for some years, which failed. Laly and Wolfgang decided to do the first larger scale habitat reconstruction experiments there. It was red earth when we began. You should see it today, how full it is with every kind of plant from the evergreen forest, so many different life forms: climbers, shrubs, herbs, epiphytes and trees.

When we made it, it was my first time building rockwalls and stone stairways. We worked during the monsoon. I remember Javier our Spanish friend was there too, and I remember we talked about Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West" that week while assembling this 3-D jigsaw puzzle of a wall with nodules of red laterite using hatchets and bare hands.

Why do I tell you about the Sanctuary's belly button? Well, I was weeding there today. I've been weeding there recently. A small herbaceous exotic urticacine (in the stinging nettle family) has taken over the "cliff", the paths, and the stairways. It is a pretty plant but it is really horrible there because it covers the area meant for *Didymocarpus ovalifolia*, a rare native species.

There are thousands of these urticacines over there. They are tiny seedlings for the most part, but some have flowered, and Laly wants to get them out before they set seed. This is a good job for me, as I can take a break from deskwork and go there to relax my eyes. In the monsoon light I find the most incredible range of the colour green down there, from bright fluorescent shades to near black. Whenever I'm there for awhile, my eyes feel washed and freed. I get to connect with different kinds of plants: *Ophiorrhizas*, *Cyatheas*, *Begonias* and *Impatiens*, *Pipers* and *Sonerilas*. I also get to hang out with lots of frogs. Sometimes I see a small raptor, it's a shikra I guess. I have to ask Sandy.

A friend quipped some time ago that my job description these days would include weeding and writing!

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I know I started off on the history of the place in the last dispatch. I've been thinking some more about it. I indulged myself in a kind of time travel that I know no one else can take, it is so peculiar to my own storehouse of memories, memories born from my own particular experiences. I was beset with sudden doubt. Of what use would these really be to anyone else? How would I or anyone bring out the real story, and is there such a thing as the real story of the Sanctuary? Is this something we can all tell together?

The thing is, whatever emerges from the telling, will not be visible to the participants, the characters in the narrative are not really visible to the characters in the place. So much of the Sanctuary has been dreamed in the secrecy of our hearts. We don't tell each other these dreams. We can't. We have different mother tongues, we are of different generations, we are of tribes, of settler-migrant families, of hippie communes, of urban India, of rainforests (I'm including the plants and animals). We are very very different people living and working here. Moreover, we are all different today from what we were 10 years ago.

Between the lines of these accounts I'm winging your way, between the jottings I've made over the years, are the struggles we've had with our own view of ourselves and of each other and others' view of us. Our dreams have thus manifested often in quiet ways. Our actions of course speak louder than words, the Sanctuary as it is today is far more than anything that could be said about it. And this is largely because the shaping of our dreams and our actions appear to happen without much conscious choice, or collaborative deliberate planning. We are hopeless with mission statements. We don't have one.

Also the plants and animals have a clear role, as does the land. I don't really know how to speak to them or about them (but I am interested). Often it is this way between humans as well, we don't know all that much about each other or even ourselves. I think this is true everywhere, not just here.

We don't strategize here in the way other places do. We haven't built an institution though we've been around some 40 years, and more if you look at how long some trees have been here. We are

more than a family but less than a community. The latter implies a shared ideological intent, which we don't seem to have, other than "can we all live on this earth without destroying life?".

Although, come to think of it, in its most basic sense, a community is just this: a group of organisms living together. That we surely are. People, plants, fungi and animals living together.

If there is one thing that is common to all of us, we seem to feel our way through things. Not very different from elephants grazing in a meadow, or amoebae in a pond, or the spreading underground network of fungi, or trees growing into a forest, or a mixed foraging/hunting party of birds. The Sanctuary grows and grows quite unknown to itself how it grows. This sounds unsustainable to a lot of people. Or insecure. Maybe it is unsustainable and insecure. But stop a moment, think of a forest and how it grows. Why should the Sanctuary be any different, why should it be more secure?

Factually, it is one of the most life diverse centres in the country. It has thousands of creatures living here. It has all this taxonomic and biological knowledge. It flourishes in part thanks to an incredible net of humans connected throughout the world. This is the odd thing about the Sanctuary. It has all these cutting edge aspects and yet it is such an amorphous and undefinable entity.

Look at it from the inside and it's not clear what's going in. Look at it from afar, it is a place (like some others I know) whose time has come.

I'll tell you more about these others by and by.

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I'll stop here today. The night is wild one moment and quiet another. There is wind and rain. I hear only one frog. No crickets. The moon is just a glint in the clouds.

I must go catch some dreams! I have a long travel coming up with our friends B&T, all the way along the Western Ghats up to Pune, in the rain. Need to sleep!

I guess this means fewer dispatches for a while!

Take care, all.

Suprabha

P. S. I've attached the next pdf file of the first four dispatches. I forgot to caption the last photograph. It is a view from the Tower during the monsoon!