

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 9: River talk and asides

October 13th 2010



Our Paniya friends on a visit to GBS

Dear friends,

Thank you, all those of you who wrote in! I received approximately 100 emails since Dispatch 8. Many of them really interesting and thought provoking. All of them really sweet! Connectivity is bad so I haven't been able to reply to everyone yet.

I am sending this one somewhat hastily (and I hope it goes!) as I will be away from the Sanctuary for a couple of weeks. I leave tomorrow for Bangalore and then in a few days I go to Delhi to visit my friends there, and also to give a talk at the forest festival being organized by India International Centre on October 25th at 5:00 p.m.. My talk is titled: "Rainforest Etiquette in a World gone Wrong". Everybody's welcome!

####

I've been preparing for this talk by swimming in the river everyday for the last three weeks. I get great ideas down there, but I also wanted the material to emerge from a living, present-moment experiencing of the forest. Swimming every day in cool water, spending long hours shivering on a wet bank full of leeches, in intermittent sunny weather at the end of the monsoon, does things to you physically and mentally (what's the difference?!).

It's fun preparing this way, receiving suggestions from wind and water and yellow-browed bulbuls and fairy bluebirds, and dragonfly congregations, and then thinking about the big picture.

I've been with Kartha the cormorant a lot. I've also been following tadpoles and fish and crabs. I've seen signs of otter. I've been, yes, you know me, talking to trees! I've had arguments with nasty vines, and snagging root mats, and sideswiping currents and rapacious leeches.

I get thoughts like: *I swim therefore I am.* And: *I sink therefore I am!*

And I get out of the water and race to write down stuff like:

Face down, in gliding pool turning me as I float, holding my breath, blinking, peering through green cloud turned sap turned stream, shifting images and thoughts, now tapdpole, now fish, now fern.

###

And, I play pretend games:

Pretend you are an eel.

Pretend you are scales so smooth that nothing can grab you as you snake along the river's stony floor. You are the gliding movement, the slip sliding dance of belly on boulder. You are the water, eddied and swirled by this flash of snout and muscle. You are the fish, the earthworm, the tadpole, hunted by the eel. You are the stone black and round, you are the glossy hard curve, you are shelter and anchor to the swift sinuous river hunter.

Now pretend you are a brown fish owl.

Pretend you are feathers so soft you can fly in a forest undetected. You are the brown wings, the unflinching gaze of yellow eyes, the talons of a night hunter, the whoo-who-who at dusk. You are the air, ruffling the feathers, clothing the body, packing the muscle, heeding the eye, seeing the fish, flipping in the water. You are the tree, branched and crowned, spreading over the river running from the forest, full with fish all the way to the sea.

Now pretend you are a curve in the river, a bend, an elbow, a rocky turn rimmed by reeds, hung with creepers, banked by trees. You are fast water and slow water, breaker and builder, scourer and silter. You are the otter, inhabiting this curve, snatching fish, catching crab, ducking and diving as the river ebbs and flows with the monsoon rain. You are the gloopy mud, home to crab, hugging the curve, hiding the bank, hosting the fern, sucking the slipper of the human walking by.

Now pretend you are any of the following:

Pretend you are a hill and a valley and a stream and a forest all together,

Or: jump two continents and pretend you are the mother of all rivers : the Amazon.

Or: walk a trail and pretend you are an elephant in the Western Ghats or an anaconda in the Rio Negro,

Or: pretend you are a lichen on a stone on a curve in a river quiet after the monsoon,

Or: an orchid on a todayan on a hill surging with new forest.

Or: pretend you are fear, you are happiness, you are joy in a child leaping from a tree,

Or: pretend you are a child in terror from a leech, an adult in terror from a spider, an elephant in terror from a human.

Or: pretend you are a mushroom on a dead tree in a pool ringed by reeds in a rainforest

Pretend you are a dying forest, a forest being born, a forest maturing.

Or: pretend you are a chloroplast in a plant cell, an enzyme in a pitcher plant's pitcher,

Or: pretend you are a gardener, a teacher, a parent,

Or: pretend you are wholly the body, or even in part, a nail, a limb, a torso, a skin, a discomfort, a pain, an agony, a joy.

Or pretend you are a world gone wrong, a person gone wrong, a culture gone wrong.

Pretend all these...and you will have an idea of what environmental education at the Sanctuary is all about

###

This is hardly public talk material, but it's great warm up!

I can then come back up to my desk and play with facts like: more than 90% of the Western Ghat forests have been destroyed, or, humans utilize 60,000 species of plants but cultivate only 100 at crop scale, or, I can read about the arrow seeding of vast degraded areas in the southern Amazon from a plane (heard this from my Brazilian friend and scientist Antonio Nobre yesterday), or, read my other Brazilian friend Marcelo's accounts of disastrous "development" amongst the Waura Indians in the Xingu River(so very sad); or, I can go a little crazy with powerpoint!

This reminds me that there is a huge sharing I need to do, which is of the trip to Brazil last year, where, together with Lorenzo (who has shaped much of our educational work) I shared the Sanctuary's story all around that country, and learned from all these incredible people too:

Yanomami Indian students, scientists at INPA, Senadora Marina Silva (who's got a surprising 20% of the votes in her election run under the Green Party), rubber tappers, university students, cattle ranchers and quilombola communities, the Rio de Janeiro Botanic Garden.

I am revisiting this trip now as it will be part of the presentation in Delhi, I will rope in some memories from travels in the Western Ghats and the Amazon.

But all this is for another dispatch, another story. All in good time.

###

In this last week, I've also interviewed some neighbours. I hung out at a Kurchiya household, family of Suresh, who works at the Sanctuary. Kurchiyas are the archer people, there is some debate as to whether they are a tribe or a caste. But they are ethnically quite distinct, they are hunters who also traditionally grew rice and ragi, living in tiny settlements in clearings in the forest. The story goes that they came to Wayanad a couple of hundred years ago, to fight for Pazhassiraja, the tribal chieftain.

I wanted to hear them express their memories and experiences and stories about this little corner here, I am keen to hear how people talk about things, what they notice, what they value, the different ways that they make connections, or use language. I wanted to record them in their own idioms.

They were keen we do this trip down memory lane with a much larger group as they felt their experiences had to be narrated collectively, especially that they needed their elders present. They said, each in turn, *no single person has the whole story or the best story: these stories have to be told together. It's the only way to tell stories. Together.*

But they were happy to begin with their own childhood memories of animals, of how the valley looked, of the old levy system of taxation, of the arrival of settlers, of how they, the Kurchiyas as a people, used to be sharper and more alert thirty or forty years ago, as they slept around small fires on the floor, and not on mattresses on beds! Suresh's uncle Annan said, *now an elephant can knock down our walls and we won't wake up!*

I also spoke to Jaimon, Sandy and Anna's cousin, (not Kurchiya) who lives just further up the track. He told me of the days when they used to go fishing as children. He also spoke eloquently about changes in people's aspirations and a pervasive discontentment that has crept in, a more mercenary culture that has replaced old generous ways.

A short while ago this morning I chatted with Pappanchetta, Laly's father, who dropped in on his morning walk and told me some very detailed accounts about the arrival of the various settler families into our neighbourhood. He himself came into the next valley in the 60s and he remembered Wolfgang's arrival here in the early 70s. He remembered Wolfgang's goat, and then the Murra buffaloes and then the cows, and then the slow growth of the garden!

Of course, nowadays, goats (and chickens) are anathema here!

Pappanchetta's narrative was fascinating, he knew every little valley and hill, and the sequence of "occupation". He also talked about the demise of the Paniya people, how they were so healthy and numerous back then, and so sparse and sad now.

Incidentally, the Paniya tribe is the oldest human presence not just in this valley, or in this district, or in Kerala, but perhaps in the subcontinent. The Paniyas are genetically the longest lineage of peoples in India, perhaps in the world, perhaps as old as 50-70,000 years.

I won't narrate the whole thing now, I'm just letting you know the highlights and the general intention of these talks. Over the years I've been doing a series of interviews of people in our little corner, as part of a project on documenting the history of the area. I call it "A people's history of the forgotten moola of God's Own Country". "Moola" means corner in Malayalam and Tamil.

There are the Paniya hamlets, the Kurchiya clans, the Mappila Muslims, the Christian Chettas, the various Hindu households (Nairs, Theeyars), as well as some old estates, as well as nondescript cosmopolitan rats at the Sanctuary. I figured not only was Wolfgang part of the history of this Moola but I too had been long enough here to have a "history"!

Everyone agrees this is a good thing to do. It's very simple, a record for posterity, a people's own narrative. I'm essentially just doing an audio recording of a loosely organized interview, a free flowing conversation. I intend to have a gathering where this can be played back to the whole community.

I'm sure many a tall tale will emerge, and this is what I find interesting: that myth, history, memory, individual and collective psyche merge into a wonderful collage of "our story". I find it fascinating when one story teller dismisses another as "myth making" and sees himself as factual and in turn could be considered a mythmaker by someone else!

And how it is indeed so, that a little moola could have the most colourful and varied and alternate versions come out of it.

Like Appachan, Suresh's father said: *we need all our stories, for the one story.*

###

On a related note, but from a completely different angle:

I've been contemplating: suicide.

The fact of it. It's presence: like a shroud hanging low, and grim, and dark, but unseen, over our society here. (It is a well known statistic, that, Kerala has the highest suicide rate in the country).

I remember the day M. chettan was found hanging (dead) from a tree at the road by some children coming to the Sanctuary from Bangalore. I remember him and so many others who have taken their lives in this time that I have been here.

I was talking to Leela a couple of days ago. We figured there had been perhaps half a dozen suicides in the immediate neighbourhood in the last 15 years or so. The ones we'd heard of. Then there were all the attempted suicides, the midnight runs to the hospital with self-poisoned men and women.

I also asked Laly (her family is from here) why this happens. She was thoughtful, first clarifying that it's reduced a lot in recent years.

Her sense was that there is great isolation in people. She said: *individuals don't know how to talk with each other and to really support one another, no one knows how to talk about their problems, often you cannot even tell if someone has a problem.* And that the isolation spirals into breakdown and desperation, the final recourse being suicide. Or emigration!

I remember when O was found dead on a storefront early one dawn, some 17 kms from here, in a junction point village called Nedumpoil at the foot of the range. She had consumed a deadly pesticide.

O had worked here for many years. Beautiful woman, married to a handsome strong man, with skilled hands which could fashion beautiful baskets and wooden objects, the same hands which pulped her black and blue on the slightest suspicion.

I remember her running home for lunch at 1:30 p.m, running home at 5:00 p.m. as soon as work ended. I remember her strength, her smile and her rapidly waning beauty, battered broken beauty. We were exactly the same age. And in my first years at the Sanctuary there were a lot of things we did together, we especially liked to race each other uphill to see who was faster. She could carry 40kg granite boulders laughing all the way.

Her husband J raped his daughter and drove his wife to death. And built a shack at the beautiful reed rimmed pool at the bottom of the Sanctuary hill. He sliced his cow's ear with a machete too. He would walk some nights, along the path that runs by our entrance stairway, drunk and swearing, yelling drunken foul insults at one or the other of us. I remember when she stopped coming to work.

I remember asking a woman lawyer friend if we could intervene. She said, "No one does that, no one goes into a home and interferes in a domestic issue, she has to seek help.

She did. O filed a police complaint. They took him away. He later tried to kill himself too. It was a real merry go round for awhile. She ran away. Then she came back. Then he beat her. I saw her

one day running on the track with torn and ripped open clothes.

She couldn't go home to her parents, as they felt her place was by her husband's side.

We invited her to come stay with us. She said she couldn't. I remember how thin she was on that day.

Sometime later we heard she had taken the final decision to end her life.

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Everytime I go to the river, I remember J's glowering presence, I remember O's smile with a missing tooth. I remember telling women students and visitors that they had better not go swimming alone.

Justice is done to the wicked in strange ways. J and his father sold their property and moved out of the neighbourhood. I believe he married again.

These days I go alone, well, with Tasha, to the river. I figured fear or caution can go just a bit too far, and keep us from the things that really matter. I thought of taking a machete down the first few times. Then I figured Tasha was better company. Then I figured my voice was loud enough. I've been singing so much!

Then I figured I might be scary enough on my own, lone would-be assaulters might think twice before they come to the pool. Unlikely anyway that a group assault would happen here at the pool, it is too visible. Anyway, I rather think their steps will quicken as they walk by on the track above the pool, they will be afraid to look too close: *is that a Queen Cobra? A water sprite? A yakshi? A wailing banshee?!! With her Rottweiler dog daemon moving boulders, with teeth that look like they could rip a buffalo apart?! Better get out-a-here!!!*

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On another note: the great news in the garden that's come in from the orchid team is that we have over 700 species of orchid growing here. They have been doing a kind of census, checking on numbers and nomenclature, sorting through planks and pots, garden registers, floras. And made the announcement a few days ago. More on this later.

For now, I am in awe.

Awe, from the plants. Awe, from knowing what work has gone in. Awe, from living with orchid geniuses.

###

On another note:

The King is here.

Ophiophagus hannah. The King Cobra. Rajabombalan.

I saw him with my own eyes, for the first time here on the land.

I was washing clothes one afternoon last week and Suresh came running to call me, saying Sandy wanted me to rush over to the other end of the Sanctuary with a camera because they'd all seen a rajabombalan!.

So I ran like crazy! Over a hill and down a steep slippery slope.

And found Sandy sitting by a hole under a tree near the swampy fields where the cows graze. Found Baby (grown man!) hanging on to Tasha who was straining manically.

Sandy asked me to move slowly, then stop, then move. I did exactly as I was told.

And then I saw him! This glossy long black beautiful body. The King with his head stuck in a

hole, moving back and forth, clearly trying to get something out. He apparently had been at it for awhile, ignoring the people, the movement of the cows. It was the cow-ladies Molly and Pushpa, who had first seen him and hollered for Sandy who was working in another part of the valley who then rushed over and then sent Suresh. A lot of time had passed!

I find it amazing that, through all the action of people and animals running all around, the King had been intent on something in a hole, and either quite oblivious, or unconcerned.

After awhile he came out and saw us, stopped a moment and very elegantly moved away, no fear, just elegant slipping away. We saw his head really well too. Powerful!! He was gone so fast it was unbelievable. What a long body too. Sandy thinks 10-12 feet!

We were wondering what he was after. So we peered into the hole. And saw a head. A dying head of a cobra, couldn't tell which one but we left the hole so that the King could come back and get his meal.

No chance for a picture, it was too dark. This is the first time I'm seeing a King on the land. Sandy has seen one once and Wolfgang too. Me, never! Not here.

Now if any of you wants to know more about King Cobras, or about any of the snakes of India, you have to write to our friends Rom Whitaker and Gowri Shankar, and visit the Agumbe Rainforest Research Centre which is located in an area where King Cobras are revered by local communities and never killed, so they are really common. You might find one in your bathroom or under your bed!

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On another note:

There is a large grazer helping himself to our grassland species. A sambhar deer. I'm naming him Chundan. He has been around for a few weeks, seen a few times only, but his hoof prints have been all over the trails.

I saw Chundan the other day. He was sporting lovely velvet antlers and his snout was very moist and he was standing in a clump of Eupatorium and bracken (invasive species).

Now sambhars are not rare anywhere else in the Ghats, or in another parts of India, but again, to see one here in the garden, is really very special.

Now this says something about the success of our grassland experiments. Sora, Wolfgang, Purvi have been hanging little lanterns out in the "new shola" areas and this seems to work, keeps Chundan in the thicket. But not last night. Sujata who works in this part of the garden, told us he had come way beyond the ring of lights and helped himself to some rare plants.

Four of the main plant conservation crew are away in the southern part of the Western Ghats, and the rest of us here are having a conversation in their absence.

Don't grazers and grasslands belong together?

Aren't large grazers an integral part of the grassland ecosystems?

Shouldn't we allow him to graze?

Instead of giving grasses an artificial hair cut, why not let the sambhar and the mouse deer and the barking deer and the jungle fowl manage the foliage? How about inclusion of some selective pressure?

Why did we not let predator fish loose in the aquaria? Isn't the grassland mimic as artificial as an aquarium? Aren't they both closed systems as they both require such close management?

Why not set fire to the grassland?

How "natural" are the local grasslands? Chandanakota for example, which we can see from the Sanctuary, a low elevation grassland at 700-800 metres, how old is that? Why is it so diverse, why is it that we see species of grass there that are not to be seen on these degraded hills here?

Are old human communities part of the local natural ecosystem? Is there a difference between tribes setting fire to attract grazers and increasing grassland diversity, and fires set by forest department as part of their management strategies?

Isn't firing banned now?

Of course we know what the shola crew would have to say about this conversation! "You guys are crazy, do you know how rare some of these plants are? We can't afford to have even one herbivore, large or small in there!"

###

On another entirely different note:

Scottish singer-songwriter KT Tunstall has released her latest album: Tiger Suit. Sandy showed me the Saturday magazine supplement's coverage of this release. Please listen to it!

Some of you might remember that KT and her husband Luke visited the Sanctuary in January 09. KT sang in our musical water tower. Along with my friends Gary and Lorenzo, I visited KT and Luke at their lovely home near London. This was on my way back from Brazil in October 09. KT sang for the three of us by a fire that night till 2:00 a.m. Amazing music.

KT has also helped us with our appeal for funds for land regeneration.

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And so on and so forth.....all part of a day in the life of the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary.

Until anon!

Take care all of you

Warm wishes

Suprabha