Protecting the ecology

UR filthy streets and dusty, drab, treeless countryside would suggest that Indians don't worship nature. Believe it or not, vanaspataye namah was an essential part of our culture. The Rig Veda personifies various natural phenomena, revered for their power over human existence, and all through Indian literature we find respect for nature. This was more so in rural and tribal India, where people played an active role in their conservation, making protection of the environment a sacred duty. They created their own laws, systems and taboos that ensured preservation of the ecology and environment. Any transgressions would be punished by fines and, occasionally, even banishment.

Ancient Tamil literature grouped the various geo-climatic zones into the aindu thinai or five tracts: paalai (desert), mullai (pasture), marudham (agricultural land), kurinji (hills) and neithal (coast). The deity, inhabitants, occupations, foods, settlements, music, musical instruments, water sources, plants, animals, birds and seasons of each are documented in detail. But there was also an attempt to preserve the delineated regions. For example, Palani in Tamil Nadu was kurinji and there was a conscious attempt to preserve its character. Folk songs sought to perpetuate the characteristics of each thinai.

The most important aspect of our heritage is the ecological, squandered away in recent times. It includes entire ecosystems and mini biospheres preserved as sacred groves, trees of economic and social value preserved as sacred trees, even small thickets preserved as sacred precincts, fresh water bodies preserved as sacred tanks, and so on. By sanctifying them, they ensured that a great heritage was preserved for all time.

What is a sacred grove? It is a patch of forest, anything from five to five thousand acres, with or without water, left untouched out of religious belief. The trees here are sacred, the pond, if any, is sacred, and so on. Generally, the grove is dedicated to the Mother Goddess or the fierce warrior Veerans (braves)

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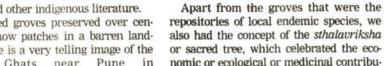
Earth Mother, Devi or Amman, but other deities could also reign in the grove. The sarpa kaavu of Kerala, once found behind each tharavaad or family home, was dedicated to the snake. The kovil kaadu of Tamil Nadu are generally dedicated to Amman, but other minor deities such as Ayyanaar, protector of the night, may also hold sway.

The nandavana and deivavana of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are similar temple gardens and forests. Every village has a grove, many of them still preserved in the south. The village made its own taboos: except for utilizing plants for their medicinal qualities, not a leaf or twig could be touched. It was a mini biosphere reserve, preserving local flora and fauna, retaining subsoil water and the water level. These are self-sustaining ecosystems and repositories of several rare and endangered endemic plant species.

The grove was also a source of preservation of indigenous art and craft. The potter excels himself as he makes terracotta horses, bulls and elephants, to be dedicated to Ayyanaar. The faces of the ferocious Devis and their

make us wonder whether these were the rakshasas or demons that came to life in Sanskrit and other indigenous literature.

The sacred groves preserved over centuries are now patches in a barren landscape. There is a very telling image of the Western Ghats near Pune in Maharashtra, at the location of the Panshet Dam. The hills are barren, except for a small clump of trees that house the deorala, as the sacred grove is known in Maharashtra. I have seen villages where all that is left of the grove is a single tree



also had the concept of the sthalavriksha or sacred tree, which celebrated the economic or ecological or medicinal contribution of individual species. For example, the pipal is the most sacred of trees, providing a home for animals and birds.

others have encroached into the groves.

the bilva (Bengal quince), neem and tulsi are sacred to Shiva, Devi and Krishna respectively, and form a necessary part of their worship. They also have important medicinal properties. The tulsi is grown in the courtvard of every home. The Ganesha or a Devi temple. Farmers and women swallow a leaf or two, to avoid coughs, colds and throat infections.

> Unfortunately, many of the trees that were sanctified for their local importance have practically disappeared. Kanchipuram was named after the kanchi tree. There is not a single tree left in Kanchi. Where is the kadamba vana where Meenakshi of Madurai once dwelled? The punnai forest of Mylapore has disappeared as the city of

shade for human beings and even wisdom

if you were the Buddha and sat beneath

it. The sthalavriksha of the

Kapaleeshwarar temple at Mylapore in

Chennai is the punnai or Alexandrian laurel. Once upon a time, ships were

made out of logs of the punnai tree. The

sacred tree of Chidambaram, the seat of Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, is the thillai

or mangrove, so essential to the ecology of the cyclone-prone region. Some trees like Chennai has grown, while the mangroves of Chidambaram are disappearing with tourism and deforestation taking their toll.

The sacred tanks were another conservation system. Water - including the rivers, lakes and other fresh water sources - was precious and hence sacred, and the construction of tanks, wells and canals was an act of great merit. Every temple in south India has a tank to store water and retain the village's water level. Harvested rainwater went into this tank.

Today the tanks are polluted. Soap, detergent, plastics and other debris float on these tanks. Some, like Chennai's Mylapore temple tank, have not seenwater for a long time and have been converted to a public lavatory and garbage dump as an uncaring and corrupt administration looks the other way. The tanks, pushkarnis, veris, keres and sarovars built centuries ago are now pools of raw sewage. Chennai was once a city of lakes. In the 1950s and '60s the water tanks were filled with garbage and given to contractors for "development". The result is a city without water.

The ancient people of India established sound socio-cultural practices epitomizing in situ conservation of biological and genetic diversity. In recent times, this has been forgotten or ignored in the face of development. Firstly, there is no exhaustive all-India listing or account of our ecological heritage. Secondly, the legal status is ambiguous. The groves, trees and tanks lying within forest areas are protected, the rest are not. Then, the conservation practices associated with the sacred groves and tanks have been weakened with time and changing beliefs. For example, conversions to Christianity in the northeast have resulted in the discontinuance of the old tradition of conserving vast tracts of forests as sacred groves. As a result, the forests are disappearing and Cherrapunji, which has the world's highest rainfall, now has a water problem. Changing lifestyles and practices are also destroying these resources. Finally, a growing population and changing resource use patterns are also wiping out our ecological heritage.

I have not touched on other aspects of our environment, only on those preserved by religious traditions. These were developed by different communities all over India and were successfully applied in different places by different people in different ways. As we have shown ourselves to be inept at protecting our environment, we need to return to our traditions to pro-

tect it. After 5000 years of civilization, religion is still the major motivating factor in India. We should continue to harness it for the public good, as our ancestors did.

beneath which sits a

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