

Dr Nanditha Krishna, a Historian, Environmentalist, and Prolific Author, is the Director of the Chennai-based C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation. She is the great-granddaughter of Dr C P Ramaswami Aiyar (1879–1966), a Lawyer, Administrator, and Politician after whom the Foundation is named. **N Kalyani** in conversation with Dr Krishna for *TerraGreen*.

You are the Director of the C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation and the Founder Director of the C P Ramaswami Environmental Education Centre. Please tell us something about the organizations.

The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation is primarily involved in education and particularly devoted towards the education of deprived and under-privileged children. The Foundation was established on October 14, 1966 to continue the work of Dr C P Ramaswami Aiyar, who was responsible for industrial and agricultural growth in Tamil Nadu and Travancore. He was also responsible for the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore which was aimed at opening temples to all Hindus, irrespective of their caste. The Foundation aims to serve the interests of the community at large and to promote Indian culture through research and development. The Foundation's philosophy is that "innovative and specialized education, training and awareness-raising within the Indian cultural ethos alone can bring about change."

The CPR Environmental Education Centre is a Centre of Excellence under the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change, Government of India, and was jointly established by the C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation and



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the Ministry. It was set up to increase consciousness and knowledge about the environment and environmental problems facing the country. The Centre has been conducting a variety of programmes to spread awareness and interest among teachers, NGOs, women, and youth on all aspects of environment and ecology with the purpose of promoting conservation of nature and natural resources. We have restored 52 sacred groves—the first organization in India to do so, and documented 13,270 sacred groves and other ecological traditions from all over India which we have posted on our ENVIS website (www.CPramaswami.org).

Recently, the Centre celebrated its 25th anniversary. How do you feel?

Yes. We celebrated the 25th anniversary of our existence in October this year by publishing a compendium of papers called *Sacred Groves of India*, covering all states and Union Territories. We also released a book titled, *Green Pilgrimage for a Clean India* to show our appreciation of and participation in the Prime Minister's 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan'. We hope these publications will inspire young people and future generations.

The CPR Environmental Education Centre has restored sacred groves in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. How has the experience been?

From very early, I felt that environmental education could bring in a turnaround. As a Centre aiming to sensitize the citizens towards the environment, we had to do something concrete and show something tangible. This was also a time when I noticed that there were several conflicts between villagers and the Forest Departments over the tree plantation programmes, as the villagers protected their sacred groves very carefully.

When I went into the sacred groves, I found that it was a perfect example of environmental sustainability, since no environmentally degrading activity was permitted in the groves. However, because of changing values, agricultural spread,

and land grabbing by the government and private agencies, the sacred groves were shrinking. We, therefore, decided to restore one grove initially. We found that there was tremendous local enthusiasm and that we did not have to spend money on non-essentials like fencing, etc. We also found that the restoration could be done at a far lower cost than the forest department. Teachers, students, villagers, and women, all were very enthusiastic.

The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation and the Environmental Education Centre are at Eldams Road. The property is a heritage building. Would you like to say something about it?

All our organizations are headquartered at the C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, 1 Eldams Road, Alwarpet, at Chennai, although they function in various cities, towns, and states of Southern India. The property is about three acres large with an old colonial bungalow which was inherited by Sir C P Ramaswami Aiyar from his grandparents. It is an excellent combination of traditional and colonial architecture. Our campus is also a habitat for several birds.

You are an environmentalist, a historian, and have finished your PhD in ancient Indian culture. How have you specialized in these varied areas?

I have a PhD in ancient Indian culture which is an aspect of history. However, from childhood I have been visiting several wildlife sanctuaries all over India. These experiences have made me an environmentalist. Initially, my work on culture and environment was separate. In recent years, they have merged and amalgamated, as evidenced in my books *Sacred Plants of India* and *Sacred Animals of India*, both published by Penguin Books.

You have authored several books reflecting your different areas of specialization. *Sacred Plants of India, Sacred Animals of India, Madras Then, Chennai Now, Madras-Chennai, Its History and Environment, Book of*

***Demons, Book of Vishnu, etc.* to name a few. You quote from the Upanishads, Puranas, epics, for instance, in the latest *Sacred Plants of India*. You also narrate mythological and tribal stories. How did you conduct this extensive research for your books? Was it all related in some way?**

I read very extensively. Since I know Sanskrit, I have read many of our texts in their original form. Sanskrit literature is a wealth of information. It is a source of inspiration for several people dealing with different subjects. I enjoy engaging in research and spend a major part of my time collecting information on a lot of subjects which may or may not be related. However, every idea in life is connected in some way or the other.

Which educational institutions do you run? Are issues related to conservation and preservation of environment, heritage, and culture incorporated in the education system?

All our educational institutions strongly impart values of environmental conservation and Indian culture. Not only is it taught, the children also participate in many activities which give them a hands-on experience. We run the following educational institutions:

- Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre for children with learning disabilities, dyslexia, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and for slow learners.
- Sir C P Ramaswami Aiyar Memorial Nursery and Primary School in Kumbakonam, an English medium school, which provides free education.
- Rangammal Vidyalaya Nursery and Primary School in Kanchipuram, which provides partially free education and is an integrated school.
- The Grove School, an ICSE school.
- 'Each One Teach One' whereby we are supporting the education of over 500 children between class VII and XII in four schools of Chennai. ■