

# Protecting the ecology

# A sacred duty

**O**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), *mulai* (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



**CREATIONS**  
Nanditha Krishna

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 fierce warrior *Veerans* (braves)

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 beneath which sits a

Ganesha or a Devi temple. Farmers and others have encroached into the groves.

Apart from the groves that were the repositories of local endemic species, we 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,

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 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 courtyard of every home. The 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

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 seen water 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*, *yeris*, *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 protect 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.

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