

Singing in the trees - Bhoomi Jathre 2005

Siddhartha

Its time again for another Bhoomi Jathre, the all-night music festival at Fireflies, an ecological retreat outside Bangalore. This year the date is April 23rd and the carnival will be celebrating the significance of trees. It will also be an occasion to express our gratitude to the poet and film-maker Pattabhi Rama Reddy, one of whose films was on a man who dedicated his whole life to growing trees. In 2003 Bhoomi Jathre was dedicated to peace in Iraq. Last year's theme was on the need to conserve water.

In a world of buying and selling we may give little thought to trees. When I lived in Bangalore I noticed how people riding in buses or cars always looked at the shop signs. Very few noticed the trees and the miraculous changes that happened in them all through the year. The writer Ogden Nash remarked sadly that he had never seen a billboard as lovely as a tree and that he would never see a tree as long as the billboards had not fallen. Years ago I used to tell my little son Ananda that it was much more fun watching the trees lining the streets than the shops. After all shops are only trying to sell you something. The more attractive the shops are made out the more likely we will succumb to the pointlessness of consumerism. Whereas, trees are not trying to con you into buying something you do not really need. Rather, they are contributing to your inner richness. There is even a theory that much of our neurosis in the modern world began with the traumatic break with nature we made in the twentieth century, as hordes of humans flocked to the cities, breaking away from the kindly influences of nature.

Anybody who has not planted a tree and watched it grow is a lesser human being for that. Quite apart from trees being a carbon sink and saving us from environmental disaster we often overlook the meaning it can give to our lives? A tree radiates positive energy. I have watched a coconut sapling slowly grow into a tree and imagined it ever so often in my mind's eye before going to sleep. I fondly remembered each branch, the new leaves emerging, the bark changing from green to brown as it matured. Wordsworth called this form of meditation 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. It brought me quiet joy, the kind of happiness that does not titillate, but silently adds harmony and meaning to one's life.

I walked in the trees this morning and noticed their varied bark. As always I marvelled at the display of texture and muted colour that would humble the most dazzling painter. The neem has an exterior that is rough and cracked, suggesting the range of its repertoire: its ability to serve as tooth paste, insecticide, air-purifier and green manure. The guava has a bark of smooth brown that flakes off from time to time revealing its sensuous green undergarment. The teak has an unbroken white skin, with grey patches of dry mildew. The semi-circular marks on the coconut are the gashes left by its fallen leaves. They tell its age. Pongamia bark is grey and relatively smooth, scarred with light patches of allergy. Bark textures are a result of changes in cork cambium, and the furrows and cracks arise from stretching, as the circumference increases. Without the bark the tree will dry; it protects the tree from extreme variations in temperature and dehydration. The

inner bark of the trees contains the cells that are responsible to carry the products of photosynthesis from the leaves to the roots.

Have you ever hugged a tree? If not, do it soon. Place your hands around its trunk and feel the bark on your cheek. Feel the energy flow into you, connecting you with the meaning of the universe. The world is permeated with meaning, but we are busy with hundreds of trifling things we believe are important. The tree is a window to that meaning, if only we can find unhurried time in contemplating its grace and stillness.

February is a deceptive month. It seduces with cool nights and at the same time begins to wither the grass and the wild undergrowth. Everything turns brown by the end of the month. The trees lose their leaves, are shamed into nakedness. Birds don't have the foliage to sing in. It is a sign of things to come: the dryness, the lack of water and the heat of the months ahead. Loss and renewal is the way of nature, the way of all life. In the Northern countries February is a depressive month. In the Scandinavian region the long nights and short days, coupled with the bitter cold, lead people to desperation and even suicide. In South India February is the last of the cool months. It is the month before spring. While spring lifts the spirits of the people in the Northern countries, fulfilling the myth of the eternal return, it's an uneasy time for us, for it presages the onset of worse things to come. Thankfully we know that, like all difficult experiences, the heat of the approaching summer will also pass. Being aware that fullness alternates with drought is what 'hope' is all about.

The visual freshness of spring and the physical experience of the emerging heat is the contradiction that March offers. The deceit continues and is intensified in April and May. We greet the spring as we progressively dehydrate in the heat. Spring is about the sap rising in the trees and erupting into leaves and flowers. The pongamia begins with light olive leaves, translucent in the light before it darkens. The pipal tree starts with copper that turns a vivid green a few days later. The neem, which may kill a part of itself to survive the dryness, springs to life in the surviving branches. Everywhere, nakedness is swathed with canopies of green.

In April I watch the mercury rising and marvel at the grace with which pongamia, neem, pipal and others species absorb the brunt of the heat. The whole of Fireflies is a movement of shade, with fragments of sun dancing on the earth. That is compassion for you, gifted by the trees. The air is different; unlike the eye-smarting exhaust we call 'air' in Bangalore. Unsolicited, the trees go about their role as carbon sink, soaking up the carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. The majestic pipal tree continues to oxygenate twenty-four hours of the day. No wonder the Buddha found enlightened under this tree rather than another. Our deepest well-being is intricately connected with the life of trees.

Felling trees has become a cruel national distraction. I watch the venerable trees on Kanakapura road being cut so that our cars and trucks can speed through. We are all guilty to varying degrees, not just the highways department. Today, development goes against the grain of nature. It doesn't have to be that way, but nobody is doing very much to opt for another kind of progress. The highways department could have at least tried to

mitigate the damage by planting new trees on the outer edge of the road, and allowing them to grow a few years, before felling the old ones. What is lacking is imagination, a commodity you cannot buy in a shop. William Blake wrote: 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way...But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.' In the end it is our unimaginative way of life that will destroy our civilisation. Today's paper says that the Bangalore Municipal Corporation plans to cut 400 trees this summer, apart from the hundreds of trees it has axed in the past months.

Each tree we cut diminishes our lives. As the Native American Chief Seattle said years ago, "...the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit on the ground they spit on themselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family... Man does not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it." The timber lobby fells trees illegally in the forest to make profits from the growing demand of urban households. The poor farmers cut trees on the commons to make a few hundred rupees. But its long past the time to cry 'halt'. The only consolation is the adage: better late than never. Rich or poor, the challenge is to shift from thinking only of our own wants and desires and do something that bonds us with the earth and secures life for future generations. The well-loved goddess Sita was born from a furrow in the earth. Evolution likewise teaches us that all human beings evolved from the earth. In the end the earth opened to receive Sita, like it will open to receive us.

To paraphrase the Rig Veda: Two people stand beside a highway. One is felling a tree and the other is just watching. The first person represents human greed, which knows no end. The second is a metaphor for compassionate awareness. Actually, both people are two sides of the very same individual. How do we create conditions for the second person, who represents awareness, to triumph? How do we let compassion overcome self-indulgence?

So come to Fireflies and celebrate this year's Bhoomi Jathre on 23rd April. Learn the difference between celebration and self-indulgence. Go away feeling a better human being after a whole night of inspiring music that makes you rock and ponder in turns. Discover your real immanent self, your Oneness, through music in the midst of trees.