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Summer Solstice Issue

Leaf Litter

NTFP  EP

INDIA



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Editorial

There may be few people today who do not know someone having succumbed to the covid pandemic. It could be a friend or relative, a colleague, or a neighbour. The images sent by the media over the last months, showing the situation in Delhi and other parts of India were graphic, and worse. Words often failed to keep up with the confused emotions. It is not possible to express all we feel.

It is clear, though, that life is fleeting. And that the whim or carelessness of an authority whose central concern is its image and not its people, can cause untold havoc to those who live under it. It is indeed remarkable that throughout this period of emergency – the suffering people, the confinements and poverty, the grief and anger – the sane voices were ignored. Expert medical advice was ignored or silenced, the social media was threatened, and even the international media was systematically brushed aside. Yet, within this eerie bubble, certain aspects of the country continued with the business-as-usual attitude, and here one is not referring to the elections in West Bengal or the Kumbh Mela.

The Rs 20,000 plus crore Central Vista project is being constructed on war-footing. Even at the best of times this is a questionable venture: now it is little else than an exercise in vanity. Alongside, we have the privatizations of Public Sector Units, as with the move to privatize the Visakapatnam Steel Plant. Plans to privatize banks and the railways continue. Even the forests are being steadily diverted for development projects or to fulfill our goals of the climate agreement in Paris. The corporate sector will, if the trend continues, own the bulk of India's forests without the adivasi people getting their rights or share of the land. One would have thought that the government, after the 2020 experience with covid-19 and the mistakes it made in dealing with the problem, would have changed course. Instead, matters got worse, as the world watched. The NGO-sector, which then played a crucial role in bringing relief to rural communities affected by covid, found its hands tied by the FCRA amendment. It could not receive mon-

ey from international donors. In fact, many NGOs still await the completion of the process of opening new bank accounts.

This year the pandemic has entered the rural areas. The usually poor infrastructure, whether of schools and hospitals, or doctors and medical personnel, barely managed to cope with the circumstances. The bulk of peoples incomes, that come from gathering forest produce, was affected either due to the lockdown that prevented them from going out or due to there being few buyers. Most traders did not adhere to the Minimum Support Price, knowing well that NTFP collectors have no storage space for their produce. The peoples investment in agriculture this monsoon will suffer, as also their household economic plans and commitments.

These problems are not new but have been brought out into the open by the corona virus. Other issues abound, like lack of clean drinking water, sanitation, a clear awareness about the virus, space for isolation of infected people, and so on. It is time the state focused on these matters, matters that are 'truly Indian' in that unique way in which even simple things like sanitation can seem like a luxury. This assumes an equitable society that is educated, has sufficient agency to navigate between religion, caste and political propaganda, and demand what is due and good for them and essentials don't need to be doled out. The government would do well to let the corporate sector fend for itself and, for a change, take the side of the people. If it had, the virus would not have ravaged the country as it did. What we see, instead, is its continued zeal to do business, as usual, and have the people pay the price.

Madhu Ramnath
June, 2021

Souls, trees, stories

Alan Johnson

Overlooking the cemetery in the town in which I live, here in the Western United States, is a historical plaque that reproduces a black and white photograph. The photo is dated 1892, and shows a slender young woman in a black dress gazing at a pale gravestone. The only point of reference in the photo is a bare hillside in the background. A caption tells us that the woman, Estella Magill, is standing before the grave of her infant son, and implies that we are looking down, from this trail on the hillside shown in the picture, at the general location of that site. The gravestone has since been moved, and the site lost.

space called a reservation—today's Fort Hall Reservation, which adjoins the town. The settlers then proceeded to cut down trees for their structures and fireplaces, cut irrigation canals into the ground, and cut any rock in the way of their roads and rails. The indigenous Shoshone and Bannock peoples grieved for this wounding of their land, felt it in their bones. They tried to save the land by fighting off the encroachers, but US forces responded by attacking whole villages, such as when they slaughtered 410 Shoshone women, children and men in the 1863 Bear River Massacre. The wars in the region ended only in 1879, when the remaining tribal members retreated, exhausted and dispirited, to Fort Hall.

How do you mourn your dead when your own life has become a walking death, as it must have seemed to the survivors? When your grieving for the land



The cemetery today sprawls more than a mile long and half-a-mile wide, and contains thousands of graves in lush verdure: clustering trees, clipped grass, blooming flowers, few of which would grow without constant watering in this desert environment. Without the caption, we would know nothing of the time or place, except a general notion that the black dress speaks of America in the late 1800s, when the town was new. It had been founded in 1889 as a servicing junction for the Union Pacific Railroad. The settlement, called Pocatello after a vanquished chief, was dubbed the Gateway to the West. The town's subsequent development brought more settlers, as well as large numbers of Chinese immigrants for the cheap labor the railroads relied on to construct their tracks, often done in harsh conditions.

Of course, this was "west" only according to white settlers from states further east, who overran the lands of the indigenous Shoshone and Bannock nations and eventually pushed them into a small

is a grieving for yourself? There is no visual recording of this grief as there is of the settler woman mourning her child. The tribes grieved, as did every other indigenous nation in North America, for having to leave their homelands, which the spirits of their ancestors still inhabited. Only in 2008 were the Shoshone able to purchase the site of the 1863 massacre, on which they plan to build a memorial and visitor's center. In this sacred place, they sometimes still hear the cries of their ancestors. "Have you ever had a memory sneak out of your eye and roll down your cheek?" a Shoshone leader asked a reporter in 2018. His grief is transgenerational and mixed with the earth.

The settler woman in the old photograph would have been a girl when the Shoshone fought their final battle. In her adult grieving, I suspect she believed that she would one day see her dead infant again. Did she see him only in that tiny plot, or did she imagine him, as the Shoshone do their dead, forever inhabiting the landscape? If the land was not hers to take, where does her child's spirit rest?

Because this ground had been home to the Shoshone until a few years before the photograph was taken, the ghosts of their ancestors who had lived here may have been gazing at the woman as she stood in silent grief. Perhaps those ancestors held the hand of her son, comforting that infant soul with their wizened selves.

Of course, the landscape has changed irrevocably since then. If the ghost of a person who died in the late 1800s had immediately departed the area and returned only now, she would find it hard to orient herself. It is uncanny to compare the old photograph to the view before us: the treeless image clashes with today's forest of green. It is painfully ironic that just a few decades after their devastating land-grab from indigenous nations, the settlers, as if to assuage their unspoken guilt for wounding the land, chose to plant new trees.

It strikes me, too, that the grieving woman in the photo has long since joined her child in the earth (perhaps in that very place, now forgotten), and that her shadowy representation is all that visibly remains of her. She lived once, as her nameless child briefly did, but beyond this is silence. We don't know her story. Did she have other children? Were they buried here at the end of long lives? There is no tradition of keeping it alive in the way the Shoshone do. It's as if her solitary grief, captured on film—possibly by a then-new Kodak camera, possibly while she was murmuring a prayer—has swallowed up her very existence. This is a troubling thought, especially when a pandemic has made us all mourners in one way or another. The woman in the photo is us, staring into the face of our insignificant impermanence.

been growing quietly, patiently. Some may be as old as the photo. When struck by hard winds, a few may topple, as happens frequently in this windy valley. But this does not halt the stretching of their limbs or diminish their voiceless self-possession. The woman, like the trees, is mute in the ordinary sense of lacking oral enunciation, but not in the more comprehensive sense of speaking across the centuries. Her stillness—including her need to stand still for the slow camera lens of the time—clashes with our raucous world, where silence is seemingly banned and mobile phones snap pics in milliseconds. It is only the dead who are stilled these days, and even they leave behind a trail of images and sounds.

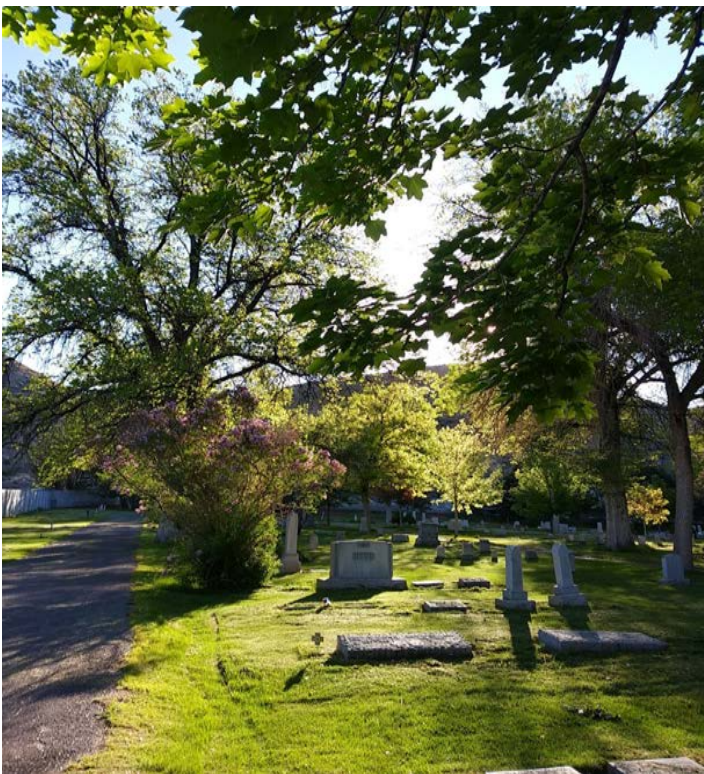
I don't mean to discount this technological asset: the sounds and flickering movements of late loved ones are no little consolation to the living. This is simply to suggest that our everyday definitions of life and death are too limited. Trees, once again, remind us that stillness is not the same as lifelessness. Trees ceaselessly speak to one another through chemicals and spores, through roots, leaves and fungi. They don't care if they've never been caught on film or seen by a person. They persist and flourish in a web of living communication much larger and deeper than our meager human senses typically notice.

In the end, most of us, however much we cherish daily moments (as we should), want to mean something beyond the Now. The Shoshone and Bannock peoples keep generational stories alive for just this reason. Maybe the trees flourishing here today are the grieving woman's continuing story, just as trees the world over hold within them the stories of countless others who have returned to the nurturing soil. Maybe the pandemic's one benefit is that it has stopped us in our tracks, reminding us of what matters.

When I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Far from abandoning his responsibilities as a member of society, he also spoke of "civil disobedience" (in an essay of that name which Gandhi read and appreciated), noting that people's frivolous valuing of objects over principles meant that "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous." (Fake news, anyone?)

And Thoreau might well have been speaking of the pre-protest, pre-COVID-19 world of 2020 in concluding that the bulk of his people were "closing [their] eyes . . . and consenting to be deceived by shows" so as to "confirm their daily life of routine," one "built on purely illusory foundations." January 1, May 25—the earthshaking changes these dates have ushered in are the realities that we have to teach students, and ourselves, if we're to have any kind of "human character" worth saving.

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But then, in a more tranquil mood, I consider that the mute photograph appropriately echoes the stillness of the woman's grief. Words can comfort, just as music or the presence of a friend can. But these must always, at some point, make room for wordless silence. The cemetery's trees—maples, poplars and oaks; cottonwoods, pines and conifers—have

Oxygen, oxygen, everywhere, but need a cylinder to breathe!

Om Prakash Singh

The last two months have been a nightmare for many of us, a nightmare that far too often had a tragic end. The visuals of attendants running from one hospital to the next with patients in critical need of immediate medical support, long queues at the cremation ghats, and hundreds of bodies floating down the holy river Ganga will likely haunt us for many years to come. To shield the government from criticism, we are reminded of similar scenes from Italy in the first wave, the US in what was their second wave and of other advanced countries. But in none of these countries were patients left hunting for basics such as oxygen cylinders. As per some [reports](#), the normal price of oxygen cylinders and related equipment were 8 to 10 fold their pre-pandemic price in the black market; even at these prices they were unavailable, leaving patients gasping for breath. Many people were willing to pay anything for this essential gas. This was the condition in Delhi, power centre of our republic, and the location for the lavish Rs. 20,000 crores Central Vista redevelopment [project](#)!



Source: The Financial Express

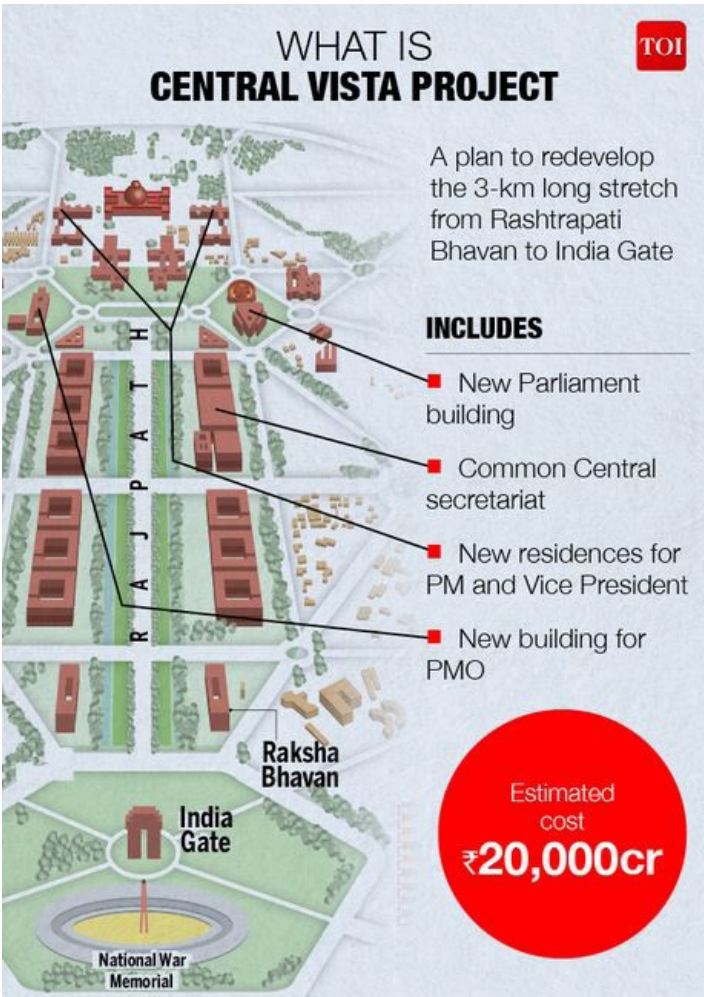
other urban centres of India. The death-rate here is estimated to be high (the official figures hide this, but investigations in [Gujarat](#), [Madhya Pradesh](#) and other states, and the data from cremation and burial grounds, reveal this). Given the findings of the studies and the fact that we have 22 of the 30 most [polluted cities](#) in the world, with Delhi as the most polluted capital, this isn't a surprise.

A number of researchers [believe](#) that destruction of biodiversity creates conditions for new viruses and diseases like Covid-19, Ebola, etc. to evolve. This will get worse as we continue our "development" activities that encroach into biodiversity hotspots. Further, there is [growing concern](#) that global heating that thaws the permafrost will release a host of bacteria and viruses. One of which could trigger the next global pandemic. As Dr. Evengård emphasises, "it's not a question of if this was going to happen, it was when".

We know that thawing permafrost is not the only consequence of anthropogenic global heating. The climate crisis it leads us into is a mammoth challenge, the kind that we humans have never experienced in recorded history. It gave a glimpse of it's destructive potential by unleashing two cyclones in India alone, first on the west coast ([Taufat](#)) and then the east coast ([Yaas](#)), both in the same month.

All this while our central government has been fixated on development indicators, like the ease of doing business. There was much [celebration](#) that India's ranking improved 79 places from 142 in 2014 to 63 in 2019. It was not mentioned that the main contributor to this jump in ranking has been dilution of [green clearance norms](#) and [environmental regulations](#). Furthermore, instead of taking steps to improve air quality, the government has given some of the most polluting industrial units, like [coal thermal power stations](#), full licenses to continue polluting with a nominal penalty.

The situation unequivocally conveys an urgent need for conservation of our natural wealth: the grasslands, the forests, the marshlands, the oceans and rivers, the lakes and glaciers, and our hills and mountain ranges. There is no place or time for either [false solutions](#) or future solutions. We have



Source: Times of India

As per [this article](#) published last year, several studies have indicated that long term exposure to air pollution can make people prone to the infection, and exacerbate the severity of Covid-19 symptoms, if infected. Unfortunately, this seems to have been experienced by the residents of the NCR and many



Source- The New Yorker

to discard our greed, and reduce our consumption level to what we need, instead of what we want or desire. Using the brute force of the majority and the government, the State has successfully transplanted a masjid in Ayodhya. But [transplanting trees](#) and [labelling](#) monoculture plantations as forests is no solution. These have far-reaching consequences, not only for the immediate ecology but also the overall environment, an approach that demonstrates State apathy to conservation. [The value of](#)

Most often those who lose are the voiceless poor, already living on the margins. Their lives don't matter to the ruling elites and the middle class that often drive these narratives. This pandemic is different in that it has affected many in the middle-income and even rich families. Will that help us realise our mistakes and inspire us to make a course correction? Will it compel us to share the urgency expressed by the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where she concluded with the message: "I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is." If not, we will be left gasping for oxygen and thirsting for water not only during pandemics and floods, but as a 'new' normal part of everyday living.



Source- Reuters

[trees](#), forests and entire ecosystems are reduced to a few thousand crore rupees, and the warped financial models of cost-benefit analysis facilitate greedy corporations in erasing these from the landscape. Such valuation models fail to include the lives lost and families destroyed, brought to our notice when nature decides it's enough and strikes back.

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Malnutrition in Mexico: the enemy within

Luis Esparza

Among the many things that the Covid-19 pandemic has come to expose are the inadequacies of health systems and policies in many parts of the world and the vulnerability to which entire populations are abandoned, especially in the South. In Mexico, 9.2% of Covid-19 patients die from the illness.¹ This is one of the highest fatality rates so far registered for this pandemic.²

Leaving aside the questionable reliability of statistical data in general —especially in times like this— the fact remains that Covid-19 in Mexico is claiming far more deaths per confirmed cases than most other countries. This is mainly due to what is known as ‘comorbidities’, and immediately calls for an inquiry into the health condition of the Mexican population.

Obesity and overweight are rampant in the country, affecting 72.5% of Mexicans aged 20 years and older,³ while heart failure, cardiovascular disorders, and diabetes mellitus are the three main causes of death.⁴ Besides, one in every three children between six and 19 years of age and one out of 20 under six suffer from overweight or obesity.⁵ This constitutes a serious public-health problem, the root of which is to be found in unhealthy and inadequate eating habits.

Today, Mexico is the country with the highest consumption of non-alcoholic bottled beverages in the world, known in Mexico as *refrescos* (cold drinks). It has been calculated that Mexicans on average drink 163 litres a year of these sugary, carbonated



beverages with artificial colouring, and as much as 10% of their income goes into buying them.⁶ To explain people’s insatiable appetite for *refrescos*, one has to look at both the demand and the supply sides. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. While it’s true that the uneven distribution of drinkable water in the country and the unavailability of alternative, healthier drinks in some cases play a role, the artificial construction by market forces of an obesogenic environment, the lack of effective regulation in the marketing and distribution of industrial food products in general, and the lack of a robust education as to what constitutes a healthy diet are determinant.

The addiction to *refrescos* begins at home. Most family tables sport a jumbo-size bottle in their midst as both an enticer and a symbol of purchasing power. No party or celebration will go without binging on *refrescos* and their inseparable companions: greasy, high-carb addictive snacks known as *botanas* (‘junk food’). Then, at school, children will find these items at hand to quench their thirst and trick their appetite.



Washing maize’. Photo: Ricardo Barthelemy. © El Colegio de Michoacán, A. C.



A (large) 'tiendita' in an urban setting. Photo: Antonio Prieto.

How did this come to happen in a country with one of the healthier and more nutritious diets ever known to have existed? The pre-Hispanic cultures that lived in what is now Mexico were responsible for the domestication of maize, tomatoes, beans, and many other food items that have become staples the world over. Their balanced diet has called the attention of nutritionists and food enthusiasts alike, as well as anyone interested in the history of food and sustainable, environmentally sound eating alternatives.

Unfortunately, today, aside from specialty restaurants and connoisseur groups, nothing much remains of this diet in the daily habits of most Mexicans. Over three centuries of Spanish Colonial rule brought profound changes to the Mexican diet, mostly as a result of the incorporation of meat, dairy products and sugar, giving way to new dishes of great repute (*mole*, for instance) but not nearly as healthy as their predecessors. Many of the ancient habits and ingredients were abandoned as new ones took their place (meat substituted insects and vegetable ingredients, milk beverages substituted water-based ones, and cheese became a universal companion of Colonial and contemporary Mexican dishes). By the nineteenth century, Mexican cooking, identified as a product of the fusion of European and Mesoamerican cultures, found a place among the famous cuisines of the world.⁷

The journey to the unhealthy eating habits prevalent in present-day Mexico began with industrialization and the acceleration of the pace of everyday life. In cities, processed food and fast-food street stalls came to shape the eating habits of most people, while cold drink bottles and junk food wrapped in

unrecyclable materials made their way to the four corners of the country. For many decades, the delivery trucks, vans or motorcycles of these companies systematically penetrated the entire national territory to the remotest locality, more effectively so than many educational or health programmes.⁸

Today, *tienditas* (small corner shops) are a quintessential element of the landscape of every village or town, though in larger cities they are quickly being replaced by modern chain businesses modelled after the convenience stores found in the US. Many of the manufacturers of these products sponsor *tienditas* by providing them with name boards, awnings, and furniture in exchange for their loyalty to their brand names, on which local people have come to be dependent.

The backdrop of the creation of this obesogenic environment is the loss of self-sufficiency and food sovereignty, a process that started as early as the 1980s, when Neoliberal policies sought to transform agriculture into an international business and the country began to import basic staples such as maize, beans, meat, and even milk.

With the signing of the North-American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the dependence of the Mexican economy on the US market was consolidated. Today, about 36 per cent of the maize consumed in Mexico is imported; only in 2018, it amounted to 17.13 million metric tons, mainly from that country.⁹ To make matters worse, the US policy of not labelling exports means that much of this grain may be of transgenic origin.

Obesity and overweight cost the State thousands of millions of pesos in hospital and medical care. The fact that this expenditure is paid with taxpayers' money means that the Mexican public is effectively subsidising the 'externalities' incurred in these business practices by companies that are not very good at paying their taxes themselves and which already benefit from all sorts of exemptions, concessions, and special treatment.

At the end of the last century, the government began to show some concern for this problem, and a few initiatives were adopted, although with little results. For example, it became mandatory that all advertisements of these products on TV or radio end with a ridiculous and hardly discernible message that recommended consumers to "eat fruits and vegetables". In general, a 'soft' approach to the problem has dominated policy across successive administrations, which consists of calling on companies to self-regulate their publicity according to their own ethical principles and social responsibility.¹⁰ In an attempt to protect the children (to whom junk-food publicity is directed) bottled drinks ads were eliminated from certain TV segments, but other propaganda spaces went untouched.

In view of the ineffectiveness of self-regulation, civil society groups called for more coercive measures. However, once they found a seat at the negotiating table, transnational corporations (some of them of Mexican origin) would not relent and were able to diffuse their responsibility by shifting the blame onto traditional snacks —many of them home made.¹¹ The battle to oust junk food and unhealthy beverages from schools has been fierce.

At long last, in the present administration —which goes by the motto "the poor first"— the Senate of the Republic passed an initiative in May 2021 to definitely ban the sale of junk food and unhealthy beverages inside and around schools, though it still needs to be approved by the Congress of the Union and enacted as a law.¹² Also, a few months earlier, front labels on food packages alerting the public of things like 'excess sugar', 'excess fat', and 'excess sodium' content made their debut appearance in all stores. Unfortunately, the fact that these labels have been applied to virtually every item found in a supermarket places junk food at the same level as many other healthier options, defeating their very purpose. Consumers then continue to be left to their own devices.

In 2005, a colleague and I set out to investigate the strategies that indigenous housewives in rural communities of the state of Michoacan followed when it came to feed their families. Our research project addressed food security from the perspective of the consumer by looking at the knowledge, perceptions, and practices of these women in the field of food obtention and preparation. We interviewed housewives from Ocumicho and Comachuen, two communities of the Purhepecha ethnic group located a little more than 40 kilometres away from each other in a region known as the Tarascan Plateau.¹³

Though usually understood in exclusively quantitative terms (i.e., access to food), food security is a comprehensive concept that includes such things as the quality and safety of food. Just as important as it is to have something to put on the family table is the concern about the nutritional quality and the health risks associated to various food items. Uncertainty about the quality of the food available for consumption translates into nutritional vulnerability.

In the midst of a transition from a self-sufficient to a market economy, these communities experienced —and continue to experience— an unprecedented situation of nutritional vulnerability. A decline in subsistence agriculture due to the dismantling of communal land systems, dwindling and less productive family holdings, and an increasingly scarce labour force rendered these communities increasingly more dependent on the market to obtain their daily food. Our main research question was: What information do these women have about the food products they find in the market and the risks involved in their consumption? How do they manage to properly feed their families? What are the choices they make?

Women from the two communities showed genuine interest in learning about the risks involved in transitioning to 'new' agricultural methods and practices and in buying food from outside sources. They all showed a disposition to participate in community programmes such as the ones directed by health and social workers.



A (small) 'tiendita' in an urban setting. Photo: Antonio Prieto.

Though most of the women interviewed had a clear notion of the gastro-intestinal and vascular risks associated to eating foods with high fat content, such as pork meat and fried items —obviously a result of official programmes— their opinion about bottled drinks and junk food was not as clear-cut. Although they had some notion that these items were not necessarily healthy, many of the interviewees referred to them as “good” and said they were reserved for special occasions, since the women could not afford them on a daily basis. This evidences two things: on the one hand, the persuasive power of propaganda and, on the other, the ironic advantage of having a low purchasing power. Not being able to afford these items effectively prevented these women and their families from completing the transition to regular consumers of packaged food of industrial origin.¹⁴

Another concern was the use of agrochemicals in food production, a topic about which they had not enough information but a lot of intuition. Finally, they seemed to have no information whatsoever about the risks involved in cultivating maize with exogenous seeds of transgenic origin or consuming imported grain.

Overall, it can be said that women from these two communities had a clear notion of the relationship between a healthy diet and longevity, and that in striving to guarantee this for their families they used whatever resources they had at hand from both traditional knowledge and the information they received from the outside and processed in the family/ community context. Evidently, much more quality information was needed to make conscious choices. But, unfortunately, access to quality information (and to safe and healthy eating) remains a privilege of the well-to-do in Mexico, as in many other parts of the world.

Counteracting the power of propaganda takes a lot of effort. Consumer groups have grown both in number and influence ever since, as have producer-to-consumer farming organisations in many parts of the country. However, much remains to be done to defeat the enemy within.

Postscript

As this article goes to the press, companies are resorting to two-front packages that hide the levels on goods on super market shelves.<<<https://www.eluniversal.com>>>.

¹ Johns Hopkins University and Medicine. Coronavirus Resource Centre. <<<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>>>, accessed on 29 April 2021.
² Statista <<<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1105914/coronavirus-death-rates-worldwide/>>>, accessed 29 April 2021. According to the data shown on this page, the average world fatality rate as of April 29 2021 was 2.07%).
³ Torres, Felipe and Agustín Rojas. “Obesidad y salud pública en México: transformación del patrón hegemónico de oferta-demanda de alimentos”. *Problemas del Desarrollo*,

193 (49): 155, April-June 2018 <<<http://probdes.iiec.unam.mx>>>.
⁴ Only in 2018, diabetes mellitus was responsible for 14.8% of total deaths (Soto-Estrada, Guadalupe, Moreno-Altamirano, Laura, & Pahua Díaz, Daniel. “Panorama epidemiológico de México, principales causas de morbilidad y mortalidad”. *Revista de la Facultad de Medicina, Mexico*, 2016, 59 (6): 8-22. <http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_art-text&pid=S0026-17422016000600008&lng=es&tlng=es>).
⁵ Torres and Rojas; Unicef Mexico <<<https://www.unicef.org/mexico/salud-y-nutrici%C3%B3n>>>, accessed on 24 May 2021.
⁶ Delgado, Sandra. “México, primer consumidor de refrescos en el mundo”. *Gaceta UNAM*, 28 October 2019. <https://www.gaceta.unam.mx/mexico-primer-consumidor/>.
⁷ In 2010, Mexican gastronomy received the distinction by UNESCO of Intangible Patrimony of Humanity. Representative recipes came from the southwestern state of Michoacan.
⁸ As a diversification strategy (and a business opportunity), some of these companies now sell drinking water in plastic bottles, which has enormously contributed to the already unmanageable garbage-recycling problem at the local and national levels.
⁹ Sagarpa. Planeación Agrícola Nacional 2017-2030 <<www.gob.mx/sagarpa>>; *El Economista* <<<https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/empresas/Mexico-lejos-de-ser-auto-suficiente-en-maiz-20200126-0111.html>>>, accessed on 26 May 2021.
¹⁰ See Montes de Oca, Laura Beatriz. *Comida chatarra: entre la gobernanza regulatoria y la simulación*. UNAM. Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Mexico City, 2019.
¹¹ Montes de Oca.
¹² Aristegui Noticias <<<https://aristeginoticias.com/1202/mexico/senado-prohibe-la-venta-de-comida-chatarra-en-las-escuelas-y-fuera-de-ellas/>>>, accessed May 29, 2021.
¹³ Oseguera, David; Esparza, Luis. “Significados de la seguridad y el riesgo alimentarios entre indígenas purépechas de México”, *Desacatos. Revista de antropología social, CIESAS, Mexico*, September-December 2009: 115-136.
¹⁴ This has been pointed out by other observers. See Trápaga Delfín, Yolanda. “Sobre el patrón alimentario del mexicano actual”. *La Jornada newspaper* <<<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2002/03/01/percuatro.html>>>.

Luis Esparza is an independent researcher in Human Geography and related fields, and has researched on the perception of the lived space of the rural inhabitants of the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh, among other topics. He now works mostly as a translator/editor and is an Ayurveda enthusiast.

An inspiring story from the Nallamala forest

Hemalatha Nalla

whatever she had learnt while attending training programmes and demonstrations from time to time. Very soon she converted her entire land and experienced encouraging results: after this she did not look back. She converted the family's chemically grown mono-crop farm land into a plot with at least 3 key crop cycles each year, ensuring green



Pulicharla Saraswati is a woman of 35 and belongs to the Chenchu community. She lives in a remote village called Palemcheruvu in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh.

The village is situated about 4 kms from the nearest road; there are 290 households of which 149 practicing farming.

Like in many other places in India, this village too suffers from insufficient water supply, extensive use of chemical inputs, limited use of modern farming equipment, over dependence on mono-cropping, poor storage facilities, 'tied-up' sale, transportation problems and high interest rates on loans. Most government schemes are yet to reach small farmers.

Saraswati's family income came from agriculture on their plot of two acres. Until 4 years ago they only cultivated paddy in the kharif season. They suffered indebtedness as loans came with high interest rates; even then, the net income was never more than Rs 15000/year on an investment of about Rs 25000/-. About Rs 18000/- of the investment went into chemical inputs.

Saraswati wondered whether she should continue with farming at all. Fortunately, she came across the concept of natural methods of farming which seemed promising, especially as it reduced input costs considerably. She decided to try this method, despite her family being reluctant. Saraswati put all her efforts into natural farming, adopting

cover all year, growing vegetables, pulses, millets, oil seeds, and cereals, along with paddy. Over the last three years she has earned a good income too, as shown in the table below.

2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
48000/-	62500/-	88000/-

Apart from changing the cropping pattern, reduced input costs increased the income from selling the surplus. The most interesting part of Saraswati's story is the way she spent her additional income. She repaired the house that was falling apart, she bought 2 deshi cows and 25 sheep in 2 years, and constructed a permanent shed for the livestock; she also dug a bore-well for the farm. All these are investments towards a sustainable livelihood for the family in the years to come.

Saraswati also cultivated fodder for the increasing livestock, integrating that into the farming practice and saving money. She then moved beyond her own farm and began motivating her fellow farmers in the village to adopt the natural farming practices. As she was successful others were encouraged to try it out. She was offered a job with one of the government's natural farming programmes as a Cluster Activist and has converted 125 farmers (of the 149) in the village.

Saraswati's achievement attracted the attention of the district collector and the local Member of Parliament, as most of the farmers in the village were following in her footsteps. Their overall efforts and shift to natural farming has improved soil health as



well as the water table in the region. The officials have promised deshi cows, the key in adopting natural farming, and supported Saraswati and the village by connecting them with a few goshalas that have provided 20 cows.

Saraswati now also runs a small natural farming inputs shop, supplying Ghana Jeevamruth, Drava Jeevamruth, Bio-Extracts, etc., besides some farm equipment. However, she is keen to teach fellow farmers how to prepare the inputs on their own.

She plans to buy more cows so as to cater to more farmers and has worked out a poultry initiative to make use of the available shed.

Saraswati aims to convert the entire village to natural farming, besides bringing the entire agricultural land under permanent green cover. While working full-time on farming she has completed a degree in B.Com degree in 2019 through Open University. Her two very young daughters go to a nearby school in town: she hopes one of them can be a doctor. One can dream big and make it happen!

Hemalatha Nalla works with Kovel Foundation, Andhra Pradesh



Labour Day

Ton Thonon



Source- <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/netherlands-festivals-intl/index.html>

(A conversation between Ton and the telephone operator at a vaccination centre in Kerkrade, The Netherlands)

On 1st May I called 08001351 and asked why I should get vaccinated.

- If we all get ourselves vaccinated the coronavirus will disappear, said the telephone operator clearly.

I enjoy good health. Why would I risk side-effects?

- There are mild side-effects, but you will be less seriously ill from the corona after the jab.

In Germany there are reports of people who've died after the vaccination. These reports are less known in The Netherlands.

- In The Netherlands too people have died, she remarked. May I have a look what the situation is for you? she asked.

I'm 65 years old and without complaints or illnesses, my zipcode is 6461, I helped her.

- Then for you it will be Moderna or Pfizer.

May I at least choose, (not that I want any), but is that possible?

- Alas! It has to be one or the other.

I don't want to foreclose the amenities offered. But how can I convey that this jab is not for me?

- If you don't respond to the invitation that would be enough.

Thank you for the information. Have a good day.

I had the impression that the lady was not fully convinced of what she needed to report on this Labour Day.

Ton Thonon is a philosopher on the loose appraising Dutch and European societies.

(translated by Elly and Madhu Oenema from the Dutch)

What's in a name?

Bhavya George

Over the past few years several cities and places were renamed: Bangalore to Bengaluru, Bombay to Mumbai, Madras to Chennai and Gurgaon to Guru-

Valliyamma, one of the barefoot ecologists in our team, gumba means a pot in the Irula language; and this vejja tree has a huge bulge in the middle of the trunk, resembling a pot.



gram. The reasons could be political or historical, even cultural. But each change does raise a few questions and evokes a few debates.

In contrast, indigenous place names that refer to a place in the forest, a specific grassland or river, and other ecosystems that people live in, speak of various associations and narratives. As custodians of their landscape, place-names for indigenous communities are much more than geographical lat-long points on the map. It describes their perception of the landscape, usually linked to their culture, and may refer to the flora and fauna of the area, and their unique interactions with them.

During the three years of walking and talking with the indigenous Irula people in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (STR) I have heard quite a few interesting tales and descriptions of the place names. I'd like to share a few of these.

1. Vejjagumba: A signage tree where travelers rest

This is a vejja tree (*Anogeinuss latifolia*) found on the path to Bejalatty village while going from Thadasalatty. Why Vejjagumba? According to

In that 3 km stretch of dirt track to Bejalatty there are many places to rest. For people carrying their shopping or firewood as head-loads from the bus stop to the village, Vejjagumba is one of the many places to rest, and Valliyamma mentioned that she and her sister often took a betel-nut break in this spot and spent time chatting.

2. Maavanatham: Name that speaks change

Maavanatham is a village in the STR and in one of the conversations a village elder told me that “natham” means a flatland in the forest. And “maa” in many south Indian languages means mango; however, *Persea macrantha*, is known locally as kulamavu and the forest around the village has both maa and kulamavu in good number. And the village got its name, Maavanatham, because it was on a flat land with these trees. He added how in the past ten years he could see the tree line pushing closer towards the village boundary and the forest becoming denser. There was a time when his father had much cattle and they could watch them grazing near the paattis (the open pens inside the forest to keep cattle) from the village, but now the forest has changed.

3. Jaagate Kallu: Music in the hill tops

Jaagate kallu is a rock formation on a hill top which can be accessed through the forest path from Itterai. This area is where people go to collect seemar (*Phoenix grass*). “Jaagate” means gong (musical instrument) in Irula, and ‘kallu’ is stone. It is said that if one bangs the stone it sounds like a gong. I’d like to test that.

The places names mentioned above are a small sample from a long list. Many of these hint at the interactions the local communities have with the space and the natural life there; sometimes there are references to ecological changes that may have taken place.

Will indigenous place names be appreciated for their intrinsic values? Or will they fade away without documentation and recognition? Literature on indigenous place names indicates that the names of many landscapes across the world have been overwritten, thereby forgetting or sidelining the importance of the socio-ecological values inherent in the indigenous names.



It is time to appreciate the values that are embedded in indigenous place names, and see their connection with the landscape, and their system of management and governance.

“Barefoot Ecologists are individuals who have traditional ecological knowledge and have been trained in observing, recording and analysing data; along with being involved in some or all aspects of the project, from setting goals and defining methods, to data collection and interpretation, to sharing the data produced (Keystone Foundation)”



But there is hope. A global resolution passed by the United Nations Group of experts on geographical names recommends that countries with indigenous/native communities to make an effort to collect geographical names, along with the appropriate information. There is also a Working Group constituted to discuss and take steps on the promotion of indigenous and minority groups place names, to oversee activities to promote indigenous and minority geographical names as a means of cultural retention/revitalization.

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Bhavya George works with the Keystone Foundation, Tamil Nadu.

Burning the forest for peace

Snehlata Nath

Incense sticks are used across many religions in Asia in temples, churches and monasteries. Any festive occasion or even funerals require these to be burning, as part of the rituals and norms. Over the years incense has become part of our households, lit during prayer and for memory. Incense sticks are made by many small and big industries, and is even a household enterprise. Commonly called *agarbatti* across India, this ancient traditional product needs a brief analysis from the NTFP viewpoint.



All the ingredients that compose an incense stick are usually gathered from the forest. The ‘body’ of the incense sticks is of bamboo and in India is supplied in large quantities from the North Eastern states. The agarbattis are made of a mixture of resinous wood powder, gums, resins, frankincense, essential oils and perfumes. A binding agent is required to hold these ingredients together and allow for slow burning. Traditionally in India, the bark of *Litsea spp.* from the Eastern Ghats, and *Persea macrantha*, from the Western Ghats, are used as binding powders.

Persea macrantha, known as ‘kulamavu’ in Tamil, is a large evergreen tree. Its leaves often have galls and it is easy to recognise the tree as the one which forms the canopy in the forests of the Western Ghats. In the 1990s large scale collection of the bark in Palni Hills, the Nilgiris and parts of Karnataka was done. The tree is now rare and needs protection.

Litsea glutinosa, known as ‘menda’ in Hindi is found in the Eastern Ghats across Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The bark has a mucilage content useful to bind together ingredients for making agarbatti. The wood of *Litsea* is used for making agricultural implements, the root fibre for making ropes and paper pulp, the young leaves for fodder, the seed oil for making candles, soaps and seed powder for treating skin ailments. With these multiple uses, the demand for the tree and its parts was anyway high among local communi-

ties. After its bark found commercial importance in the incense stick industry, the population of *Litsea* fell drastically.

Due to unsustainable harvesting and the high demand of these barks, both *Persea* and *Litsea* trees are endangered in their natural habitats. Bark extraction has a complicated system of harvesting and if not done with due caution, giving trees enough time to heal, the trees often die. Removing the bark exposes the cambium of the tree to insect attack, fungi, pests and as a result the tree dies.

Many of the species used in this industry of incense are over harvested and need immediate protection. *Ailanthus*, *Commiphora*, *Canarium strictum*, *Boswellia serrata* all provide resin and are getting more and more difficult to find in natural forests. Generically known as Dhoop/Dhupa these resins were traditionally used in prayer by adivasi communities and to light torches when no modern torches existed.



When we move from small scale, well distributed traditional use to the large commercialisation of forest produce it is important to exercise restraint. It is difficult to make scientific assessments of the population of forest species, their distribution and status. Nor is there a way to ascertain the quanti-



ties that would make a sustainable harvest. One measure that has been successful, for some species, is their large scale cultivation. However, for both *Litsea* and *Persea* no such efforts have been undertaken and they are now imported from countries like Vietnam and Cambodia to meet the market demands. Cheaper substitutes have also been found to make lower grade agarbattis; however, many of the ingredients are toxic and burning them indoors may prove potentially harmful. Once again, the forest is in our home and we must think how to use it best.

Snehlata Nath is with the Keystone Foundation, Tamil Nadu.

Food dyes and me: a modern day horror story.

Mark Antrobus

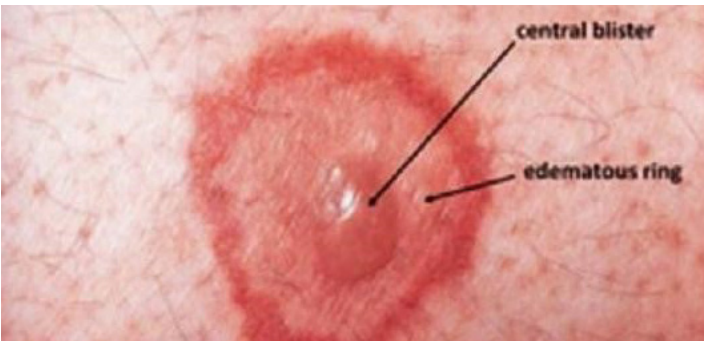
In the middle of the night—about 25 years ago here in Kodaikanal—I awakened to an intense burning sensation around my ankle. When I switched on the light I was shocked to find a bright red ring on my skin as though someone was branding me with a red-hot poker. I looked at the clock. It was one in the morning—outside it was drizzling in the winter monsoon. I put on my robe and slippers and went out to the garden with a knife in hand to cut a piece of aloe vera to apply to this burning wound and go back to sleep. The morning revealed that the target lesion had morphed into a blister as if a water balloon had grown on my ankle overnight.

Over the course of that first winter, one or two “target lesions” (erythema multiforme) appeared on my elbows, wrists and feet. These burning lesions would emerge as if from nowhere at night and transform by clockwork into water blisters. These abominations would last for three months before subsiding. Once without my noticing, a lesion appeared on my right elbow. The single bed was adjacent lengthwise to the wall and when turning in bed my elbow touched against the plaster. This awakened me from a half-sleep with a searing sensation accompanied by cry of “owwch!” The now delicate epidermis had scraped right off my elbow revealing



a whole lot of red subdermal tissue. I was swathed in cotton and bandage on different parts of me for that winter.

Local physicians were befuddled as to what this condition was. Suggestions included Lupus erythematosus (SLE) an ‘incurable’ auto-immune disease that can assault the joints, skin, kidney, blood cells, brain, heart, and lungs: a genetic disorder that appears in African, Hispanic, Asian and, Jewish genetic lines. In those days before the internet, I scoured the medical textbooks of our doctor friends at the local hospital. I found water blisters and Lupus all under the rubric of idiopathic—which is to say ‘causes unknown’. I decide to take a trip down to the Plains to visit a top dermatologist at CMC in Vellore. It was she who talked about ‘target lesions’ and



erythema multiforme, probably not Lupus, which was a relief, but she reiterated that the cause for these events was idiopathic and that I might try antihistamine and an antifungal cream. The ‘idiopathic’ condition was aggravated most during cold weather. The first breakthrough came after three years when I began to suspect the cause was not within, not genetic, fungal, or viral but environmental. This was when, on a bus halt from Dindigul, a hawker came by the window and for a few coins accommodated me with a packet of popular crispy-fried snacks called kaara-sev. Crunching down on my five rupees-worth of crispy kaara sev I noticed that it was not very “kaaram” (chili hot) despite the bright red color. That night, another target lesion appeared on my elbow and a blister soon followed in the morning. Some weeks later having a lovely dinner with Kamal, a friend from Bombay, that I determined what was the cause of all this hell. Kamal had a massive glass jar of bright red Bombay pickle which I had on the side with chapati. Again on that night a small blister appeared on my forearm and I decided the cause of my years-long condition was indeed food dye.



As mentioned, there was no internet for us back in those days; and being rather isolated in the Hills from medical libraries I let it go. I simply avoided red foods and sweets (e.g., chocolates with maraschino cherries) and this reversed my condition. Around the turn of the millennium, I came across a tiny news item in the Indian Express reporting that a container load of red Tandoori Chicken powder from India was refused at UK customs and sent back to its port of origin as UK laws had been upgraded regarding food dyes. A few years after this a friend of ours who manufactures leather goods in Chennai was bemoaning his loss. Why? A huge shipment of their red leather jackets was refused import into Germany. It turns out that even skin contact with some forms of red dye can create allergic reactions.

Through our Trust, I do medical interventions sending patients to conventional doctors, as well as consulting for Nature Cure. In seemingly “hopeless cases” I always advise folks to eliminate tea and coffee

and white sugar, etc., but most importantly to make their own masala powders and avoid processed foods and commercial spices. For more than fifteen years of red-dye abstinence, I experience zero recurrences of those terrible lesions. On one occasion a friend of ours turned up with an ugly rash with bright red pustules on his wrist. He told me it was “heat”. When enquiring more deeply I found that he had been working far from home in Kerala and had eaten that bright red Chicken 65 from the streets for months. I know, all this is anecdotal, but the evidence piles up. For example, our housekeeper Mary appeared for work after a long weekend with



a rough rash by her nose to her cheek. Asking her what happened she said it was because she was taking vitamin B tablets and they are known to create “heat”. Examining the pills revealed that they were sugar-coated with erythrosine, a notorious red food dye. Stopping the pills, the rash went away. After a decade and a half of complete relief, one day I was making some popcorn at home one day and thought I’d sprinkle some turmeric powder just to



give it some color. I consumed yellow popcorn in front of the television for two days in a row when, to my horror, a water blister appeared on my foot. I went back to the turmeric, an all-India spice company which we soon banned in the house and began to take whole turmeric to the mill for domestic use.

The latest and most disturbing anecdotal case which has ended in tragedy was that of a driver Ramesh from Kodaikanal who went to the big city of Coimbatore for driving work. His favorite food is red-coloured fish and quail to accompany a drink, coated with the radioactive-looking red of the “65” ingredients. His wife claimed that he demanded “Chicken 65” with his daily meal even from home, while in Coimbatore he consumed even more than usual for three months which I believe brought on the gangrene, as though being afflicted by snakebite! I want to say, snakebite by provender. Several doctors agree with me as to the seriousness of dyes in Indian food while others laugh off any thought that “masalas” could cause such problems. In fact, we have ameliorated gangrene through natural methods in the early stages of numbness before necrosis has set in, but the Ramesh case was far too advanced and his left foreleg had to be amputated.



Recently we helped a patient, Rani, in her 20’s to be tested properly for a thyroid condition. She had been examined at various clinics but had only undergone a cursory thyroid test. This time we took a rather more expensive test which included examination for Graves’ disease. It turned out that her condition was just this, an auto-immune reaction mimicking other thyroid conditions. Looking it up on the net revealed that one warning for sufferers was “to avoid red food coloring”. Along with medication prescribed by the doctor, I suggested the family throw out the commercial masalas they’d consumed on a regular basis. Rani is recovering quite well and was married recently. The 10-rupee packets of masala packets sold in India are very convenient for lower-income families. But most families have a blender (given by the government) and can make their masalas with the exception of turmeric. In this time of Covid when turmeric is touted as a preventative herb, it’s quite troubling to think of the amount of artificial dyes utilized by Covid patients thinking they are doing the right thing.

Certainly, not everyone has a noticable adverse drug reaction⁵ and auto-immune response to (particularly) red and yellow dyes. But as with the thyroid, internal problems like kidneys being affected and other affilcitiions could be on the horizon. There are changes taking place with the public and business becoming more aware. Certain vitamin pills, for example, vitamin B12, shifted from Ponceau red and Sunset yellow to beetroot color and others to different shades of iron oxide: red, brown, yellow, and black. Several restaurants in town no longer use red dyes in chow mein, dragon chicken etc. Spices companies in Kerala have abandoned dyes. And folks who can, make their own masalas for home use.

There are tests that anyone can easily perform to find out if spices are adulterated with cheap, harmful substances. The images below illustrate some of these tests.⁶

Test 14 : Detection of lead chromate in turmeric whole

Testing Method:

- ⊗ Add small quantity of turmeric whole in a transparent glass of water.
- ⊗ Pure turmeric will not leave any colour.
- ⊗ Adulterated turmeric appears to be bright in colour and leaves colour immediately in water.



Test 15 : Detection of artificial colour in turmeric powder

Testing Method:

- ⊗ Add a teaspoon of turmeric powder in a glass of water.
- ⊗ Natural turmeric powder leaves light yellow colour while settling down.
- ⊗ Adulterated turmeric powder will leave a strong yellow colour in water while settling down.



There are plenty of natural food dyes from natural sources like paprika, saffron, vegetables—and even squid ink for anyone who is not vegan. The best thing in India (and Asia) even now with legislation slowly creeping along to alter things, is to avoid products that are (especially) red or yellow, just to be sure and to buy organic turmeric powder or to buy clean trusted turmeric, smash it into small pieces and grind it up in the mixie-blender. Beware of Indian-style pickle (chutney) that is bright red.

Our appetites are stimulated by green, red, and yellow colors in food. The best breakfast is fruit, like papaya and pineapple. Meals planned with red from tomato and red pepper, and green from greens and green pepper curry leaves, etc., highlight the rest of the food and are more attractive. Here are a few examples of naturally colorfull dishes.

Appetite is not the only reason we ought to prepare meals with colour, fruits and vegetables which are colourful contain plenty of vitamins and other anti-oxidants and bioflavanoids required for health and immunity. Cooking without salt is also vital



according to Nature Cure. We feel good having happy-looking food that is sourced from Nature and not “putting lipstick on a pig” with artificial and dangerous dyes, which reflect the artificial quick-fix nature of commercial life.

We should encourage governments to be vigilant (it seems to be a problem throughout Asia) in protecting citizens from adverse drug reactions, sadly, in respect to commercial obliviousness. Surely the costs to governments looking after sick economically disadvantaged folks—as with the bane of tobacco—should spur action in this quarter.

The Kerala State Government wised up recently and has taken action to ban certain out-of-state spice mixes and masalas with dangerous dyes. This signals that this might become a statewide initiative in India, and throughout, Asia still to catch up with government mandates initiated by consumer protection organisations in the West.

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⁵ An adverse drug reaction (ADR) may be defined as an undesirable clinical manifestation resulting from administration of a particular drug or other chemical in the environment; this includes reactions due to overdose, predictable side effects, and unanticipated adverse signs.

⁶ <https://fssai.gov.in/dart/> (This website illustrates tests to check adulteration for many food items)

Mark Antrobus is the President of the Palni Hills Conservation Council in Kodaikanal, is a Nature Cure aficionado and writer who looks after Mother Earth Trust and its sanctuary in the Hills. He was assisted in the article by Siddharth Kalra.



Barefoot ecologists of Nilambur - locked in not locked out!

Asish M. and Anita Varghese

Keystone Foundation received funding from the UNESCO, New Delhi, to train indigenous community members in Nilambur, in January 2020. They were to take up ecological monitoring, the restoration of native (plant) species, and conduct nature education. The health and nutrition needs of their people were an additional aspect of the programme. Little did we expect that a virus would make all our plans futile, and that a lockdown awaited us in March 2020. The pandemic swept across Kerala, with the project area reporting the highest numbers. A quick way to get the work underway was needed.

Asish who is from Nilambur, is an ecologist by training and a staff member of Keystone. He was all set to lead this project; as work from home became the norm we were indeed lucky that home and work-place were not far apart.

Nilambur is located in the Malappuram district of Kerala, home to several indigenous groups like the Kattunayakan, the Cholanayakan, the Paniya, the Muduva, etc. The region is drained by fast flowing rivers, namely the Chaliyar and its tributaries, which flow through pristine evergreen forests of the higher reaches. The indigenous people like the Cholanayakan number less than 150 people, while other groups like the Kattunayaka and Paniya are estimated to be around 5000 in number. They have a strong dependence on the forests and also earn their livelihoods from wage labour. Many of them have been relocated from their homes inside the forest; however, some have moved willingly since access to the forest was limited and threat from wildlife, especially elephants, was high.

Over the past decade, with the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006), and especially the Community Forest Rights provisions in the Act, the people are coming forward to claim their rights. The women and youth would like to revisit, relearn and revive their relationship with the forests of their ancestors. A new leadership has emerged in many of the villages to implement the Act in its true spirit. It is at this crucial juncture that we set out to train the community members, and give the women and youth some skills and knowledge to aid them in becoming leaders of their community.



The river is a big part of the lives of indigenous communities and almost all their settlements are located on the riverbanks. The Barefoot Ecology program therefore looked at the ecology of the river. When six people from three villages came forward to be part of the program our first challenge was to ensure regular trainings and learnings. Virtual learning became a reality for them – anyway the children already needed internet for their online classes and now the parents had to follow suit. In July, Abhishek from Keystone conducted a three week intensive course, online, for the six on photography and film making.





After successfully completing the course the groups had their own cameras and laptops for editing and began the journey to document, observe and communicate about the biodiversity of their rivers. Support was also given to the NTFP value addition unit to continue procuring and value adding local produce. The team of barefoot ecologists maintained a forest species nursery in their villages. Each nursery has around 3000 plants that were raised from forest seeds during the lockdown period. The team also went around their riverbanks on a one kilometre path observing the river and associated riverbank vegetation. In spite of the project having concluded in April the team continues to monitor their rivers and collect information on the forests. In August 2021 the survey will have covered 12 months and we will see how to take it forward.

This project, with its emphasis on documentation and recording, was a timely one. It gave community members new skills with which they could record through audio and video what was happening in their environment. The two consecutive floods of the past years have left a deep scar in their lives, with the added uncertainty of the lockdown.

They have survived and have taken on this work of looking after their forests and rivers, keeping a watch on it! Wage employment was hard to come by in these times, and it was important to be engaged in something proximate and meaningful. One of the villages that was selected for the nutrition project was not part of the plan initially.

But during the lockdown period intense depressions led to several suicides in the village and a decision was taken to hold monthly events in the village. It involved cooking and eating together and meeting all the people in the village. This has helped alert the government departments who are now keeping a close watch on the village to ensure their wellbeing.

This project also gave us an insight into the kind of activities that could be part of local people's lives and how they can be engaged during a pandemic. Today the barefoot ecologists have made a short film on their journey and use their cameras to photograph life around their villages and in the forest. The nurseries are coming up well and will be maintained by the team. 'Thoduve' – their very own value addition centre, buys honey and other forest products that the people harvest. Beekeeping has increased and many of the youth have taken to it in earnest. While wage opportunities may have reduced, the people and their forests seem to be doing well so far.

Asish M., and Anita Varghese work with the Keystone Foundation, Tamil Nadu.



The brink of hunger

Ajinkya Ukey

Daily life among adivasi and forest people came to a halt after the lock down announced by the state government, in an attempt to control the spread of the corona virus. The impacts of the lock down on the livelihoods of the people were many. The closure of local markets and the restrictions imposed on travel directly affected income generating activities.

A majority of adivasi and forest dwellers have already fallen into debt due to the circumstances. Those with goods are forced to sell at low prices as there are very few buyers in the local markets when they are open.

In 2020 the sudden lock down that was imposed led to a deprivation that compelled millions of adivasi migrants to travel back to their remote forest villages. Many walked hundreds of kilometers as there was no transport; in addition, thousands of older people were stranded in their villages during the lock down with almost no income or support. Approximately 70% of adivasi incomes come from NTFPs such as mahua, tendu, chironjee, char and bamboo. Unfortunately, both the lock downs happened in March-April, the peak season for NTFP harvest. Erratic weather conditions added to the existing problems, causing a record decline in NTFP output. With the government providing neither time nor space for selling what little NTFPs adivasi people had they were seriously impacted.

It is recommended that the government takes immediate action and formulates a plan to compensate losses incurred by the adivasi people in the NTFP trade and adopt necessary mitigation measures; the state also needs to prioritize the food security of tribal communities. However, the government seems very confused with regard to the support to the adivasi and forest dwelling communities: the contradictory decisions and actions among the various state departments is a case in point. For instance, the government is raising the minimum support price of NTFPs; alongside, the MoEFCC is restricting community access to forests



A family working with tendu leaves

In PRERAK's project areas the adivasi people are heavily dependant upon the weekly markets. What they earn from selling the NTFPs they collect is partially used for the expenses incurred in the khariff crop. But this year the people could hardly collect much of NTFPs due to the restriction on their movements; much of the collected produce went to waste due to the closure of local markets after the orders issued by state government. Thousands of daily wages labourers had been instructed to stay home; the rice mills, shops, construction sites were closed across the state. Most wage labourers are landless adivasi people from nearby locations. They are the Kamar, Gond, Baiga, Birhor or other adivasi communities with whom PRERAK works, and are spread across the districts of Mahasamund, Dhamtari, Kanker, Kabirdham, Bastar, Gariyaband, Raigarh, Bilaspur, Mungeli, Dantewada and Kondagaon. The story is the same in any of the other districts of the state. The present condition of the daily wage adivasi people is tragic; they have no food security and have been confined to their homes.



A woman with a basket of mahua flowers

(in an apparent bid to save wildlife from transmission of the corona virus). Restrictions were also applied on the implementation of MGNREGA work during the lock down; it was further delayed due to the scarcity of personnel to generate work and assess work already done. Millions of adivasi people have been pushed into poverty and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs needs to urgently ensure proper healthcare for the adivasi people on a priority basis. This should be done alongside ensuring food security for these communities.

The immediate needs, however, need to be met to ensure food security for these tribal communities. The extension of support through direct cash transfers will also be a concrete step towards alleviating the present problems, at least temporarily.

For the long term, a concrete livelihood support plan needs to be formulated. This should include agricultural subsidies, support for value-addition of NTFPs, the raising of MSPs, and assured procurement. The state government needs to collaborate with concerned ministries and frame effective plans for a smooth NTFP-based livelihood for the adivasi communities for the coming years. Such plans would necessarily include funds with the Gram Sabhas for afforestation of their community forests: it will generate employment in the present and assure a livelihood in the future.



family making bundles of tendu leaves

Ajinkya Ukey, is with the PRERAK, Rajim, Gariyaband, Chhattisgarh.

Picking mahua flowers under the tree cleared of all litter



Can The Netherlands push for better agro-ecosystems worldwide?

Paul Wolvekamp and Tamara Mohr

Recent studies confirm that The Netherlands still has a large global deforestation footprint. This is unsurprising if one considers that The Netherlands is one of the largest importers of soyabean in Europe, and the European Union's largest importer of palm oil. So much for the bad news. The good news is that our major role as an importer of these products implies that The Netherlands can also use this position to contribute to a solution. We have a number of suggestions on how the Dutch can turn the tide.

Firstly, The Netherlands can stop contributing to the construction of infrastructure that facilitates the transport of products which drive deforestation. Dutch embassies are very proactive in advertising the know-how of Dutch companies, in order to assist such companies to win tenders around such infrastructure projects. This happened, for example, with the plans for the Brazilian 'soya corridor': a mega-infrastructure project to transport soy from the interior quickly to the seaports, from where this soya partially sets course for The Netherlands, and to other European countries.

An alternative would be for The Netherlands to promote its innovative knowledge in the field of sustainable agricultural and food systems. The Wageningen University enjoys a high international reputation in this field which could be used to ensure that countries, instead of importing our cows, chickens and pigs, can enhance their own systems for producing sustainable, locally grown, healthy food.

Secondly, it is time for binding legislation to uphold environmental and human rights standards in product chains. For the production of soy and palm oil, among other things, ecosystems are destroyed and local farmers and indigenous communities are driven from their land.

So far, The Netherlands prefers to focus on voluntary agreements with the business community, which have provided little or no improvement. To escape debate about The Netherlands' own responsibility, policy makers quickly refer to the EU as the arena where binding rules are forged.

The European Commission is currently working on legislative proposals to combat "imported deforestation" - deforestation caused by products that EU imports - worldwide. As a major importer, The Netherlands, as the most competitive economy in the EU, can play a pioneering role in Europe, instead of waiting. By passing the Bill on value chain responsibility in the Parliament, The Netherlands can set an example and make itself credible in both Europe and abroad for pushing really strong legislation that has far-reaching impacts on global ecology as well as farmers in poorer nations.



Photo Source- <https://www.dreamstime.com/green-ripening-soybean-field-green-ripening-soybean-field-agricultural-landscape-image119348643>



EU-Parliament : Photo Source- Leonardo1982/Pixabay

However, something urgently needs to change within the agricultural sector in The Netherlands as well. The overall number of livestock is far above ecologically sustainable limits and needs to be reduced; and farmers need better prices and prospects. This will help to tackle the Dutch international footprint, the incomes of farmers, and the domestic nitrogen problem. Food production must be more sustainable, and the efforts of outgoing Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Ms Carola Schouten, towards circular and nature-inclusive agriculture deserve broad support. The notion that The Netherlands feeds the world with its efficient food production is a fallacy, because the world feeds the Dutch livestock.

Let's ensure that the world can feed itself in a way that protects our planet, the climate and the living environment of billions of people. The Netherlands has no cause to be afraid of losing its stake in international trade. With these concrete actions, post elections, a newly formed government can show the world that The Netherlands is truly an innovative and concerned international player in the agricultural sector and that it is serious about international climate agreements.

Paul Wolvekamp and Tamara Mohr are with Both ENDS, Amsterdam.



Photo Source- <http://www.ipsnews.net/>

We lost a rishi

Pandurang Hegde

India has the tradition of rishis', learned and wise men with compassion, not only for human beings, but for all beings on Earth. 'Rishi' literally means those who study and understand the truth, the changes in nature, and who pass on their knowledge. Sunderlal Bahuguna was one such modern rishi, a spokesperson for Nature throughout his life, till the covid took him yesterday.

I first met Sunderlalji in the late 1970s in his Navjivan Ashram, an idyllic place set on a hillock overlooking the Bhilangana, a tributary of the Ganges. His first question was, "Why are you here? If you aspire for a career, then I am sorry, this is not the place. We train people to become activists, so that they can become the spokesperson for those who do not have a voice, the Nature, forests and rivers."

The routine and discipline of the Ashram, combined with the physical labor in the fields, helped us to maintain a balance between mental and manual labor, an essential quality for an activist, adhering to the ideology of simple living and high thinking.

Inspired by Gandhiji, Sunderlalji had launched a movement against the King in Tehri and British Raj at the age of 14, and was expelled. He studied in Lahore and, in the post independence era, he could have become a successful politician. But his wife to be, Vimla, set the condition that she would marry him only if he quit politics. That is how they jointly established Navjivan Ashram for constructive work in the Himalayas inspired by Mira Bhen, a disciple of Gandhiji.

Over the last forty years I have been practicing what he taught me, to stand up against the destruction of forests, against dams, and the pollution of rivers. And to convey the message that ecology is permanent economy. I am one among the innumerable people, especially the youth, whom he inspired. As Sunderlalji said, he was the messenger of the Chipko women, seeking to protect the basic capitals of humankind, which are Soil, Water and Air. During the early 1980s he undertook a Padyatra, a walk, of 4800 kms across the Himalayas, from Kashmir to Kohima. It took him three years. I was fortunate enough to join him in Bhutan and the north eastern Indian region.

At that time I was energetic and young but I could barely keep up with Sunderlalji in those hilly tracks. What was more, he carried his ruck sack that weighed 40 kgs on his back! The end of the day during the meeting in the villages, there was no trace of tiredness, but he was full of energy and humor sharing stories and listening to them. That is when I learnt the basics of grass roots action.



Photo Source- India Today

When he heard that people in Uttara Kannada launched Appiko, a movement similar to Chipko, he came and participated in the movement. He took me to the then Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde, saying to him that "these people are protesting against the policies of your government to destroy forests to establish teak plantations. We hope you will change the forest policy". There was no trace of anger and he was full of humility and compassion. His appeal touched the CM who had no other option but to take action that led to changes in the forest policy.

His influence spread far and wide, from the interiors of Bastar in India to far off places like Switzerland, Sweden, the USA and Japan.

In Bastar, a movement similar to Chipko was launched by tribal women to save the sal forests. In Odisha the movement against mining in the Gandhamardhan hills was inspired by Chipko. Across India he visited many places, whenever there was a need to save or protect forests and rivers. He played a significant role in the Silent Valley struggle.

What surprised me most was the way Japanese housewives and youth used his method of non-violent struggle to launch the Chipko movement in Japan, against the expansion of a highway that would destroy the natural forests. I had the rare opportunity to participate in this movement even though, unfortunately, the forests could not be saved. Similarly, I took part in the Chipko Padyatra organized in Switzerland. He was instrumental in spreading the message of the Chipko, of ecological conservation in different parts of the world.

Ironically, in our own country, the land where Chipko has become a legend, we are destroying forests, polluting rivers and damaging the basic capital of

air, water and soil that are essential for human survival as well as that of other forms of life.

Sunderlalji was a seasoned journalist, writing in Hindi and English on issues of environmental protection. I have seen him penning articles on his writing pad on a moving bus! He used his time judiciously to write articles and publish booklets on Chipko and related topics. He was often criticised by opponents as a “media savvy” person interested in self propaganda. Nevertheless, he categorically accepted this criticism and defended his action to use media for the cause of conservation.

Condoning his death, the Prime Minister said that is it ‘monumental loss, and he manifested the ethos of living in harmony with nature’. In sharp contradiction to his words the actions of the PM regarding the Char Dham highway, to link pilgrimage centers, (and other infra structure projects) is destabilizing the entire Himalayas.

This is a clear indication from those who rule us that we do not heed to the wisdom of the rishis.

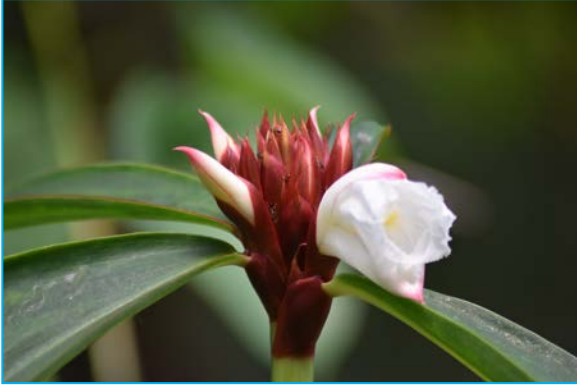
Many will pay rich homage to the memory of Sunderlalji, but the best way to pay tribute to this great soul is to practice what he taught, becoming the voice of voiceless Nature.

Vimla, Sundelalji’s lifelong companion, inspired him in his life long struggle. Unfortunately, she is also affected by covid and both of them were hospitalised together. Let us hope she recovers to continue the legacy. His long innings of 94 years was worth living, propagating the principles of non-violent action. He gave new lease to Gandhian philosophy, of living in harmony with nature as the road map to attain sustainable development.

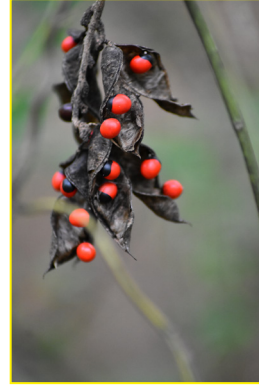
Pandurang Hegde is an activist and works with Prakruti based in Karnataka.



Nature Watch



Costus speciosus



Abrus precatorius



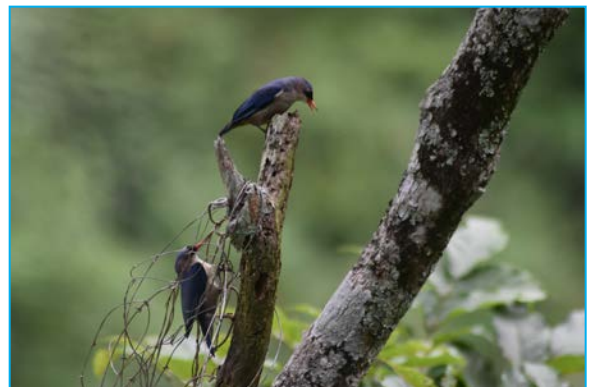
Erythrina suberosa



Gloriosa superba



Malabar Grey Hornbill



Velvet fronted Nuthatch



Ratufa indica



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