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Nexus so natural

Changes in the seasons brought in festivities which signified the importance of nature. Students were taught to draw inspiration from their surroundings and use it either for language, art or performing art classes. The concept of planting of saplings and ploughing of fields during Briksharopan in the month of August was introduced to the students of Vishwa Bharti as part of the festivities and everyone participated in the grand colourful event. In our house, we have always seen water retained after washing pulses and vegetables being used for watering plants.

Several species of birds have their homes in our garden and the squirrels know where their breakfast is kept each morning. It is simple for my father to point to the differences in the pattern of rocks and landscapes just as the knowledge of medicinal plants and uses comes naturally to my mother. Devika Raghav, whose parents grew up at Santiniketan, recounts.

One man's vision

Rabindranath Tagore, when he set up the Viswa Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1921, wanted to create an environment for study where students would learn not just from books, but from experiences, and feel one with nature by being aware of the trees, the birds and the animals. Before he set up the university in 1901, he had started a school

where classes were held in the sublime serenity of nature, under the trees. Tagore believed that ‘the highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our life in harmony with all existence’.

In close to a hundred years since Tagore envisioned this, we have, all around us, only witnessed the brutal destruction of nature by humans. All our modern day environmental problems are a result of our relationship with nature gone wrong. We have abused our rivers, forests, trees and animals, using them selfishly and offering no nurturing care in return for what we receive. In the name of development, we have built structure upon structure so our cities choke for air and rains flood our homes; we have encroached into forests leaving no safe haven for wild animals, so leopards walk into our concrete colonies and children’s schools looking for food and water.

Our collective greed has led us to forget how our culture and festivals were meant to foster our connect with nature. We have lost sight of the essence of traditions and engaged ourselves with rituals. One such example is the festival of Naga Panchami, which dates back to when humans still lived in close proximity with nature and wild animals.

With the advent of monsoons, as the rain filled their pits, the snakes came out. There must have been awe and fear and reverence apart from the status the snake holds in religion and culture. The worship of the snake or cobra may have begun to prevent people from killing the snakes that may otherwise not harm humans. Today, it has become a mindless ritual. Snake charmers capture snakes from the wilderness, pull out their fangs, making them incapable of living on their own in the wild again, and bring the helpless creatures in cramped baskets to our doorsteps so we can feed them milk.

Forging lost connections

Anuragini Nagar, who works in the social development sector and is a naturalist at heart, says, “I wanted to explore the ways in which animals, birds and flora support each other. Last year, I joined a group that goes on wildlife tours with experts. The first was a herpetofauna trip that offered me a glimpse into the world of reptiles and amphibians. Since then, I have been on three birding trips and apart from all the beauty and wonder I came across, I discovered how birds have adapted to the change — from habitat, to beaks, to eating habits. So it is with nature.” These trips have made her aware of the deep linkages between nature and humans and the fact that there is a space for every being on this planet.

Priya Ramakrishnan Anand, also a busy full-time professional, takes out time to trek to the mountains at least twice every year. Priya says that amidst the unspoilt beauty of the mountains, surrounded only by the awe-inspiring stillness of nature, the mind slows down to absorb the images and the essence of nature.

MapleTree Farms, a farmers’ combine of about 70 farmers that delivers fresh, organically grown farm produce to almost 60 Bengaluru households, insists on the buyers visiting the farm to see the practices they follow in order to not harm the soil or

disturb the delicate eco-system. Shankar, who leads this initiative, issues a light threat every once in a while, warning his buyers that he's going to make one yearly visit to the farm compulsory for them to continue being supplied. It is his way of facilitating our lost connection with nature.

A similar goal was in the mind of the young entrepreneurs of Linger, a chain of holiday homes with the tagline and philosophy — 'do nothing vacations'. Samir Shisodia, co-founder, tells me that "boredom is the start of awesome possibilities". So their 'properties' do not offer 'packages' — there is no television, no snooker tables or chlorinated swimming pools. There are, however, hills to trek to, farms to visit, villagers to talk with, and streams to bathe in or to fish.

They encourage the use of locally grown food and offer local dishes. He says their guests are almost always happy and grateful for the experience of being led back to the simple pleasures offered free in nature — that of sitting in the dark, spotting fireflies, soaking in a sudden shower, getting to know trees and birds by their names.

Healing the earth

We are all naturalists and nature lovers at heart, but in the mad rush that is our life, we have forgotten to stop and smell the flowers. But increasingly, people are reviewing and altering their lifestyles to live more in harmony with nature, to harm it less. From completely environmentally responsible, resource-efficient buildings to organic farms that not only give us chemical-free produce but also prevent the depletion of natural nutrients from the soil; from groups promoting eco-friendly lifestyle choices to those working to save our rivers and lakes, trees and animals — people in their own way, big and small, are trying to heal the planet — one band-aid at a time.

According to recent news reports, about 200 nature-loving volunteers came together to make seed balls on Earth Day in Bengaluru. To reverse the effects of deforestation and climate change, this is an effective and inexpensive way of planting trees. Seeds of local varieties of trees that are suited to the climate of the region are rolled into soil and manure and then these laddoos are tossed into forests and barren land before the monsoons. These germinate and take root. The germination rate is believed to be 70%. This no-till method is also said to prevent degradation of soil.

Top of form

Many farm owners have opened up their farms for visits and stay. Families, especially children brought up in polluted, concrete cities, get an opportunity to get close to nature and partake of the simple pleasures of life like the company of farm animals and learning how fruit and vegetables that they consume, grow. Many groups organise nature, tree and bird walks to spread awareness about our natural surroundings.

All life in harmony

“The basis of a man’s nature is almost always... the soil from which he draws sustenance, the air which he breathes, the sights, sounds, habits to which he is accustomed. They mould him...” (Sri Aurobindo)

High-schooler Abeer Khan, when she came to know that about 10% of the waste in her city of Bhopal comprised single-use plastic bags, began raising awareness about it and offered alternatives.

Starting from her school, she has facilitated the ban of plastic bags in two other localities of the city.

More schools than before are promoting learning through experiences; where students understand their linkages with nature and become aware of how human activities threaten the environment and animals.

There are more outdoor programmes that help students make sustainable lifestyle choices, explore eco-systems, and become aware of the natural world. But because this learning too is eventually geared towards the examination and score-based school system that aims to only better-‘equip’ students for their performance in exams, the crucial takeaway is lost. A child who learns about water conservation in school does not stop to think before leaving the water tap on at home.

In the absence of the fundamental sensibility of appreciation, wonder and regard for nature; of living our lives in harmony with it, we cause irreversible harm.

Long ago, we were walking on the ghats of Benaras and munching peanuts. Soon our hands were full of the empty shells and there was no trash bin in sight. We kept walking, holding on to our litter, displeased that we could eat no more. Our local guide and companion laughed at our predicament and pointed to the goats that were following us. They were polishing off the shells he was tossing away, leaving the ghats clean. But city life, where our segregation is complete when every bit of land, every tree and animal is property and not our partner, does not offer such simple solutions.