

Planting seeds for the future

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August 8, 2021

DH



DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

- AUG 08 2021, 00:17 IST
- UPDATED: AUG 08 2021, 02:40 IST

The baking hot summer has given way to cool breezes, and welcome showers of rain. The monsoon has been kind to us this year, filling up lakes, tanks and large dams across Karnataka. Koels now serenade the city, alongside the frogs and toads, calling for sweethearts at high volume. The snails, slugs and millipedes have returned in full force as well, and this is the time of the year when one needs to be careful while walking, looking down to make sure you don't crush an unwary, slow-crawling creature under

your feet (or tyres). In between showers, butterflies and dragonflies flutter around, basking in the sun, while sunbirds and other birds gorge on the nectar, fruits and insects that are in abundance all around.

These flying species are pollinators, crucial to maintaining the web of life that sustains us all. Karnataka's major cereal crops – rice, maize, wheat and ragi – do not need external pollinators to reproduce. But most of the fruits and vegetables we eat are pollinated by bees, butterflies, wasps, birds, beetles and other species. Some species of plants will die completely if pollinators collapse – for instance, the cacao bean, pollinated in South India by a tiny midge that resembles a mosquito. Without pollinators, the world's cacao bean production would collapse, leaving us to inhabit a world without chocolate.

Though scientists have warned us of this danger for years, the biodiversity of our pollinators has been rapidly shrinking – not just in India, but across the world. This is because of a complex set of factors. The pesticides we use kill all the insects, pollinators included. Cities like Bengaluru have concrete urban heat islands, patches of cement and asphalt, which trap the sun's rays and increase local temperature by several degrees. These also impact pollinators. But one of the major causes of pollinator collapse is the indiscriminate destruction of the trees and plants that once fed and sheltered these insects and birds.

The monsoon is the best season to make amends. As we mourn the 60,000-plus trees that are soon to be cut for infrastructure projects in and around Bengaluru, and the millions of trees the city has additionally lost in recent decades, we can also honour the memory of these trees, and of the birds, butterflies and other species that they protected, by going on a planting drive.

In cities like Bengaluru, every square-foot costs money, and there is very little space available for planting. But there are different ways in which each of us can recreate our living spaces and surroundings to coexist with pollinators, sharing our lives with nature in the city. Many parts of the city have large patches of open space in parks, where people visit regularly, and where trees are needed for shade. This is the best season to conduct plantation drives in nearby parks and at lake fringes (though not in the lake!), along the roadside, and in large compounds in schools, colleges, apartments, and corporate campuses. But everyone may not be able to do this.

Bengaluru's slums have astonishing levels of native plant diversity, and pollinators, in cramped places where water and basic necessities are minimal – they grow plants in old vessels, paint buckets, and plastic bottles, placing plants on their roof, or the sides of their homes. There is so much potential for bees and butterflies to thrive in Bengaluru if we can do the same in every apartment balcony across the city. Pollinators thrive in surroundings where they are left alone, so it is best to resist the urge to pluck every 'imperfect' leaf. We can all find space for a pot or two in a sunny corner of our homes where weeds and insect-friendly plants can grow undisturbed, inviting beautiful

butterflies to drop by for a moment of magic. We need to make room for insects, without the expectation that each leaf, flower and fruit will be perfect. Hidden in the decay of the leaf is the story of the caterpillar and the butterfly.

Nature

monsoon

Opinion

conservation

NEXT STORY

The discovery of India's heft (but not yet of how to use it)

Initially skipping around moral issues to avoid condemning Russia for its messy military intervention, India became more forthright in pursuing its national interest



Bharat Karnad,

- MAY 08 2022, 22:38 IST
- UPDATED: MAY 09 2022, 08:34 IST

That India has clout if it acts independently in pursuit of narrowly defined national interest is something the Narendra Modi government apparently discovered, courtesy the Ukraine war. It reveals what is fundamentally wrong with Modi's worldview and how the S Jaishankar-led Ministry of External Affairs assesses the world and India's role in it.

Initially skipping around moral issues to avoid condemning Russia for its messy military intervention, India became more forthright in pursuing its national interest. It was uneasy about running afoul of the United States and the West but unwilling to court President Vladimir Putin's wrath.

The balance of Delhi's concerns was this: The US and European States could be persuaded to be flexible on account of China, the West's other great rival, otherwise benefitting strategically. The Modi government hinted at the possibility of China using the Ukraine tensions to initiate hostilities across the disputed border as it had done in 1962 when exploiting the Superpowers' distraction with the Cuban Missile Crisis to start the mountain war that India lost. It is a danger heightened by an unpredictable Putin, in a pique, slowing down the flow of military spares and creating no end of trouble for the Indian military. It eventuated in India's "neutral" stance and abstentions on several UN votes, which preempted Putin from getting punitive.