

New Year, with butterflies and birdsong

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If each of us were to identify a spot of green where we could create or restore some habitat for biodiversity, we could start to make a difference



Harini Nagendra,

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As we look back at the end of yet another pandemic year, the news is filled with uncertainty about the future and what it holds for us. 2020 and 2021 have shown us that we can no longer take the old ways of living for granted. The air we breathe is not just packed with viruses, it is also dense with smoke and smog from the more than eight million vehicles in Bengaluru, and with dust and cement particles from the tens of thousands of new buildings springing up across the city. The water we drink is contaminated with pesticides, sewage and heavy metals. The air is also filled with the sounds of hammers, horns and heavy machinery, but the birds, frogs and crickets have fallen silent. Perhaps we don't even recognise that they are silent. The tragedy is that we have become used to this change. We no longer question why the world is in such a mess.

Last year, during the first lockdown, we could see and smell, hear and taste the difference in the air. The birds were out singing in larger numbers than ever before. Peacocks were all over Bengaluru, reclaiming spaces in Jayanagar parks and streets where they had not been seen for decades. Butterflies and honeybees, brilliantly coloured, filled the air, lightening our spirits in the worst of times. Deer were seen in cities like Noida and Chandigarh, and near Guwahati, a rhino made its way to the fringes of the city. With no new industrial effluents entering the Arkavathy river, this erstwhile lifeline of Bengaluru, polluted and foaming for decades, was able to clean itself up.

The lockdown came at too steep a cost of human suffering. It showed us the possibility of forging a new pact with nature, but also told us that we needed to find a different path to get there – one that was less drastic.

For a brief while, we dreamt that humanity would be able to find a different way to live embedded in ecology – with space for all beings, not just human beings. Global carbon dioxide emissions fell by close to 6% in 2020, encouraging progress towards climate

change. But in 2021, the world returned to a business-as-usual model. CO₂ emissions soared back, returning to, and possibly surging past, 2019 levels.

At a time when the IPCC report warns of the catastrophic consequences of global warming beyond 2°C, governments and businesses should sit up and take notice. But all signs indicate the opposite, as the city administration moves at full speed to cut down tens of thousands of trees for new Metro lines and peripheral road expansion, even entering premises like the All Saints Church -- one of the few remaining wooded spots in the heart of the city -- to take down old trees for new 'development'.

With so much of the city in private hands, there is still space for co-existence, though. There are millions of us in Bengaluru. If each of us were to identify a spot of green where we could create or restore some habitat for biodiversity, we could start to make a difference. This does not mean that each one of us has to have access to large parcels of land.

A casual visit to most slums in Bengaluru will show you how creatively the residents have managed to live amidst nature in cramped surroundings. In Puttenahalli, Agara and Bhattrahalli, and so many other parts of the city, people live in tiny sheds with aluminium roofs, but still find space to grow tulasi, mallige, and soppu in old buckets and plastic bags. If every apartment in Bengaluru had a few pots in the balcony, and every corporate building filled its rooftops with plants, we could have millions of butterflies and birds visiting each day.

What better way to usher in the New Year?

NEXT STORY

Gujarat: Powder keg politics ensures ground turbulence

Gujarat's urban areas are considered BJP fortresses, and Congress is stronger in rural areas, so AAP's inroads in urban agglomerations are likely to be at BJP's cost



R K Misra,

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Hitherto the exclusive domain of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)'s entry into the Gujarat election arena gives notice of a season of heightened aggression as the new challenger and the old one brace to beard the lion in its own den.