

Swansong for an Old Forest

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Conservation by neglect enables a forest without predators to flourish - as has happened on land owned by temples in Tamil Nadu for centuries.

People rarely go inside the forest because wilderness is frightening to the modern man. Ghosts inhabit forests. Suicidal types find consolation preparatory to hanging themselves from obliging trees. Occasional drinkers brave it and leave little messes. Desperate ladies are also sometimes encountered but they only take old wood furtively for their kitchen fires. Except for my grandson, who still begins to whisper upon entering, I've never seen a child in here.



On one of my first walks around Arunachala many years ago I stepped impulsively from the circuit road into the forest and only

after several hours did I return. From then on I went frequently for many years. Sometimes I'd sleep there in a bed of leaves.

Noticing the barrenness of the surrounding area it occurred to me that it was a miracle that this old forest survived. There is no old growth forest like this for a radius of thirty kilometres and many rare trees flourish here. A contrast to the conspicuously barren plain surrounding the nearby sacred mountain. Years ago the locals told me that we could attribute this miracle to the little Devi - the goddess in the shrine next to the frog pond. 'It is she who protects the forest' they said. The surrounding community is exploding monumentally now in the age of progress and we are just beginning to wake up to the fact that trees are our lifeline, although the mountain still burns every summer.

The old forest is a robust seed bank for the diminishing dry deciduous trees of South India. My young daughter and I had the pleasure of collecting seeds here at the beginning of the greening of Arunachala. Women members of the Arunachala Kattu Siva Plantation continue to collect seeds here now.

Thirty years ago I would climb up one of the big trees to secure a comfortable spot and wait, curious to see who came into the forest. People didn't come but the bonnet monkeys soon revealed themselves to be distinctly different from the urban bonnets around where I lived four kilometers away. These forest monkeys were shy but they were not hesitant once they became used to me and it was an honour to witness the integrity of their family life. The old forest still offers a sanctuary for monkeys although the descendents of the families of those old days are not often seen inside the forest now since there's a plethora of fast food available on the roadside.

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The langurs come down in summer when their water sources on the mountain are dry; they drink discreetly from the old tanks near the shrines at times of day when the fewest persons are likely to be about. They don't take fast food although Hindu humans would be more than happy to feed them with biscuits and buns in honour of Hanuman, Lord of the Ramayana epic. Aristocrats the langurs are; they rely on the nutritious abundance of the forest.



Let's go in. We can quickly vanish from the road down a path through the thorn barricade festooned with old plastic bags. The sound of the road is not unwelcome once the forest envelops, the pressures from outside don't dent the rim of this forest at all; the depths of restorative leafy shadow are well protected.

There are a couple of avenues a little way from the shrines that were reinforced at some ancient time by large stones now almost entirely hidden by the rich leaf mould that continues to elevate the forest floor. A great many smaller winding tracks connect all the different areas of the forest. The Forest-keeper's cattle and my dog and I keep these tracks in good condition, although in wet weather many become impossibly boggy since the adjacent seasonal lake on the mountainside leaks in on the forest floor. Later, after the rains when all the small plants proliferate, these paths are obscured temporarily until the heat sets in and shrivels the leaves of conquistadors.



Dignified solitary standing stones command considerable presence in the mysterious green. Occasionally playful rocky

outcrops set their own stages for surprising configurations in the botanical kingdom. Depressions in the forest floor fill with water in the rains, providing temporary venues for fabulous frog concerts. In dry times these depressions form magical little clearings. A beautiful hand-made rocky water-holding place lies at the flow entrance of the old water tank behind the Devi shrine. The very deep old tank bordering the forest next to the little Ganesh temple used also to reveal the handiwork of past centuries in its beautiful boulders; they are smothered now by concrete progress.

Huge termite nests are scattered throughout the forest. Years ago little clay oil lamps, flowers and incense marked the work of one devoted worshipper who sometimes coated the mud of a particular termite mound with brilliant yellow turmeric and left juicy half-limes dobbed with blood-red kum kum, and sometimes milk and honey. Gifts for the cobras who lived in the labyrinthine termite tunnel. The sight of the worshipper never surprised me, but she discontinued her devotional practice many years ago.

Copses of one type of tree or another are here where glades form sky-wells draw beams of light. Patches of many kinds of grass are flecked with dew in early mornings. The dry season sets the stalks to their golden advantage and lends a certain softness to the eyes. Keyholes to the vast sacred mountain standing golden behind remind me that the name of the mountain is Sonagiri: Gold Mountain. Where the giant ancient trees stand, particularly the illapais – claimed by the District Forest Officer to be four to five hundred years old - the canopy formed above is very thick and strong, creating an entirely different atmosphere in the vivifying shade below. In a heaven-pool among the thick lianas, the late afternoon sun spotlights an arch

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of smooth light on a graceful tree copse. The surrounding leafy crown drops in a long and looping, with squirrels descending or ascending, frolicking.

Spiders' skilful webs spread between the elbows of old tree roots and stumps with sprinkles of fallen leaves suspended in their nets. Little misty orbs scatter on the carpet of tiny ground plants; flowering stars of blue and white. Porcupine quills are often found here, my grandson smiles mysteriously when he finds one. Brilliant feathers also provide great occasional finds since we have no predators except the civets with their long long tails and possumy faces. They rarely venture near to the roadway although a mother and three babies did live in my roof until it needed re-thatching, after which they moved under a culvert in the garden; I caught sight of them in the dead of night every few weeks for a long time.

The heavy swooping branches of the giant tamarinds are a favourite langur spot, giving an excellent view to the edge of a series of big old neems, the curvy branches of the graceful Soapnut and the tall majestic grandparent illapais. The canopy is so strong here that the huge langur king and company, with their beautiful big behinds and long looping tails, can gallop very fast across from one side of the forest to the other. The langurs have tiny heads, very small black leathery faces and their grey fur is wig-wamed on top. Definitely aristocrats.

On the edge of the series of big trees with the marvelous canopy, voluminous branches encircle a big glade that was once a water-holding tank centuries ago when rains were regular and the water table higher. Some big old fortifying boulders have been set by human hands to strengthen one side. In the rains it becomes marshy

in here; dormant water plants suddenly proliferate and mongoose holes can be seen under the overhang of earth on the sides of the glade. Mongooses can be seen in person especially at dusk and dawn, both the soft ferrety ones and the bigger bandicooty boys. And a big rat snake lives here also - in the rainy season. The frog concert held at night can be heard at my house on the other side of the Rain Goddess shrine behind the road.

The weight of the lianas bends smaller trees to join in the riot of festoons with bulbous knobbly trunks. My bush lemon, a humble tree, often bears a skeleton trunk reaching into the exuberance of twisted branches. The floor beneath the bush lemon is all leaf litter since ground plants don't grow well here. The fallen leaves are dappled greys to browns to soft pinks, very pretty. After the rains the lush leaf mould on top and the rich earth below will be nosed up by the wild pigs and porcupines, releasing sweet smells from the earth, bordered by delicate surface creepers on the edge. At a distance, the ground creepers look like moss but closer inspection reveals speckles of yellow fallen leaves in between the strands of tiny fragile creeper.



There's an ancient stillness here. The long thin earth roots of one canopy vine fall like a curtain of stalactites through the undulating branches of an old tamarind. The canopy itself dips and rises under its own weight and sunlight streams through open heaven-pools onto a dappled carpet. Old lianas corkscrew into enormous fierce embraces and the vine that makes walking sticks for sadhus will add its thick spiky protuberances to the forest's riotous display.

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Birdsong is almost constant. An astonishingly big bird lives in this forest - far bigger than a garuda. It takes off heavily from the canopy when we approach below and I marvel at the size of it. Little honey eaters flit about in multitudes and the hoopoe is often seen too, dapper with its black and white stripes, its cheeky face and little red crest, tapping at the hoary barks. Timid little quails hastily retreat into secluded undergrowth as we approach and occasionally I've seen the male paradise fly-catcher with his immaculate white flowing tail weaving breath-taking trails of glory through those slanting beams of sunlight seeking the forest floor. On the mountain side of the forest - the other side of the leaky embankment - ducks and other water birds gather after the rains on the seasonal lake; they don't come into the forest, but pass overhead above the canopy.

For some weeks recently my shawl was lost - a good big bright one; I searched but did not find it at home. However walking one morning on a track seldom used I found it lying where I sat beneath a tree quite some time ago; conspicuous it was lying there, purple in the green. Clearly nobody had ventured by this spot during all this time because in this poor rural community an abandoned shawl is a golden opportunity.

Dead branches and the corpses of old trees are much respected. They harbour the sprouts of new trees and feed the voracious termites whose labour is essential to the forest.

Although it's far too hot, I love the summer because the dry deciduous forest comes into its own - crackly, crinkly. The percussion of the dry seedpods joins the muted brittleness of the golden grasses, with sunny smells, and the fragile textured softness of the season. Many of the trees lose all their leaves. The bare bones

of the sacred hill exposed behind are red in the after glow of summer sunset, reminding us of the magnificent old matriarch's primordial presence.

Throughout these years as a guest of India I have wandered at home in this forest to my heart's content. And when it is exceedingly difficult to accept events in these turbulent times, this place has soaked me up – soothed me and rejuvenated my inner silence. It assures me. It will be my place to die.