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OUR VANISHING FORESTS—WHO IS RESPONSIBLE ?

JAI NIMBKAR

ALL of a sudden there is a heightened awareness about the vanishing forests. Those who travel, observe, read, are beginning to be filled with panic. They look at a place and compare it with the way it was ten years ago and are shocked at what the comparison reveals. They walk in the jungle in a place like Mahabaleshwar and find that, along with the bird calls and the humming of the bees, the sound of axe on wood is also their constant companion.

In the villages of western Maharashtra where trees have always been sparse anyway, there is now severe shortage of firewood. Just a few years ago, the really poor could get enough wood by collecting sticks here and there. One could see women carrying small bundles of sticks while returning home from work in the late afternoons. Now the sticks are getting harder and harder to come by. Little girls scrounge around all day and manage to find a small basketful of miserable dry twigs, babhul thorns and pieces of dry fodder, enough perhaps to bake one bhakri. The prices of firewood are climbing prohibitive heights. People steal sugarcane which is on its way to the sugar mills and use it for fuel. The chopping of branches from roadside trees has reached such proportions that long stretches of road are lined with only mutilated stumps of trees. (This should, incidentally, bring home the futility of planting roadside trees.)

Obviously the situation is desperate. The reactions to the crisis are varied and fall into three broad categories. The largest and poorest group of people as usual suffer with equanimity. They face the problem and try to deal with it in their own way, by begging, scrounging, poaching. They have no concept of the overall problem, or of the effects of the disappearing forests. They would be surprised if anyone told them that if the present trend continues, there will one day be no more trees left in this country or that, because of the soil erosion which is the inevitable result of the removal of soil cover, large tracts of land which are now fertile will be turned into a desert. They are also not aware that perhaps they are to a certain extent responsible for the crisis because of the pace at which they are increasing their numbers.

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The second group of people blame the government for this as they blame the government for everything else. They either haven't any direct access to a natural source of firewood, or do not feel free to avail themselves of it for various reasons. They are therefore forced to buy wood at whatever price prevails in the market. They complain bitterly, and do not think either that they are partially responsible for this state of affairs or that they have any responsibility in dealing with it.

The third group consists of the most educated, enlightened and vocal people. They write articles and letters to newspapers, give speeches, hold seminars. They look at the problem from an ecological and aesthetic point of view. They too do not own to any responsibility in creating the problem. They deplore the natives for cutting down valuable jungle, the forest guards for taking bribes and giving too many permits for wood-cutting, the forest department or private owners for allowing contractors to cut indiscriminately and laying waste large forest areas. They demand that road building in inaccessible forest areas be stopped forthwith.

What they believe may all be true. Some forest guards probably take bribes and allow too much wood to be cut. The permit holders probably cut more than they have a licence for. Because they have permission to cut only dead dried wood, they often surreptitiously make cuts round live branches or remove the outer bark so that the sap dries and in a few days they have dead wood to cut. Permits to contractors are often given unwisely and with only a temporary gain in view. Also, we have all read about cases where such licences are given for the private gain of a political leader or government official.

It is quite natural, and quite right, that the more enlightened people should have a feeling of panic and should give expression to it. They however seem to ignore the reason for all this happening, namely that there is a demand for the wood; and they conveniently forget that they, as much as everyone else, help create the demand. Because they cook on gas and have an electric heater for heating their bath water, they feel that they do not consume wood, that it is all those other people who are responsible for the destruction of the beautiful forests.

They do not think of all the doors and windows and furniture in their houses or flats. It apparently does not occur to them that they consume a lot of products in the manufacture of which vast quantities of wood have to be burned. When they shake their heads sadly at the hundreds of women in Mahabaleshwar carrying bundles of wood, they are not aware that the wood is going to their hotel to cook their meal and heat their bath water. They do not make the connection between their daily paper and the books they take for granted with the bamboos and wood cut to produce them. They do not realize that, even though they may never lay destructive hands on a tree, they are more responsible for the disappearing forests than the unenlightened poor man. They consume more wood and, just as much as he, do nothing to replace what they use.

4
OPINION, January 27, 1981

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[Considering the present thinking among large sections of our people, it seems worthwhile to suggest a glance at some of the writings during the Emergency 1975-1977.]

'But what is your view of the general state of the land ? Good, going on to better, every day in every possible way; or bad, going on to worse ? You stand on a height, so to speak, in your work, and the country is spread out like a map before you, so you should be able to tell. But wait, here are two more of our former company,' and he greeted two ladies, who stopped and exclaimed with surprise and pleasure. 'I was just asking our friend here to give me his view of the state of our land. I'm sure you too will be interested and may like to give your views, always I suggest keeping your voices low and with a quick change of subject for any passer-by.' 'I agree,' said the pleasant-featured middle-aged political scientist, while the younger secretary added in a grim tone, 'And is not that enough to give you an indication ? In India, the freest and openest of countries, we ordinary citizens having to be so cautious about saying what we want to in public. I find it difficult at times to believe that I am still in Bombay. In the streets or at a party in the evening, when everybody glances round uneasily at a word or sentence, I get a sense of being in Moscow, a city in which I spent two very instructive years, incidentally learning what living in a Police State could be like for the average citizen. I had thought that part of my experience was over and done with. Alas, now sometimes it seems I shall be back in that nightmare here in familiar surroundings, in my own country.'

'Try as one may to gloss it over—and many people do because the current situation benefits them financially, politically, etc., or because it is very discomfiting to have to recognize the facts—there is no doubt that today India is an authoritarian state. Despite the forms of Parliament and of the Courts of Law being in existence, one single person decides finally and there can be no appeal from her decision except to her. The majority ruling party has become a mere forum of the later Roman Emperors to applaud Caesar's words and praise his wisdom in choice phrases. The Court of Law continued to have some power to protect the citizen until the highest tribunal recently committed what has rightly been called Judicial Suicide. We live then in a total despotism and our sole safeguards are the good sense and moderation of the despot. Let me say at once that these have been in evidence on a number of occasions. Otherwise our condition would have been even worse than it is. Despite this, all good Indians, true lovers of their country, cannot but find the current position most degrading. From free men they have been turned into serfs. What was theirs as of right, they must now plead for as a special favour. They must listen to long disquisitions by the despot and her myrmidons on how their present servitude is better than the freedom they enjoyed in the past, on how the change has wrought much good, on how perverse it is to want to be free when you are being offered a golden cage for your residence in future.'

(6 July 1976)

OPINION, January 27, 1981

7

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"Unfortunate the land that has an arrant liar at the head of its obsequious administration! The atmosphere of government is then irretrievably vitiated; the men engaged in its tasks see things not as they are but as the chief has made them appear in his lies. A haziness shadows all eyes, and decisions can scarcely be on merits.

The ordinary liar is almost invariably aware that he is lying, and that the truth is otherwise. The arrant liar gets so carried away that for him there is no distinction between the fact and his fancy. After a few repetitions he believes his lie to be true, and anybody who states the truth opposed to his lie becomes to him an enemy to be crushed.

Consider these most recent examples of the arrant lie (*Indian Express*, 18-8-1976): 'Prime Minister Gandhi told the Indian community living in Sri Lanka that the emergency in India had now been considerably relaxed and "it is no longer the same rigid one of the type when it was imposed".' But people in India are still being jailed without trial and even without cause given. The fundamental freedoms are as curtailed as ever. Except in the Prime Minister's mind there is no relaxation. She having fancied that there has been relaxation, believes it firmly to be fact. So for her there has been relaxation and she has no hesitation in stating it.

'Mrs. Gandhi said there was no Press censorship now and even the guidelines to the Press had been "greatly" relaxed.' This, when at least one journal has been forcibly closed down by order of Government for not submitting to pre-censorship, and when a leading daily newspaper has not been able to appear for several days owing to pre-censorship difficulties! Anyone who has any access to any editorial office knows how false the statement is. Yet Mrs. Gandhi makes it with perfect aplomb.'

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