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OPINION

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WOMAN TO WOMAN

Continued

GAURI DESHPANDE

The Pen is Mightier than the Sword Department: I wish I could reproduce for you the last page of the Mainichi Shimbun which gives the local and national news (admittedly the more sensational or bizarre items of it). In it I came across the following news item about a Korean who has lived, worked, married and sired children in Japan for the last thirty years. He came to know he was a Korean when he applied for a driving license and could not produce the necessary papers to prove his citizenship. So he tracked down his mother, whom he had lost track of since he was ten, and was told by her that his father was in fact a Korean soldier and that he was born in Korea but was brought to Japan by her when at the end of the last war the father was missing and there was chaos and confusion everywhere. The man, utterly astounded to discover at this late date that he is actually a refugee, asked for sympathetic consideration on the part of the authorities and was told by them that there was a traffic violation on record against his name, and unless he cleansed himself of that blemish, he could not be granted citizenship. Now, what intrigued me about that story (most of its facts are not too uncommon in a country which was as churned up by war as Japan was) was the word 'cleanse'. How does one cleanse oneself of a traffic violation? Presumably when the violation occurred, he paid the fine, or went to jail, or whatever; so now what? Supposing he was caught jaywalking, does the cleansing process consist of his crossing and recrossing the same zebra one thousand times when the light is properly green? Supposing he was found speeding, is he now doomed to crawl along the same route at ten kph for one year? And supposing he was caught driving without a licence (which, in view of his application for the same is what I think his crime was), will he now be made to drive with his licence or a large facsimile thereof pasted to his windshield? But how can he get a driving licence without getting his citizenship, and how can he get his citizenship without first cleansing himself? If it were India, I might think it meant a dip in the Ganges (though how much that would cleanse one is a moot point), but in Japan I haven't heard of any especially holy river that cleanses one's traffic violations. I await developments, either actual or etymological.

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SAY IT WITH TREES

W. M. AITKEN

THE current craze to plant trees can be dangerous if it is a passing fashion. Fashions wither after a season and so do saplings if no one is responsible for their growth. Anyone can plant a tree, even octogenarian V.I.P.s. The problem starts after the ceremonial douse from the silver watering-can. The mali may have water or a watering-can—but not necessarily both together at the critical time the tree needs a transfusion.

Saplings are like children and require a lot of love and attention if they are to grow into trees. A single tree piloted through the hazards of flood, drought and pestilence is a real gain to the nation. Mass public planting is suspect because such shrill spectacles tend to drain the nation's morale, especially when they are held the same day each year by the same people and often in the same place; all their previous efforts having been nullified by nature who works in cycles and doesn't think in terms of inputs. Notice boards with their comforting statistics do not fool anyone and rate with the obsequies of the graveyard.

This organised attitude to the inherent pleasure of planting a tree is strange in a country of farmers though one knows that the most strident supporters of conservation are the urban middle-classes who often entertain wildly idealistic notions about green belts but can't relate paper and firewood to their decline.

Possibly in India it is believed that vocal support leads to dynamic action, that shouting a slogan is active participation in social change. In which case we should look to the monkeys and parrots for Utopia. Many years ago I attended a Bhoojan conference in Raipur. Two hours each morning were put aside for the dignity of labour. (Labour is always dignified, never enjoyable.) About a thousand delegates lined up in a parade inspected by Vinobaji and then marched off to a nearby village to help dig out an irrigation tank. I witnessed the extraordinary sight of pointless dedication; for the milling throng of eager hands there were but a dozen *pharusas* for digging and as many baskets for carrying earth. Everyone helped everyone else to get in the way and instead of loosening the earth of the tank it was hammered by benevolent feet into a hard pan.

After an hour of well-intentioned churning we accepted the imbalance of the labour-technology ratio and lined up for the march back. The revolutionary songs of the outward trip were not heard on the return leg. When I suggested to a delegate that the Kafkaesque situation could be remedied by a small party of volunteers going back to complete the tank, he felt it was a waste of time. People hadn't come from the four corners of India for such menial undertakings but were here to improve their understanding of Gandhian philosophy. At that moment I sympathised with the old Scottish tramp I had met while hitchhiking in the Highlands

and whom I had tried to impress with my youthful belief in *ahimsa*. "Och laddie," he said kindly, "if that's being at peace with the world, I'd rather be at war."

Over the years I must have planted more than five hundred saplings, mostly in Kumaon and Garhwal. As a 1 in 10 survival rate is quite satisfactory considering the all-four extremes of hot, cold, wet and dry each tree has to face, I hope to be able to meet my Maker with as many trees growing (for others to love) as I have been given years in which to love these works of his hand.

It is a nice thought to plant a tree on a friend's birthday or in memory of someone you love. A line of *morch pankh* do homage to the Gurus of many faiths. A spreading chestnut salutes my friend Ruskin Bond who reared it from a conker and bequeathed it when he moved house further up the hill. A holly tree from an uncle's garden in Scotland grows with inbred canniness at the rate of an eighth of an inch a year. The chowkidar objects violently to these interlopers from the jungle being given prime space in the flower beds. I had to appease him with a jacaranda.

In Mussoorie the first range above the Doon provides a challenge to tree planters for it is nothing but a ridge of limestone. Rocky and dry for most of the year the monsoon can be extremely heavy. If one is lucky enough to have some winter rain a sapling or cutting planted in the monsoon and mulched thereafter may weather its first year. Apart from weather hazards there are bugs after the roots, goats after the leaves and children (even from expensive schools), who uproot trees just for the heck of it.

The trees I have come to admire would be beneath the notice of most forest officers: the willow, the polar and the wild cherry. They seem to enjoy the challenge of survival and will grow cheerfully on a minimum of love almost anywhere. As it is sensible to grow only those things your neighbour—and the government—do not covet, these lowly varieties are under no *nuzzar*. Wild cherry provides the only burst of green in mid-winter.

Another easy-to-grow tree is a variety of maple. An easy-to-plant method which avoids the labour of digging a hole and adding manure is to heap a few stones together and rake some leaves over the pile. This acts as a trap for wind—and bird-borne seeds and you will be surprised at your catch.

Five years ago while on a picnic in a shady deodar jungle I prised out a thumb-nail-high seedling and carried it home carefully in a paper cup "*gamla*". This conifer of sweet smells but deadly pollen to the nose, in slow and stately in its growth and is the sort of tree you plant for your grandchildren. I have agonised over its inability to signal its survival possibilities. It now stands a foot high so my agony will continue for at least another ten years.

Miraculously I discovered a cypress seedling growing out from under the doorstep of an outhouse. After two hours of flooding and cajoling

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I managed to extract its tap roots and felt the surgeon's sense of triumph after a delicate operation. Green fingers usually involve cut fingers. One forgets that planting trees in a monsoon downpour didn't seem romantic at the time.

The Indian villager may be conservative but he loves to see things growing. Sarala Devi, the Gandhian worker recounts how, when she was in Almora jail for the Quit India Movement, she had found a village woman, jailed for disposing of an unwanted baby, lying on the ground squinting under the bottom of the jail door. She turned round and said with tears in her eyes: "Behnji, khet mein gehun itne uncha hai" and indicated with her hand how high the crop of sprouting wheat stood in the fields.

Compare this feeling with the superficial mood engendered by the Emergency. I was threatened with a heavy fine for planting trees without first having official sanction for felling two dead stumps. I had applied for sanction a year before and apparently the clerk had been waiting for a recognition of his right to private taxation. My instinct to retaliate proved right. This was a time when shopkeepers went scuttling around breaking their shopfronts and slapping on pink paint in fear of the mantra "immurjensi". I told the authorities I would report them for holding up the nation's tree planting programme; and had a gushing reply urging me to avail of deodar saplings from government stock at a discount. To my horror the roots had been completely washed away in order to pack as many as possible to meet an official target. Not one of these trees would grow but I understand fifty-thousand rupees were supposed to have been spent in planting them. Possibly people who think money grows on trees also believe trees can grow without roots.

This is not to argue that large plantations can't be done effectively given the will and expertise. Israel's desert forests in memory of Jews scourged by the swastika exist as forests of growing trees not as a series of empty holes punctuated with notice boards informing the wind which honourable minister had cast the seed. "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it."

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