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How to Bring Back a Forest

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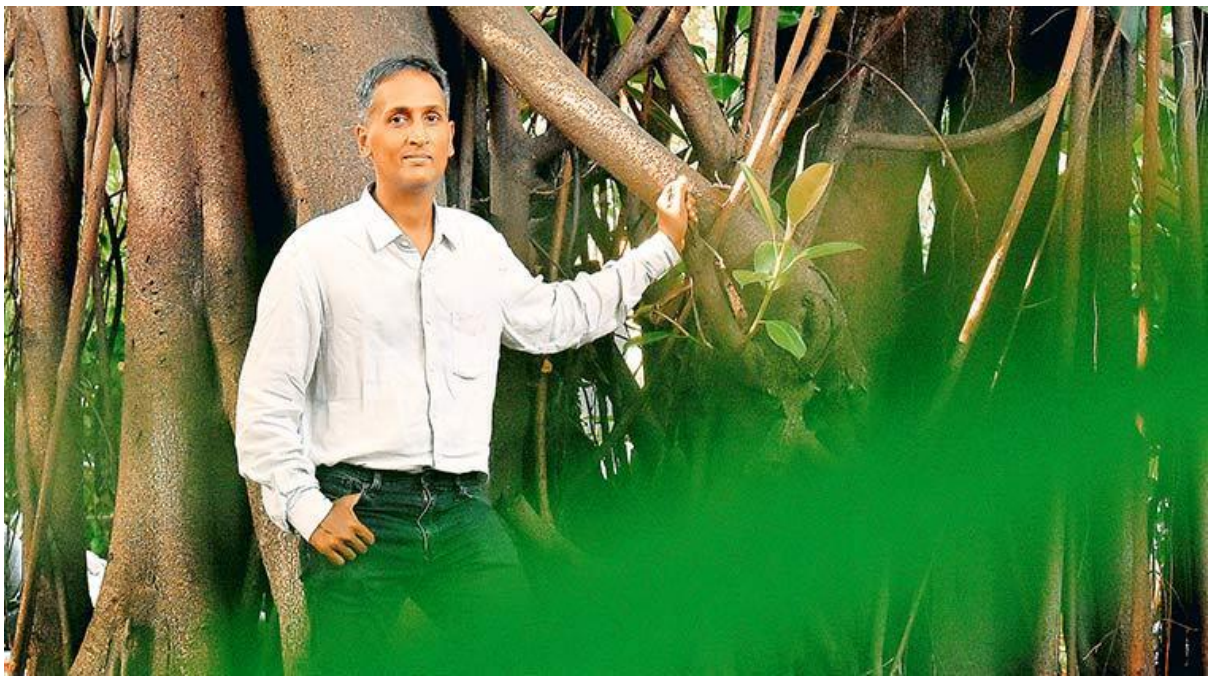

To approximate the primal poetry that trees evoke in humans, Raman turns to writing and his personal experience, but also to art. (Photo: Jithendra M)

The door of TR Shankar Raman's home in Valparai, Anamalai Hills, offers a view of the distant dome of Anamudi, the highest mountain in the Western Ghats. "The rounded peak, like the head of a giant elephant, hides in haze, nestles in clouds, or rises in austere grace into gin-clear skies, depending on the moods of earth, sky and wind," he writes in The Wild Heart of India (Oxford University Press), a collection of essays written between 1992 and 2017. Nineteen years ago, it was research that drew the scientist to this rainforest-rich landscape in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. But it wasn't only cold scientific curiosity that made him stay — and make a life here. There was the pull of memory — "As a child, I loved these mountains" — and the question: can the life of a conservationist remain separate from the land and its people?

"Science is a powerful tool to document and understand nature. But, when it comes to conservation on the ground, by itself science cannot give you the solutions. You have to learn to deal with local communities, communicate with them, and understand how they use the landscape," Raman says, when we meet at the bustling environs of the Bangalore Literature Festival last month. In a white shirt and a pair of woody-grey trousers, the soft-spoken, lanky 47-year-old appears slightly ill at ease in the raucous, high-pitched gathering of literary animals. This is, astonishingly, his first interview since the publication of his book six months ago. Astonishing because The Wild Heart of India includes some of the finest

writing on nature and ecology, as it recounts the author-naturalist's journey: from an 11-year-old birdwatcher growing up in Chennai, learning to cast off the city-dweller's blindness to the thriving nature in his midst, to the field biologist weighing the claims of people and land in the forests of Mizoram, to the co-founder of the Nature Conservation Foundation and a conservationist in the Western Ghats, animated by larger questions: "how does one quilt the city, the country, and the wild into one ecologically viable landscape?"

The essays, says Raman, attempt to convey the naturalist's experience of transformation and wonder in the wild. "I walk into a rainforest and stand in front of a dipterocarp tree. As a scientist, I can identify the species, what animals come there, aspects of its ecology. But the role that the tree plays in that landscape, its connections to the people of that forest, the other intangibles that the tree can give us — for instance, how inspiring it is — these cannot be explained by science alone," he says.

To approximate the primal poetry that trees evoke in humans, Raman turns to writing and his personal experience, but also to art. The result is The Pillars of Life, a book co-authored with his partner and fellow scientist Divya Mudappa. Dedicated to "the original landscape historians", the book showcases 30 tree species of the Western Ghats, from Nageia, whose origins date back to the age of the dinosaurs, to the more familiar jackfruit and rudraksh. The fine, evocative prose is overshadowed by artist Nirupa Rao's botanical illustrations, which bring to life the magnificent trees in exquisite detail. "This book came about because we see these incredible trees on a daily basis. Most people either drive or walk past without knowing what they are. We felt there is a limit to how, as scientists, we can describe or create appreciation for these trees. Art can be very powerful, it can capture those values better than a dry scientific narrative about the importance of the tree," Raman says.

Nature writing, too, says Raman, can do the same. "There is a lot written on conservation issues, which is important, but insufficient in creating a constituency of people who care more for nature. There is also a kind of writing, where nature is something to be consumed, or a thrill to be sought after, experienced, and bragged about on social media. Nature becomes a place that you go to rather than a place where you belong. But I am talking about writing that can awaken people to understand how they, too, are part of nature and motivate them to make space for other species in their lives," he says. Divided into three parts, The Wild Heart of India nudges the reader into this awareness with elegant sentences, good humour and writing that is awake and attentive to slightest of movements, sounds and colour — like an alert birdwatcher in quest of a lifer. It is also a book that concerns itself with the history of landscape, and the place of humans, whether conservationists or forest-dwellers, in it.

A little over a hundred years ago, says Raman, the Anamalais were home to extensive swathes of rainforests, where the Kadar tribe, the original people of the forest, lived. The British converted a large part of the forests into tea and coffee plantations, creating small islands of rainforest fragments. While examining the impact of the loss of these forests 19 years ago, Raman and Mudappa realised that the fragments, some of which were overrun with weeds, or denuded of trees, could be restored. The project was ambitious — "bring back the forest". First, the land had to be cleared of weeds, native rainforest plants raised in nurseries and planted, and then would begin the wait for the forests to ring with birdcalls and animal life. "Since these fragments were on private lands, we needed the support of the plantation owners. It took us two years of constant dialogue to get the first of them on board," says Raman.

For both Mudappa and Raman, it was a cause big enough for them to stay back as inhabitants, and not researchers who fly back, having filed their reports. “We had to repeatedly meet managers, explain to them the significance of these forest patches, how they are important to them as watersheds, how they reduce conflict with wildlife-like elephants by offering them a corridor to move, and how there are so many tree species that survive in these patches that we can protect through restoration,” says Raman. Over 35 such forest fragments have been ecologically restored in this way, covering 1,000 hectares. “Even as trees planted by us continue to grow, we are now also seeing the process of regeneration of many rainforest plants in the undergrowth below. Many saplings we planted between 2002 and 2005 are now small trees that have begun to flower and fruit,” says Raman.

Like many conservationists, Raman acknowledges the average Indian’s ability to coexist with wildlife. “There is innate regard for wildlife in people. In a lot of tea estates, people are okay with wildlife moving through the landscape. They understand that the animals have to eat, they have to move. It is only that they don’t want their lives or property to be threatened,” he says. But it is a relationship that is changing. “ In conflict situations, such as with elephants or leopards, people get swayed by social media hype and political rhetoric, which can overwhelm rather than build on or strengthen their usually sensitive understanding of how to respond to these animals or how to accommodate them in their midst. As the world becomes more urbanised, it is perhaps the pace of life and the deluge of news that distance or distract people from nature, from paying attention, from opening all their senses to the living world around them. Even among tribal people, there is a loss or dilution of their rich traditional knowledge and forest skills, as younger people move to work in estates and towns. While these changes may be aspirational or inevitable, the question is: how can we nurture or revive connections to nature, traditional knowledge, and lifestyles that are more in tune with the living world?” he says. It is an issue that Raman believes is as important to Indian conservation as the degradation that comes from reckless road-building or “ecologically illiterate” policymaking.

Meanwhile, the forests restored by the scientists in Valparai are quickening, and offering a home to creatures great and small — Nilgiri langurs, Indian giant squirrels, and brown palm civets; rainforest birds like grey hornbills, forest flycatchers and understorey babblers.

In an essay, Raman describes this quiet ministry eloquently, “And so in the Anamalai landscape, in our small way, we pursue our own tinkering. We plant saplings of native rainforest trees…we track the movements of wild elephants, conveying their presence to local people by text message; we build bridges, literally with canvas, linking the canopies on either side of the highways to enable macaques and tree-dwelling animals to cross safely…as leopards sharpen their claws on the barks of trees planted by us within the last two decades…we watch and wonder at nature resurgent, at rainforest revenant.”