

THE ARUNACHALA KADU SIVA PLANTATION

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Arunachala is a sacred mountain in Tamil Nadu, denuded by the fuel/fodder needs of a backward community. The official description of the artesian basin now stands as 'gray, approaching black'. Black designates desert.

Although a magnificent mountain, Arunachala is known by admirers as "The Holy Hill". It rises in the centre of a plain encircled by groups of smaller mountains. Thirty kilometres distant in the North and South west lay vast areas of forest, but the mountain itself and the surrounding plain have been deforested almost entirely in recent centuries. The town of Thiruvannamalai on the east side of the mountain became District Headquarters some twenty years ago causing an unprecedented increase in population, now around two hundred thousand. Over-exploitation of water is endemic. During these years a growing awareness of environmental mismanagement has contributed towards the present day upsurge in intention to reforest the potentially resourceful monolith.

Arunachala is the most sacred site for the element of fire. Yet it is not the gross form of Agni not fire itself that is relevant here. It is the Light produced by fire which is crucial to the meaning here, since it is our only earthly means of symbolizing the radiance of Pure Awareness. The rocky hill is held to be the first protuberance on the face of the earth, the embodiment of Lord Siva, an icon for The Brahman. The Joythi Lingam Arunachala is an invisible column of endless Light.

It is the rocky hill - the icon - that is the focus of attention in the Greening programme.

Ancient texts establish an intimate relationship between a forested mountain and the two main temples one in the centre of the town on the east, and an older one in the village of Adianamalai on the north west hence the endeavour to reforest Arunachala spans us back through millennia, long before our natural resources became mismanaged by disrespect for natural processes.

The Arunachala Kadu Siva Plantation, on behalf of Rainforest Information Centre in Lismore, Australia, has taken responsibility for six hundred hectares of denuded Reserve Forest lands on the lower slopes of the mountain. The thrust of this project is social ecology. Twelve rural persons, most illiterate, are engaged in water conservation strategies, seed collection and nursery work, and the plantation, maintenance and protection of saplings on the slopes. Day to day decisions are made on the basis of dialogue reaching consensus.

The primary objective of the Greening of Arunachala is the rejuvenation of our artesian system. However the Arunachala Kadu Siva Plantation has a wider social ecological import:

- To undertake responsibility for solutions to civic needs
- To participate in making decisions about these solutions
- To utilize and regenerate indigenous knowledge
- To follow through the work beyond the call of duty and
- To communicate about its meaning on every opportunity with members of their own villages and in the wider community.

The reforestation of Arunachala will furnish Tamil Nadu with a perfect environmental precedent site

- Because a mountain in the centre of a plain is such a conspicuous advantage in water management
- Because the terrain has been so obviously ravaged in recent centuries that a return to health will be spectacularly dramatic
- This transformation will be witnessed regularly by a vast number of persons from all over India since Arunachala has become an extremely popular pilgrimage place with an estimated six to eight million visitors every year.

Arunachala lies in the heartland of the Tamil culture, a worshipful culture of great antiquity; it is one of the oldest living cultures. The present cultural fabric is divided between the educated, sophisticated perspective the 'high' culture - and the 'low': the superstitious, unsophisticated, uneducated, folk culture. The Tamils tend towards hierarchies; nevertheless they are anarchical and capable of table-turning, as in the reversal of roles affected during the last century which makes life difficult for the highest traditional (Brahmin) caste, and gives preference and power to the lowest.

The upsurge in intention to reforest the mountain manifests in the educated culture. The Thiruvannamalai Greening Society, formed a few years ago by community members and administrative officers, has still not been formally recognized by the State Government. A recent move on the part of Devotees of the mountain to seek legal protection for the sacred monument has recently failed entirely in the Supreme Court, paving the way for the building of hotels and tourist facilities on private lands adjacent to the mountain.

Nevertheless this is a sacred place. A huge lamp is lit on the top of the mountain during a special festival every year, as a symbol for the univocal radiant effulgence of consciousness. So despite the difficulties, the intention to reforest endures.

“Kadu” means forest; Lord Siva is The Destroyer of Ignorance.

The dry deciduous forests of this area are magnificent. Their specialty is the bursting forth of new green leaves after the dry brittle early summer. This occurs prior to the first rains, when the undergrowth is parched tinder, when water on the surface and in the wells is scarce; it is then that the brilliant new glorious green flamboyantly proclaims confidence in this marvelous world.

The Arunachala Kadu Siva Plantation area is undoubtedly the most beautiful, most protected and gentlest on the formidable mountain; the very best site for plantation. It includes two streams from the slopes, a delta area potentially extremely powerful for conservation of water, three ancient water-holding tanks and one that is the most reliable and secure water storage site in the entire area. The six hundred hectare site is bordered by extensive wilderness. The only remaining old growth forest for a radius of thirty kilometres stands within a short walk from the site: an invaluable seed bank. Although there are patches of rough stony soil on the exposed slopes, much of the soil in this area particularly beside the streams and in the delta area is quite rich. Our choice of sites for plantation of each species honours the dictates of these conditions.

During the dry months we are building check dams and providing barricades to prevent erosion during the rainy season. When the rains come, we are constantly observing the surface run-off to improve our earth and water conservation strategies. The lemon-grass now covering the slopes with roots preventing erosion and stalks providing summer fire hazard is being managed to maintain the anti-erosion facility and prevent the fire potential. On the main body of the site, lemongrass roots are left but the stalks are cut at the end of spring to be used as mulch. Barren fire-breaks are cut, taking roots and stalks.

The climate of this area has very little cool weather sometimes in December. The rest of the year is hot. From end March to end June is very hot with temperatures remaining above the mid thirties for weeks at a time and frequently exceeding the mid forties. Our work is dependent upon the vagaries of season. First rains enable new pits; second rain enables us to plant saplings on the slopes. If there is sufficient early rain, then planting can take place earlier. Some rains come between June and October, but we can no longer rely on this since our weather patterns have been disrupted as elsewhere. The temperature has increased noticeably with the dramatic diminishing of the seasonal rainfall. Recognizable climate change has coincided with detrimental changes in socio-economic practices. Even illiterate farmers learn that this is a global problem. Members of the Plantation team grow more and more conscious of the fact that the responsibility they take is a small but powerful contribution towards an international process of restoration.

The site is surrounded and protected by flatland wilderness which is maintained by the Forestry Department. Grazing is not permitted in this area but we have built a protective thorn barricade segregating our site from the Forestry Department wilderness since our community is anarchical.

Some of our people are always present during daylight hours.

With the emergence of the reforestation, ancient sacred sites are again honoured and new groves planted, inviting the contemplation of the rich natural beauty surrounding us.

In these initial years we are concentrating very much on establishing the nursery, water management and plantation adjacent to water-holding areas on the slopes. Gradually we shall gain a more powerful position to communicate formally about what we have learned to the community in general. At present we are investigating the opportunity to have an environment education programme introduced in two schools in the area.

Thirty years ago there was an accessible wealth of indigenous knowledge particularly noticeable in local women's use of medicinal plants and in agricultural practices. This has been overpowered recently by the domination of allopathic medicine and the so-called green revolution.

This small project is primarily a deliberate initiative in the direction of the revival of indigenous knowledge and capacity. Its members are all previously disempowered rural persons who are very much aware of the fact that since the time of their grandfathers and grandmothers, their very sound traditional knowledge has been overwhelmed by unsustainable strategies based on lack of confidence in natural processes which entice under the banner of progress. Under normal circumstances in this traditional culture, such persons are never invited to have an opinion on matters of civic concern. In the hierarchical structure of this society such persons are kept at coolie level and their traditional knowledge is relegated to the past.

Members of this project are seeking out information from elders, contacting other groups in nearby areas also engaged in the process of restoration.

They are learning to make their own decisions. They are a small vanguard in the return to a healthier way of life, respecting and conserving our resources and consciously co-operating with the processes of nature and learning also about informed ways of doing this. Since such strategies have an excellent track-record in this ancient culture, they are confident their example will spread indelibly in their community.

The wilderness provides habitat to a wide variety of birds, reptiles and animals and we are confident that the number of species will increase as the forest grows. The District Revenue Officer recently designated all Revenue Department lands adjacent to and surrounding the slopes of the mountain as Wilderness forever. With thanks to him, we are secure now with sufficient area to sustain a healthy wilderness and a variety of wildlife species.

Their habitat will be encircled eventually by urban development; nevertheless the area designated wilderness is vast.

Conceptions within the local culture about what is happening to our climate and culture involve myths which weave an orientation quite different from that in the Occident. To the Hindu we are in the age of Kali Yuga, the age of ignorance and degeneration. We are prepared for the worst. The Vedic perspective pans in eternity, time is cyclic: time and time again I have written this essay, each time separated by aeons. For the Judaic, Christian and Islamic perspective, one trusts in God but makes sure to tether one's camel. For the Hindu, all camels are being tethered according to God's will despite appearances. Trust is all that is needed.

So despite notions that extinction is looming and no disgrace, and despite the fires and commercial encroachment, cultural degeneration and all of that, we are planting. This is our work; it is our worship. It is our good opportunity to serve.

Nevertheless, people's chances of basic good health are very much related to the control that they see themselves as exercising over their lives and to the knowledge that they are valued for the contribution they are making within their own communities. So although our basic orientation is worshipful, a most important role for us is to strengthen ourselves as individuals, as members of our community, in coming to terms with and making a contribution towards the conditions which determine primary health care for all families, of all species.

Our eco-system has one very serious disadvantage:

With funding and supervisor capacity, we could reforest the entire mountain within a good season. Yet this work could easily be destroyed by the ubiquitous fires of one summer night.

This means that the only possible avenue for sustainability lies with the psychological investment of a large number of persons within the community.

We have cut fire breaks in appropriate areas, and from March until the rains we have fire-watchers, fire-fighting equipment, water storage, medical facilities and mobile phones to assist with preventing fires in our area, although this is all on a very primitive level relative to the expectations of a 'Developed' world. (Our fire-fighters, for example, wear flip-flops or bare feet, as they always do.) We are connected to the Forestry Department network of fire fighters and nearby village watchers.

The grass cutters used to burn the mountain systematically to save themselves the trouble of cutting the stalks. Arsonists burn at random for a hit or because they believe that Lord Siva will reward them for the conflagration by curing digestive dysfunction. Since the mountain is tinder in mid summer and the area vast, it is not possible to prevent arsonists

from doing harm. It is only in recent years that concerted attempts are made to curb the extent of damage. It is a very deep problem. Our attempts at restoration may always require fire defensive strategies.

Environment matters are an uphill battle in India for many reasons. Essentially perhaps this is because in the Hindu world view it is subjective transformation that counts and this is a matter of loss, not gain. Spiritual progress involves transcendence of the tyranny of the petty mind; the significance of all else is meagre by comparison. Now although the vast majority of Indian persons are not perhaps cognisant of this, still this orientation permeates the Indian psyche.

The prevailing notion is that whatever is is God's will. Devotees recently mortified by the Supreme Court ruling that commercial interests in our reputedly 'bad' town have the legal advantage over pristine sacred and aesthetic interests, are now in the process of surrendering to God's will.

Solutions to problems here are not congruent with those of a directed-thinking culture. Nevertheless this culture has its own integrity and local persons need to be enabled to act within their own constraints, according to their own perspective.

The website we are about to put up on the World Wide Web is our begging bowl, proffered with the invitation to those able in lands of material plenty, to take this opportunity to serve the Great Goodness by contributing to the material need of our humble restorative process.

Sobeit.