Walking is a Metaphor, as well as an Act
Satish Kumar

Nurtured by Nurturant Careers
Bhoomi College Students

Women: Unsung Heroes of the Environment
Bianca Jaggers

Thank the Women Farmers
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End of a Chapter

and the beginning of a new one...

The first issue of the Eternal Bhoomi magazine rolled out in December 2009. Satish Kumar, the well known editor of the Resurgence Magazine, a peace activist and philosopher released the first issue on Food, Health and Climate Change during the Bhoomi Conference on the same theme held at Bangalore. The first conference and the magazine were well received – back then not many here connected food with Climate Change.

This magazine was seeded with the vision of sharing holistic views on ecological and man-made realities and also on positive action to foster Sustainable Living. Most writing on sustainable living seems to focus on ecological, technological and socio economic issues. We believe that a holistic view needs to include psychological, cultural and educational aspects of life today as well.

Today we find that everyone, and in particular the youth prefer to read articles or view videos from the internet. The time has come we believe to end this chapter of Bhoomi as a printed magazine and focus instead on sharing our work online and through social media. We are not particularly sad at this closure – it is a new beginning as well!

A special Thanks to all our contributors!

It has been wonderful to have been in touch with the many, many writers, thinkers, activists and artists who have contributed to Bhoomi. Our heartfelt thanks to all of them who have generously shared their wisdom and efforts with us!

In particular we are grateful to Satish Kumar, who released the inaugural issue of the Bhoomi Magazine and has always supported us with articles from the Resurgence Magazine, of which he was the editor for over 40 years.

We have thoroughly enjoyed and learnt much through bringing out the Bhoomi magazine. It has been of great value for our work at the Bhoomi College as well for our conferences. In future we hope to post articles in the Bhoomi emagazine where the subscription will be free and open to all.

And thank you, dear readers, for joining us in this journey... we believe that a community has emerged here that collectively has acknowledged its caring for Mother Earth, its responsibility for ecological wellbeing. We invite you to give us your responses and subscribe to our free e-magazine which will be launched soon.

- The Bhoomi Team

(This magazine is printed on wood free paper with soy based inks)
It is important to rejoice in the eco-feminine! To savour its nurturance and wisdom, to dignify its value in these times of climate change, to respect its persistence and grit. We need to go beyond an apologetic "this is all that I am able to do", and celebrate the connection between ecology and the feminine as an idea whose time has come.

This is a great quote from Paul Goodman:

"Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!"

These words seem to be meant precisely for the situation we find ourselves in. When the powerful forces dominate and the exploited or undervalued feel helpless, it makes more sense to live out one’s beliefs; even if many are called and are needed to fight, resist, try to change laws or policies or whatever, a larger part of our population can contribute in eco-feminine ways.

I am not talking about a revolution, a feminism that pits men against women, but a revolution that fights the masculine as a principle dominating the feminine.

The feminine principle gives importance to nurturance, processes, gathering, relationships, softness, the sacred, diversity, inclusion and fulfillment.

The masculine principle values acquisition, products, hunting, conquest, aggression, toughness and achievement.

Certainly both men and women manifest both sets of qualities in various combinations, but on the whole we see that men act from the masculine principle more and women from the feminine.

In many of the popular languages of the world, Nature and Earth are feminine. We talk of Mother Earth, Ganga Maiya, Kavery Mata etc. Perhaps because of being the ones who give birth to children, perhaps because they are the ones who stayed home to collect and prepare food or perhaps because of genetic programming women seem to be closer to Nature.

But despite the fact that both Nature and women are essential for human beings, patriarchy became the norm in most civilisations. Women’s role is secondary to that of men even today in areas where power rules the roost – especially in politics and governance. The dominant patriarchal culture has colonized our minds and in both blatant and subtle ways, both women, most men and Nature are in a similar relationship with respect to the world of development, technology, economics and politics today. The relationship is one of subservience to a masculine principle.

And in reaction to this masculine world, both men and women are looking at macro issues, writing books, fighting in courts of law, organizing campaigns and attempting to restore ecological, individual and social wellbeing in many ways. Resistance of all kinds is arising spontaneously around the world. But also needed is a cultural renaissance, where men and women own up the feminine that is part of our every day lives – owning up responsibility for wholesome and non-chemicalised food, re-building communities, valuing simplicity and wellbeing, caring for Nature and natural resources we use.

The theme of this issue is the Eco-Feminine and we have presented many articles that elaborate on the connection between ecology, women, and sometimes feminism.

Seetha Ananthasivan
seetha.bhoomi@gmail.com
Eternal Bhoomi

Eternal Bhoomi is committed to bringing you holistic perspectives on Nature and ecological living from renowned writers and thinkers as well as practical ideas and examples of earth conscious living from people around the world.

Rejoicing in the Eco-Feminine

Women and Nature have been undervalued by a patriarchal world. So too the eco-feminine as a principle - as can be seen in the way poetry, the arts, natural resources, softness and nurturance, the small and the simple have all been under-recognised and under-valued in the masculine world of politics, technology and economics of endless growth. We explore this theme through stories and essays - as it so happens, mostly by women.
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58 Bhoomi Programmes
Walking is a Metaphor, as well as an act!

Satish Kumar walked over 4000 miles from India to UK and the US in the early 1960s. He still loves walking and says that thanks to walking he lacks no energy, enthusiasm or passion...

Walking is a metaphor as well as an act. When we walk, we talk; we integrate the ideal with the reality; we bring principles into practice. It was Nietzsche who said: “All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking.”

There is an implicit connection between such thought and the school of peripatetic philosophers. Theologians have their cloisters around a monastic courtyard, and churches and cathedrals have sacred space around them for walking while studying and meditating on the mysteries of faith and the metaphysics of existence. Pilgrims go on foot on sacred journeys to reach their divine destinations. They walk around the holy peaks of the Himalayas, or to the confluence of sacred rivers, or to the places associated with prophets, poets and mystics. The act of walking in itself is as meaningful for pilgrims as the fact of arrival.

Environmental, social and political activists walk in protest against the pollution, exploitation and injustice perpetuated by those who hold the reins of power. Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March to the sea and the March on Washington during which Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech, were acts of political defiance as well as spiritual awakening. Millions of men and women have walked to bring an end to colonialism, racialism, sexism, capitalism, communism and militarism. As mothers with their babies in prams and disabled radicals in their wheelchairs have walked to show their solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, cultural creatives of all ages, nationalities and political persuasions have walked to proclaim their support for sustainability, spirituality, justice, peace, freedom, human rights and the rights of the Earth.

My teacher and mentor Vinoba Bhave walked more than 100,000 miles the length and breadth of India over 15 years persuading wealthy landlords to share their land with landless labourers in the name of justice. It was a miracle that he was able to open the hearts of these landowners and collect 4 million acres of land in gifts, which he distributed among dispossessed and deprived people. It was his walk that inspired and impressed wealthy people to part with their land.

My mother was a great walker, too. She had a smallholding about an hour’s walk from our house in Rajasthan. She would always go on foot to reach the farm. Our family was blessed with a horse and a camel, but Mother never rode on animals. Our religious tradition, Jainism, required us to respect animals and not inflict any undue suffering or hardship upon them. If someone suggested to my mother that she ride on a horse, she would smile and simply reply: “How would you like it if the horse wanted to ride on you?”

So walking came to me without any effort. I would walk with my mother to Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March to the sea and the March on Washington during which Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech, were acts of political defiance as well as spiritual awakening. Millions of men and women have walked to bring an end to colonialism, racialism, sexism, capitalism, communism and militarism.
In this final print issue of the Eternal Bhoomi Magazine, we are happy to feature this article by Satish Kumar. We are grateful to him for his warm support in many ways. He released the inaugural issue of the Bhoomi Magazine during the first National Bhoomi Conference in 2009. He has given us permission to use articles from the world renowned Resurgence Magazine, of which he was the editor for over 40 years; and he has visited Bhoomi College many times - and we do wish he will continue to do so!

Walking is digestive, refreshing and calming. It is good for my body, good for my mind and good for my spirit. I walked across Scotland and reached Iona, one of the most peaceful places I have ever been to, then along the west coast down to Wales and back through the West Country, over Exmoor and home to Hartland. It was a journey over four months and 2,000 miles, where I enjoyed hospitality from people of all backgrounds. I walked without any money in my pocket and encountered many miracles emerging out of the sheer generosity and goodness of ordinary men and women whom I met – many for the first time – during that journey.

Walking is more than a way to move from A to B: it is a way of life; a way to health, harmony and happiness. When there is no expectation, there is no disappointment. Walking for me became a source of self-realisation. Now walking is more than a way to move from A to B: it is a way of life; a way to health, harmony and happiness.

Walking, for my mother, was a source of joy and pleasure. She observed the miracles of Nature that most people took for granted. Walking, for my mother, was a source of joy and pleasure. She observed the miracles of Nature that most people took for granted.

And so it is for me. In my early childhood I became a Jain monk. I walked barefoot for nine years, never even touching a car, a train, a plane or a boat – not even a bicycle. My feet became wide and firm. I walked on sand, on pebbles, in heat and in cold, without socks, sandals or shoes. And yet in my mind I thought that I was walking on rose petals. My guru said to me: “Practise gratitude towards the Earth who holds you on her back and enables you to walk.” This was his way of teaching me a lesson in Earth spirituality. “People plough the Earth, they tread upon her, dig holes in her body, and yet the Earth forgives. She is so generous that you plant one seed and she returns a thousand fruits. So meditate on the unconditional love of the Earth and practise the same kind of compassion, generosity and forgiveness in your own life.”

I parted company with the monastic order of the Jains, but not with my love of walking. So when in the early 1960s the idea came to me that I with my friend E.P. Menon should walk from New Delhi to Moscow, Paris, London and Washington, I jumped at it without a moment’s hesitation. We dedicated our walk to the cause of Peace and walked 8,000 miles without a penny in our pockets. Whether we were able to bring more peace to the world or not, I certainly found peace within myself through walking.

I learned to trust myself, to trust strangers and to trust the world. I gained confidence and resilience. I was able to drop the fear of the unknown, the unplanned and the uncertain. I managed to love mountains, forests and deserts equally. I appreciated wind and rain, snow and sunshine with equanimity. I faced hostility and hospitality with humour and acceptance. I learned to expect nothing and accept everything as it comes. When there is no expectation, there is no disappointment. Walking for me became a source of self-realisation.

When I was 50 I went on a pilgrimage around the British Isles. From Devon to Somerset and Dorset and then on to the Pilgrims’ Way to Canterbury, I walked from village to village and from town to town, immersing myself in the beauty of the British landscape. Then along the east coast I arrived at the holy isle of Lindisfarne, where the Celtic saints of ancient times meditated on Nature while standing in the sea.

People ask me: “What is the secret of your good health?” My answer is plain and simple. I just use one word: “Walking.” It is good for my body, good for my mind and good for my spirit. I walk for an hour or so every day, and failing that I go for a constitutional stroll after my meal. Walking is digestive, refreshing and calming. No words are sufficient to contain my praise for walking. I choose to move and flow rather than to remain fixed and static.

Walking is digestive, refreshing and calming. It is good for my body, good for my mind and good for my spirit.

Satish Kumar has been the guiding spirit behind a number of ecological, spiritual and educational ventures around the world. He is the co-founder of the Schumacher College, U.K. He is also a member of the Panel of Advisors of Bhoomi College.

This article featured in the March/April 2015 Resurgence & Ecologist (Resurgence, at the time), is reprinted courtesy of The Resurgence Trust.

Visit http://www.resurgence.org

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The Refugee Crisis

The world community will be facing an ever-increasing stream of refugees. Is it a sign of a Planet in trouble? asks David Korten, the famous author of “When Corporations Rule the World”.

The plight of immigrant families in the United States facing threat of deportation has provoked a massive compassionate response, with cities, churches, and colleges offering sanctuary and legal assistance to those under threat. It is an inspiring expression of our human response to others in need that evokes hope for the human future. At the same time, we need to take a deeper look at the source of the growing refugee crisis.

There is nothing new or exceptional about human migration. The earliest humans ventured out from Africa to populate the Earth. Jews migrated out of Egypt to escape oppression. The Irish migrated to the United States to escape the potato famine. Migrants in our time range from university graduates looking for career advancement in wealthy global corporations to those fleeing for their lives from armed conflicts in the Middle East or drug wars in Mexico and Central America. It is a complex and confusing picture.

There is one piece that stands out: A growing number of desperate people are fleeing violence and starvation.

I recall an apocryphal story of a man standing beside a river. Suddenly he notices a baby struggling in the downstream current. He immediately jumps into the river to rescue it. No sooner has he deposited the baby on the shore, than he sees another. The babies come faster and faster. He is so busy rescuing them that he fails to look upstream to see who is throwing them in.

According to a 2015 UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report, 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced by conflict or persecution in 2015, the most since the aftermath of World War II. It is the highest percentage of the total world population since UNHCR began collecting data on displaced persons in 1951.

Of those currently displaced outside their countries of origin, Syrians make up the largest number, at 4.9 million. According to observers, this results from a combination of war funded by foreign governments and drought brought on by human-induced climate change. The relative importance of conflict and drought is unknown, because there is no official international category for environmental refugees.

The world community will be facing an ever-increasing stream of refugees.

Of those currently displaced outside their countries of origin, Syrians make up the largest number, at 4.9 million. According to observers, this results from a combination of war funded by foreign governments and drought brought on by human-induced climate change.
Without a category for environmental refugees, we have no official estimate of their numbers, but leading scientists tell us the numbers are large and expected to grow rapidly in coming years. Senior military officers warn that food and water scarcity and extreme weather are accelerating instability in the Middle East and Africa and “could lead to a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions.” Major General Munir Muniruzzaman, former military advisor to the president of Bangladesh and now chair of the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change, notes that a one-meter sea level rise would flood 20 percent of his country and displace more than 30 million people.

Already, the warming of coastal waters due to accelerating climate change is driving a massive die-off of the world’s coral reefs, a major source of the world’s food supply. The World Wildlife Federation estimates the die-off threatens the livelihoods of a billion people who depend on fish for food and income. These same reefs protect coastal areas from storms and flooding. Their loss will add to the devastation of sea level rise.

All of these trends point to the tragic reality that the world community will be facing an ever-increasing stream of refugees that we must look upstream to resolve.

This all relates back to another ominous statistic. As a species, humans consume at a rate of 1.6 Earths. Yet we have only one Earth. As we poison our water supplies and render our lands infertile, ever larger areas of Earth’s surface become uninhabitable. And as people compete for the remaining resources, the social fabric disintegrates, and people turn against one another in violence.

The basic rules of nature present us with an epic species choice. We can learn to heal our Earth and shift the structures of society to assure that Earth remains healthy and everyone has access to a decent livelihood. Or we can watch the intensifying competition for Earth’s shrinking habitable spaces play out in a paroxysm of violence and suffering.

David C. Korten is an American author, former professor of the Harvard Business School, political activist, prominent critic of corporate globalization, and “by training and inclination a student of psychology and behavioral systems.”

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The Growing Importance of Eco - Feminism

The central tenet of Eco - Feminism is that social and environmental issues are not separate and it is therefore best to view them collectively. Jessica Schmonsky writes about Eco-feminism - which she believes is a new term for ancient wisdom.

There are countless ways of viewing the environment. In modern societies, it is important to consider the ways in which we connect with nature as industrial practices move us away from the earth and as biodiversity is lost. Pollution is on the rise, and people all over the world are suffering the consequences of projects constructed in the name of progress.

Ecofeminism offers a way of thinking and organizing ourselves by encouraging interconnectedness with our environment and addressing the subjugation of women and marginalized peoples. As a result of this kind of thinking and organizing, new human and environmental connections can be made with a broader perspective, involving less overt social recognitions.

Categorizing women and subjugated peoples with the environment allows for the recognition of social and environmental injustices from a unique and often forgotten perspective, which in turn allows for solidarity and solace.

The central tenet of ecofeminism is that social and environmental issues are not separate, that the causes for the mistreatment of women, people of color and the environment stem from the same place. Therefore, from an ecofeminist perspective, it is best to view all of these issues collectively.

Ecofeminism puts forth the idea that life in nature is maintained through cooperation, mutual care and love. It is an activist and academic movement, and its primary aim is to address and eliminate all forms of domination while recognizing and embracing the interdependence and connection humans have with the earth.

The Roots and Flowering of the Ecofeminist Movement

Ecofeminism, “a new term for ancient wisdom,” developed out of various social movements: the feminist, peace and ecology movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to many adherents to ecofeminist philosophy, French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974 to demonstrate the potential for women to make significant contributions to an ecological revolution. The term was popularized through its use in protests against environmental destruction. According to Charlene Spretnak:

Ecofeminism grew out of radical or cultural feminism, which holds that identifying the dynamics behind the dominance of male over female is the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrialist forms.

Radical or cultural feminism is sometimes referred to as big picture feminism because it examines assumptions, values and fears in an effort to holistically understand patriarchal culture. Ecofeminists began as feminists who sought to create a fundamental shift in consciousness with respect to the domination of women and nature, rather than simply accepting women’s participation in the public sphere.

Early feminist and environmentalist efforts have allowed women to become more visible and accepted in a typically male-dominated public sphere, and though early ecofeminist thinkers sought to reinvigorate ideas surrounding feminism and the environment by drawing forth a conceptual framework as opposed to a political or bureaucratic approach, these ideas brought environmentalism to public attention through activism and political maneuvering.

The idea was to change the way people think at their core instead of only changing laws, policies or institutions, which can often have superficial results, as they do not address fundamental attitudes and assumptions that underlie ideology.

Two important conceptual themes often discussed amongst eco feminists include the recognition of the vital link between social dominance, oppression, and feminism, and the notion of human and nature interconnectedness.

First, for eco feminists, evaluating oppressive power structures is the first step toward a new standard for a human/nature relationship. They assert that powerlessness and inequality – perpetuated by a modern, male-dominated social structure – are the root causes of environmental degradation and the pressures it puts on humans, such as famine and a lack of access to clean water.

The second major theme, interconnectedness, proposes that every organism on earth, as well as inorganic matter and entire environments, serve a larger purpose, as all forms of matter are connected by complex webs belonging to a reciprocal system:

Eco feminists understand human beings as not being separate from or above nature. They are one small part of a whole, rather than the pinnacle of nature. In separating nature from persons, humanity creates a concept of nature which is made up of dead, unintelligent matter.

Why Ecofeminism? Why Now?

Examples of Ecofeminist Perspectives
Given that the subjugation of women and nature is a social construct, not a biological determinant, these relationships have the potential to change. Ecofeminism provides a forum for this change. With burgeoning environmental destruction and historically oppressive power structures, it is important to examine closely alternative solutions to the woes of our communities, land and the earth itself.

While ecofeminists have made many connections between women and nature, the three ties that most strongly bind them are empirical, the conceptual and epistemological.

Conceptually, women are associated either culturally or symbolically with the earth.

The claim is that dualistic conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality and flesh: and men with masculinity, spirit, mind and power. Dualisms such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/Earth, and man/woman converge. This implies that men have innate power over both women and nature. This dualistic structure was championed in the Greek world, perpetuated by Christianity, and reinforced later during the scientific revolution.

Finally, the epistemological connection results from the theoretical connections between women and nature; this approach suggests that because women are most adversely affected by environmental problems and generally associated with nature, they are in an epistemological privileged place. This means women are in a position to facilitate the creation of practical and intellectual ecological paradigms.

The Conceptual: The Past and Future of the Gaia Tradition

We have been taught, directly or indirectly, that human civilization is built upon a rugged and intense desire to dominate and oppress, that once “man” figured out how to domesticate plants and animals, slavery and warfare were quick to follow. However, new archeological evidence points to something contrary: “If we look closely at the new data we now have about the first agrarian or Neolithic societies, we actually see that all the basic technologies on which civilization is based were developed in societies that were not male dominated and warlike.”

Furthermore, anthropologists today commonly agree that the domestication of plants was developed by women. The ancient civilizations that humanity is built upon were not founded by war mongering and oppression, and evidence suggests that women and nature were highly regarded in many cultures. Many ancient civilizations were peaceful, and both men and women lived in harmony with one another and nature. Most notably, “the life-giving powers incarnated in women’s bodies were given the highest social value,” thus faith in the goddess and in nature was heavily prevalent in ancient civilizations, reaffirming the principle of associating women with nature. This was known as the Gaia Tradition, wherein practitioners view the earth (Gaia) as a living system.
designed to nurture and maintain life, and it has been part of the human faith for millennia, though these belief systems are now largely extinct.

The Epistemological: Healing a “Lobotomy”

In his essay “How to heal a lobotomy,” Brian Swimme postulates that the patriarchal mindset of modern, Western culture is comparable to a frontal lobotomy, in that by only seeing the world through a male-dominated lens, we lose touch with our surroundings and parts of our brains are rendered useless (virtually removed) from lack of use. He is a scientist attempting to change the way his field works, confessing that science – with its insistence on analysis, computation and categorization – can blind people to the whole reality.

Swimme suggests that scientific data be interpreted in a more holistic way, encompassing categorically “masculine” traits, such as logic and reason, with typically “feminine traits,” such as intuition and creativity. Swimme states:

Ecofeminism puts forth the idea that life in nature is maintained through cooperation, mutual care and love. It is an activist and academic movement, and its primary aim is to address and eliminate all forms of domination while recognizing and embracing the interdependence and connection humans have with the earth.

To get knowledge of the parts, we [scientists] had to become partial. But the one-eyed vision of partial minds is exactly what is killing us. To understand the scientific facts we need the wisdom of the whole, the wisdom germane to the consciousness celebrated by ecofeminism."

That is to say, science as we know it should not be eradicated, but people with an all-encompassing attitude toward the earth (ecofeminists, in particular) should also help interpret data and contribute to the field of science.

Who are Today’s Ecofeminists? What are they doing? How to Get Involved?

Currently, ecofeminism has had only budding effects on the sciences or in the realm of conservation; largely, ecofeminism is most easily detected through academia and more theoretical frameworks. It is still in the development stage. However, there have been significant contributions on behalf of ecofeminist thinkers and writers who have paved the way for grassroots activism and helped spread the word about this young discipline. Popular ecofeminist influences such as Gloria Orenstein, an author and professor of topics relating to ecofeminism; Vandana Shiva, a popular ecofeminist, philosopher, author and environmental activist; Maria Mies, a retired sociology professor and author; Starhawk a writer and activist; Charlene Spetnak, another author and activist; Karen Warren, a philosophy professor; and Carol Adams, a prominent author, continue to shape the emergence of ecofeminism through scholarship, community organizing and international outreach.

As climate change continues to affect all corners of the world, it is becoming more and more important that our views of the environment and our relationship to the planet begin to evolve into something more holistic. Ecofeminism provides an additional alternative to ecological thought and social organizing, while promising solidarity among women and those who suffer from oppression, as well as sympathizers.

Photography: by Ananth Somaiah

Jessica Schmonsky earned her BA in Anthropology at SUNY Plattsburgh. During her undergraduate years she had the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua, Turkey and Mexico through various study abroad programs. Her interests include ethnography, gender and women’s studies, sustainable development, and food and culture.

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Women: The Unsung Heroes of the Environment

As we waver on the cusp of various global crises, the services women provide to environmental protection become more indispensable every day. Bianca Jagger traces the deep connections women have had with the Earth from time immemorial.

Recently I delivered the keynote speech at the exhibition, "Women Pioneers for the Environment and Nature Conservation - 1899 to the Present" in Berlin, Germany, organised by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment to celebrate International Women’s Day.

When I was first asked to give the speech, I was aware that women have played an important role in conservation, environmental protection, and in addressing the threat of climate change. But I didn’t know how much they have contributed, often invisibly, to preserving and caring for our planet’s precious natural resources. In the course of researching and preparing the speech, I learned a great deal. Women are the unsung heroes of the environment.

What is clear is that, as we waver on the cusp of various global crises, the services women provide to environmental protection become more indispensable every day. More than ever, as we face the challenges of combating climate change, deforestation, the melting of the Arctic sea ice, we will need these women: their skills, their wisdom and their knowledge.

The Great Tradition of Women and the Environment

When the English dissident preacher John Ball asked, in the early 14th century, 'When Adam delved and Eve span/ Who was then the gentleman?' he described an idealised divide between traditional gender roles: between the domestic and the agricultural. Eve stays at home and spins - Adam tends the land.

But a short examination of almost any culture across the world, throughout history, will demonstrate how far removed from reality this idea is. Women have always worked and tended the land. Farming, husbandry, gardening, hunting and fishing, forestry... As often as not, Eve is out in the fields with the plough, as well as inside caring for the children.

The idea of the female sphere being limited to 'Kinde, Küche, Kirke,' or 'Children, Cooking and Church,' is a prevalent one. It is also erroneous.

The relationship between women and the land, the environment, can be hard to trace since records frequently leave out our contribution. For many centuries history has been written by the patriarchy, which omits women from the canon.

But there is a long and great tradition of women devoting their lives to the land and the environment. They have sown and tilled fields, bred new species of plants and rediscovered fossilised, extinct ones. They have protected their homelands from destruction and saved rare animals from extinction. They shaped the way their cultures relate to the land.

Examples of women’s contribution to the protection of the environment can be found all over the world in all eras; wherever there have been women, it seems, they have cared for the planet.
Women in Hunter Gatherer Societies and Agriculture

For 73,000 years, which is most of our species’ time on earth, we were made up of hunter-gatherer societies. In these societies women largely gathered, and men largely hunted. It was an efficient system which meant that the tribe could have both meat, and plant nourishment at once. Both men and women contributed to the welfare of the community.

12,000 years ago saw the advent of agriculture and cultivation, and the allocation of gender roles. In other words, as the Economist puts it, ‘Agriculture... stands accused of exacerbating sexual inequality. In many peasant farming communities, men make women do much of the hard work.’ This unequal division of labour has persisted for thousands of years.

When the Cherokee tribe was being pushed further and further west by settlers, a group of Cherokee women sternly petitioned the council, reprimanding their ‘beloved children,’ reminding them that they had raised the (male) Council members on that land which ‘God gave us to inhabit and raise provisions,’ and instructing their ‘children’ not to “part with any more lands.”

Another Cherokee woman wrote to Benjamin Franklin in 1787, pleading for peace between the government and the Cherokee. She says that he

“. . . ought to mind what a woman says, and look upon her as a mother - and I have Taken the privilege to Speak to you as my own Children . . . and I am in hopes that you have a beloved woman amongst you who will help to put her children right if they do wrong, as I shall do the same. . . .”

Though denied any legal rights, these Cherokee women assumed authority as ‘mother’ to the land, and the community.

Mother Earth

The theme of mother, as representing land and earth, is embedded in many traditional cultures, particularly in Latin America. It is a dominant theme in the pre-Columbian Mayan text Popol Vuh. As the Maya scholar Victor Montejo writes, ‘Concern for the natural world, and the mutual respect this relationship implies, is constantly reinforced by traditional
Josephine Kablick, 18th century Bohemian botanist and palaeontologist, gave her name to many of the fossil specimens she discovered. An intrepid explorer, she contributed over 25,000 specimens to museums.

During the 18th and 19th centuries botany was considered an acceptable pursuit for women - but they were largely invisible scientists, assisting their male counterparts. ‘As long as it remained an informal, private pursuit, botany was open to women. As soon as it became a professionalized, public activity, botany became closed to them and directed towards a male audience.’

I could go on and on. The early woman naturalists like Almira Phelps, Margaret Fuller, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Mary Treat; Isabella Preston, the Canadian horticulturalist who produced hundreds of new hybrid species of lily, lilac, crab apple, iris and at least 20 roses; Cynthia Westcott, who devised new methods of plant disease control.

I encourage you to do some research of your own; there is so much to learn.

**Women and Climate Change**

Skilled, dedicated women will be vital in the coming years, in the desperate race to keep up with climate change. Climate change is an issue of human rights, and social and economic justice; and it is a feminist issue.

The poorest people will suffer most in both the northern and southern hemispheres. Developing countries will be hit first and hardest by the effects of climate change, and without a doubt it is women in those countries who will bear the brunt of the disastrous effects of a warming world. The struggle for women’s equality is a key part of the struggle to save the planet.

Many women have livelihoods highly vulnerable to climatic variations. Rural women are responsible for water collection in almost two-thirds of households, according to UN Women. They are the primary managers of household supplies such as water and fuel, resources which will be seriously affected by climate change.

According to a study by the London School of Economics, women are more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters. ‘In other words,’ the report states, ‘natural disasters (and their subsequent impact) on average kill more women than men or kill women at an earlier age than men... Natural disasters do not affect people equally.’

Nor does climate change affect everyone equally. In addressing the threat, we must also address the issue of gender: the ramifications a 4 degree warmer world will have on both men and women. We need to do more, much more to tackle the threat of climate change.

**Conclusion**

Climate change is the greatest threat we face in our time. It is a global crisis: we will only solve it through global collective action - and women will play a vital role.

Dangerous climate change is already upon us. We are not doing enough, and we are not doing it fast enough. In order to avoid climate catastrophe we must be prepared to change everything about the way we live, travel, eat, and shop. We must acknowledge that business as usual is not an option. We cannot, and must not give up.

As the great woman environmentalist Rachel Carson said:

‘We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost’s familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road -- the one less travelled by -- offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.’

I hope we choose the right road. We simply must. Our fate, the fate of our daughters and granddaughters and that of future generations, depends on it.

**Bianca Jagger** is a prominent international human rights and climate change advocate. She is the Founder and Chair of the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation, Council of Europe Goodwill Ambassador, Member of the Executive Director’s Leadership Council of Amnesty International USA, Trustee of the Amazon Charitable Trust, and on the advisory board of the Creative Coalition.

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In Search of a New Ethic to Live by...

“Though a new term, it is embedded in ancient wisdom. Archeological evidence suggested that there were many ancient societies where women were not considered subordinate to men; where Earth was treated with respect and reverence and not as an object to exploit and dominate.”

If one looks at the expansive sweep of over four billions years of existence of our alive, animate, miracle Earth, the entry of our species is a very recent phenomenon. However, even in this small time frame we have managed to alter the biosphere like never before. There are obviously a multitude of reasons which has led to where we are today. And it is not a simple cause effect equation either. There is complexity involved. There are also many myths that humanity has lived with which has brought us to where we are. We probably need new stories, new lenses, new ethics to live by if we are to flourish and thrive as one of the many diverse species in Earth.

Eco - feminism offers an alternative way of being. The central principle of “ecofeminism is that social and environmental issues are not separate, that the causes for the mistreatment of women, people of color and the environment stem from the same place.” Ecofeminism, “a new term,” developed out of various social movements: the feminist, peace and ecology movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to many adherents to ecofeminist philosophy, French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974 to demonstrate the potential for women to make significant contributions to an ecological revolution.” Though a new term, it is embedded in ancient wisdom. Archeological evidence suggest that there were many ancient societies where women were not considered subordinate to men; where Earth was treated with respect and reverence and not as an object to exploit and dominate.

Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation. Ecofeminists are anchored in belief that, “there is interconnectedness of all beings and wholeness in theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of each living being.” Thus there is no dualistic splitting of man/woman, body/mind, nature/culture and so on.

This approach sought to question and replaces the dominant mechanist reductionist science paradigm and world view. Wherein there is no space for diversity only hierarchy; man is seen as a measure of all value; nature’s diversity is seen not as intrinsically valuable in itself but through economic exploitation. It also drew CREATED an artificial barrier between knowledge and wisdom, empirical science and observational science, specialists and non-specialists. This worldview resulted in the subjugation of nature, women and marginalized communities. Thus disconnect and alienation from nature was but an expected consequence. Thus the central fault is an attitude, logic and practice of domination of nature.

It follows therefore that legal/institutional fixes to take care of resource depletion and environmental degradation or laws/policies aimed at bringing in equality for women or increasing participation of women in public sphere alone will not help. These are mandatory and need to be worked with but by themselves they remain end of the branch solutions. What is of greater importance is deeper root level attitudinal shifts and fundamental changes in human relations with each other and human relations with non human nature. We need to see ourselves as in Nature rather than above Nature; in and of Earth rather than on Earth.

So myths of human dominance, a species at the pinnacle of evolution and in particular the separation-from-Earth myth need to be examined to carve out new ethics to live by. A
deeper understanding of nature and nature’s cycles needs to be honored and fostered to pave way for a saner, ecologically sensitive society. Ecofeminists argue that women are in a better position to do this since from immemorial women have lived finely tuned in with nature’s cycles and rhythms. They have been in closer relationships with their context and have been dependent on it. As Ariel Saleh states, “To make a better world”, men have to, “brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves,” while women simply have to “be allowed to love what we are. This conclusion follows from the fact that according to Salleh women already "flow with the system of nature by virtue of their essential nature.”

There are critics of ecofeminism who contest this special bond with nature that women are professed to have, either through their specific biology or closeness to nature or through their historical oppression in a patriarchal system. Another argument against them is that this approach is built and revolves around the concept of the female ideal and hence is not free form generalizations.

The Importance of the First-Person Narrative

We can go beyond these arguments and look at what this approach has to offer in terms of ethics to live by, there is a direction and way forward which is suggested. As Karen J Warren states in ‘Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism’

“Many feminists and some environmental ethicists have begun to explore the use of first-person narrative as a way of raising philosophically germane issues in ethics often lost or under-played in mainstream philosophical ethic. There are at least four reasons why use of such a first-person narrative is important to feminism and environmental ethics.”

• Firstly because it voices a felt/experienced sensitivity which looks at seeing oneself in relationship with others and the context one is in. This is often missing in traditional analytical ethical discourse.

• Secondly, it gives expression to a variety of ethical attitudes and behaviors often not even seen as valid in mainstream discourse on ethics., e.g., the difference in attitudes and behaviors toward a rock when one is rock climbing- does one think of oneself as “friends with” or “caring about” the rock one climbs or is it something to be conquered?

• Thirdly, it provides a way of conceiving of ethics and ethical meaning as contextual, as emerging out of particular situations that people find themselves in, which is in contrast to ethics being imposed from the outside on those situations.

• Lastly, “Narrative has argumentative force by suggesting what counts as an appropriate conclusion to an ethical situation.” So one ethical conclusion suggested by the climbing narrative is one of respect and care rather than conquest or domination.

Two beautiful stories powerfully reflect the spirit of the environmental ethics we need to live by;

A story narrated by a Sioux elder who had sent his seven-year-old son to live with the child’s grandparents on a Sioux reservation so that he could “learn the Indian ways.” Part of what the grandparents taught the son was how to hunt the four legged creatures of the forest. As I heard the story, the boy was taught "to shoot your four-legged brother in his hind area, slowing it down but not killing it. Then, take the four legged’s head in your hands, and look into his eyes. The eyes are where all the suffering is. Look into your brother’s eyes and feel his pain. Then, take your knife and cut the four-legged under his chin, here, on his neck, so that he dies quickly. And as you do, ask your brother, the four-legged, for forgiveness for what you do. Offer also a prayer of thanks to your four-legged kin for offering his body to you just now, when you need food to eat and clothing to wear. And promise the four-legged that you will put yourself back into the earth when you die, to become nourishment for the earth, and for the sister flowers, and for the brother deer. It is appropriate that you should offer this blessing for the four-legged and, in due time, reciprocate in turn with your body in this way, as the four-legged gives life to you for your survival."

Another story is from Niyamgiri. "The Niyamgiri hills or the 'the hills of law' and their foothills and plains are part of an important biodiverse landscape in Odisha, and constitute the habitat of Dongria and Kutia Kondh adivasi communities which have developed a close association with the forests and the fertile soil accumulated at the foothills. The Dongria identify themselves as Jharnia, the ones living near and protecting the numerous streams of the Niyamgiri ranges. They believe that the hills are the abode of Niyamraja (the King of Law), their supreme deity and ancestral spirit who rules the hills along with other deities associated closely with nature. The way of life practiced by the Dongria is therefore the law as prescribed by Niyamraja. It does not allow unsustainable exploitation of the forest and the land at the behest of greed. Every Dongria elder reiterated that everything within their habitat belonged to Niyamraja and Niyamraja was everything."

Thus the values to live by are values of care, appropriate trust, kinship, friendship and reciprocity. Like Tagore so eloquently stated in the following lines we need an inclusive love.

“The world needs a mystic’s universal and inclusive love, not the exclusive love of a faithful.”

“Many feminists and some environmental ethicists have begun to explore the use of first-person narrative as a way of raising philosophically germane issues in ethics often lost or under-played in mainstream philosophical ethic.”

Rema Kumar is an educationist with over 20 years of experience. She has been involved with Prakriya Green Wisdom School Bangalore since its initial years. She is currently the Director, Bhoomi College. A passionate teacher who has keen interest in deep ecology and education for Sustainability. All images courtesy creative commons/flickr
The summer of 2010 was an especially exciting time for me when as a part of a course organized by the Centre of Science and Environment, Delhi we were taken to Tehri-Garhwal, Uttarakhand to visit villages which transformed the way the world looks at environmental activism and conservation. Names like Uttarkashi, Birahi, Srinagar, Makku, and Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary keep appearing on the pages of my field diary when I flip through it. It was here that I truly started collecting experience, inspiration and stories related to my educational field.

I feel like I’ve been re-visiting Uttarakhand off and on through Ramachandra Guha’s thesis, “Unquiet Woods”. I had read it earlier this year for my Master’s thesis, and I couldn’t wait to read it again since the Garhwal I experienced last year was exactly like it has been described by him in 1992. Well, figuratively at least, excluding the major dam sites that seem to interrupt the picturesque themes at every corner and the huge stone quarries that raise their ugly heads at every second turn along the highways and also not to mention the general mayhem such projects tend to leave in their wake. But it still has the same sereneness, same people and the same money-order economies. All the villages I travelled to in Uttarakhand have one particular thing that I noticed right away. There were no men! You see women of all ages, as they worked at home and on farms, tended cattle and looked after the family.

The women know a lot about their forests as well as about governance initiatives because they have to deal with almost everything themselves. The older women I came across were deeply attached to the basic natural resources that are available here.

Historical records show that women in Garhwal had to assume responsibilities of both the fields and the homes. The men were generally lazy, needing help in fields and considering it only right that the wife does all the chores at home too! They would gather

**Women Tales from Tehri - Garhwal**

Meenal Tatpati wrote this article because she was riveted by the fact that all the villages she travelled to in Uttarakhand had one particular thing in common. There were no men! There were only women of all ages, as they worked at home and on farms, tended cattle and looked after the family.
near village squares and gossip or share a smoke. Also, in the past decades, due to increased education as well as migration of men to cities and nearby towns and their traditional role in the Indian army, men in these villages are not really the ones who look after the home and fields.

The fact that the women here have to take up a lot also speaks volumes of their courage and determination. They particularly know a lot about their forests as well as governance initiatives because they have to deal with almost everything themselves! The older women I came across were deeply attached to the basic natural resources that are available here. Many of them were witnesses to the total destruction of their forests in the past and are protective about their resources.

When we visited Makku village in Rudraprayag district, the head of one of the largest Van Panchayats, Manorama Devi who is about 53 and was witness to the total destruction of her village forest in 1985, spoke to me for a few minutes. She highlighted the fact that there is electricity but no hospital.... that the weather is definitely changing and that it has progressively warmed over the years. She didn't speak a lot, like most younger women there but was disappointed with the fact that the youngsters didn't want to stay on in the villages and that the city attracted them.

When I asked her why the forest was so important to her, she replied with such simplicity, “Agar Van chaley jayenge toh hum kya karenge?” (What will I do if the forests are not there?) Almost as if the forests were her life...

In Sari, I was struggling to climb a pretty steep hill with nothing but my cell phone and a notebook when a tiny lady with the bamboo basket on her back, full of fresh, sweet smelling fodder came bounding down right in front of me.

She smiled very sweetly for a picture. I asked her if I could lift her load and see if I can carry it. She obliged and when I put it on I almost fell over backwards! That thing was heavy! And carrying it either up or down the hill looked like serious work!

Another woman I encountered at Guptakashi was taking the load to her house uphill! When asked where she lived she said I needn't bother to come because I would not be able to breathe where she stayed! She pointed to her house and it wasn’t even visible because it was covered by fog!

I was amazed at the strength these tiny women had. And the unique sense of humour is probably important to sustain them here.

At Reni, Bali Devi had me mesmerized. This woman was the epitome of a perfect grandma...wrinkled skin, rosy cheeks, naughty sparkling slits for eyes, so deliciously wizened! I was enthralled as I sat by her feet and listened to her Chipko reminiscences.

She told us stories about Chipko and slammed Sunderlal Bahuguna as a Thekedar, probably brought on by the fact that Bahuguna, years after Chipko actually became a strict conservationist! She also told us of the love and respect the women who were a part of Chipko feel towards Chandi Prasad Bhatt and his people centric view of conservation.

She was apparently happy with the eager audience, so she gladly recited many Chipko songs for us...

“Chal didi, chal bhayyya
Sab milkey jungle bacholo”

“Char din ki saheli mat bani rehna
Umar bhar ki saheli bano, jungle ki raksha karo”

Bali Devi is recognized now as the Global face of Chipko, having been to Kenya to meet Mathai and was supposed to be a close associate of Gaura Devi, the famous woman activist historical records show that women in Garhwal had to assume responsibilities of both the fields and the homes. The men were generally lazy, needing help in fields and considering it only right that the wife does all the chores at home too!
In the same village the younger women didn’t want to collect forest produce all their life. They wanted roads, education for their children, to stay alone with the husband and children. They may be right in their own way, but if the Unity that was the cornerstone of these villages is gone, will they be able to sustain their forests like they have for so many years?

from Reni. Later as we walked down towards the bus, we were told that she was an imposter that the real Bali Devi was long dead and the village was totally against her! Yet, the simplicity with which she recited the songs and talked to us about the forests was truly endearing.

The most striking woman I met was in Tolma, a village in the buffer zone of Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, and ironically I don’t know how she looks because I met her at night and it was pitch dark!

She was the wife of a man whose flex poster, announcing his candidacy for Gram Sabha was plastered all over the village. My friend and I wanted to meet this man who looked like he could tell us something about the village.

So we waited for him near his home one evening. We were told that he had gone down to Joshimath and would return in the evening.

Poonam, his wife, came home with their cattle at about 6 and made us saccharine sweet tea. Barely 30, she had two sons and a husband who was never home. She gets up at four in the morning, goes to her fields and comes back only by 6. She also knits woolen caps and sells them to tourists. This brave soul was almost attacked by a Himalayan bear once and has never gone beyond Joshimath, the village downhill where the entire village of Tolma shifts in winter. Her husband, who is a trekking instructor frequently, travels all across India. The walls of their home are covered with pictures of her husband with celebrities he’s met. This woman is by far the closest I’ve come to the description of the term we city women use: – “working woman”!

The loneliness of her house and existence and the amount of respect she had for her husband as she proudly showed us his trekking gear and the tool-shed he was building touched me deeply.

Simple lives and simple minds, yet incredibly strong and individualistic women. The more I travel to rural India, the more I realize that women are the back-bone of our economy as well as the epitome of ecological warriors.

They have to battle nature’s wrath, which we, as urban dwellers rarely have to face, yet their lives are linked to nature and its many intricacies. More power to these women.

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**Meenal Tatpati** has a Masters in Environmental Science and has worked as an intern in various projects for the Conservation and Livelihoods team before she became a member in 2013. She works on advocacy and research on Community Forest Rights (CFR) under Forest Rights Act. She is interested in understanding the changing socio-political aspects of forest governance in India.

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Revolutionary change is something immediate.

It is something that we need to do today, right now, wherever we are, where we live, where we work or study...
This is not an armed uprising.
It happens in the little corners which cannot be reached by the powerful but clumsy hands of the state.
It is not centralized or isolated: it cannot be destroyed by the powerful, the rich, the police.

It happens in a million places at the same time, in the families, in the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the work places.
Suppressed in one place, it reappears in another until it is everywhere.
Such revolution is an art.
That is: it requires the courage not only of resistance but of imagination.

- Howard Zinn
Eco-feminism involves philosophy and movements that connect feminism with ecology. It is believed that there are some significant connections between women and nature. A society that respects women also values reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation. Certain societies that lack gender equality also witness self-centric, materialistic mindset with oppression of nature and women.

Piplantri village in Rajasthan was once suffering from huge problems – industrial pollution from the nearby marble factories, water scarcity, lack of electricity, child marriage, female foeticide, illiteracy, crime and what not! The then ‘surpanch’ of the village, Shyam Sunder Paliwal, had a vision- to make Piplantri an ideal village. In 2006 he began a unique initiative to plant 111 trees when a girl was born in the village. And today after ten years, Piplantri is in deed an ideal village, which many villages around the country are looking up to.

The journey started when a youth, who had only studied upto eighth grade, decided to improve the situation in his village rather than migrate in search of better opportunities. He contested the election and become a young ‘sarpanch’ in 2005. Shyam Sunder Paliwal is the man who has revolutionized both regressive social outlook as well as the ecology of a state. Through a series of visionary initiatives, consistency in purpose and cooperation from all the villagers, he completely changed the socio-economic fabric of the village. Hailed as the “Father of Eco-Feminism”,

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Shyam Sunder Paliwal is the man who has revolutionized both regressive social outlook as well as the ecology of a state. Through a series of visionary initiatives, consistency in purpose and cooperation from all the villagers, he completely changed the socio-economic fabric of the village. Hailed as the “Father of Eco-Feminism”,

the first impression that hits you when you talk to him is that of simplicity, humility and love for the people.

It was clear that the ‘change’ could not be brought about without an active participation of villagers. The Gram Panchayat started a day-and-night program – “Panchayat at your door”, visiting every home, understanding their problems and discussing the vision that panchayathad for the village. Program called “Swajaldhara Yojana” was launched to create awareness and take concrete steps to conserve water. While the village started to witness a new wave of change, a tragic incident left Shyam Sunder devastated. He lost his beloved daughter Kiran. Paliwal did not deflect from his mission, in fact he emerged out as a much stronger leader.

“How a person chooses to conduct himself in the worst of circumstances, shows his inner strength” he believes.

In the memory of his daughter, Paliwal started an initiative of planting 111 trees when a girl is born. To safeguard the child’s future, villagers commonly make a donation Rs. 21000, which along with parental sum of Rs.10000 is fixed in a bank account under the name of the child for 20 years. Parents also sign an affidavit to ensure that the money can only be withdrawn if they provide education to their daughters, get them married only after the legal age and care for the trees they planted. This has not only helped in securing the future of girls but also helped in improving the waterlevel thus eradicating the water scarcity, lowering pollution and providing employment. Over a million trees stand tall in and around Piplantri village, as a symbol of this amazing bonding between social issues and the environment. The village is now covered with Neem, Mango, Amla and Sheesham trees adding to its beauty. This also gave rise to increased economic activity and source of livelihood, as locals have set up units to produce Aloe Vera products. The village has toilets, safe drinking water, electricity, streetlights, lower crime rate and above all peace and harmony. Paliwal recalls the visit of social activist Anna Hazare, who was very happy with the progress made by the village.

Paliwal’s vision along with the efforts of villagers has finally helped Piplantri earn the prestigious “Nirmal Gram Award”. On 4th May, 2007 for his rigorous efforts and far-sighted vision, Shyam Sunder was also honored by the President’s award. The “Piplantri Model” is now being followed by many Panchayats of the country and the Piplantri Gram Panchayat is now openly inviting the villagers, professionals and other individuals to study this model and implemented it in their villages.

“Long-lasting change is most likely when it’s self-motivated and rooted in positive thinking. So the three points that bring about change are motivation, attitude and positive thinking. Amalgamate these three things and change happens. And in the process of bringing the change, become a go-giver and not a go-getter” advises Paliwal to the young people of the country.”
As yet another example of the desperate ‘science’ of Monsanto, it is now being argued that genetically engineered Bt cotton – introduced in India in 1997 – has liberated Indian women. In a paper* authored by Arjunan Subramanian, Kerry Kirwan, David Pink and Matin Qaim, the argument is that the crop produces massive gains for women’s employment in India. But this argument is false on many grounds. Firstly, women have traditionally been seed keepers and seed breeders, which means that the knowledge and skills related to seed conservation and seed breeding have been women’s expertise. The seed economy was a women’s economy. As long as seed was in women’s hands, there was no debt and there were no suicides. Women have acted as custodians of the common genetic heritage through the shortage and preservation of grain.

In a study of rural women of Nepal, it was found that seed selection is primarily a female responsibility. In some 60% of cases, women alone decided what type of seed to use. As to who actually performs the task of seed selection, in cases where the family decides to use their own seeds, this work is done by women alone in more than 80% of the households, by both sexes in 8% and by men alone in only 10%.

Throughout India, even in years of scarcity, grain for seed was conserved in every household, so that the cycle of food production was not interrupted. The peasant women of India have carefully maintained the genetic base of food production over thousands of years. This common wealth, which has evolved over millennia, has been defined as ‘primitive cultivars’ by the masculinist view of seeds, which sees its own new products as ‘advanced’ varieties.

The replacement of traditional varieties of seeds with genetically engineered Bt cotton is an appropriation of women’s skills, knowledge and decision-making. This is disempowerment of women, not empowerment. Moreover, women have always played a significant role in agriculture: most farmers in India are women.

The replacement of biodiverse cropping systems evolved by women with monocultures of Bt cotton leads to a decline in food production. This undermines women’s food sovereignty and erodes food security, which in women’s hands is women’s empowerment. Further, it destroys women’s work relating to agricultural production and post-harvest food processing. Interestingly women’s work in relation to food sovereignty has been defined as ‘feminianual’ work.

The growing of food is the most important source of

Thank the Women Farmers!

The eco-feminine tends to be subtle, dispersed all over and non-monetised. Like Nature, women and their offerings are externalised in the economic system. And exploited.

In India, Africa and many other countries, women have preserved and improved seed varieties in millions of homes and according to the FAO, “they use more plant diversity than agricultural scientists know about”.

Dr. Vandana Shiva writes about the amazing and unacknowledged contributions that women have made to food security, and how Monsanto and other ‘macho’ organisations are destroying biodiversity and disempowering women through GM crops.

(This article was written by Dr. Shiva in 2010. We have included it in this issue because it still is extremely relevant today when GM crops are being approved for release in India.)
livelihood for the majority of the world’s people, especially women. It is also the most fundamental economic right. Women were the world’s original food producers, and they continue to be central to food-production systems in the Third World in terms of the work they do in the food chain.

The worldwide destruction of feminine knowledge of agriculture, evolved over four to five thousand years, by a handful of white male scientists in less than two decades has not merely violated women as experts, but gone hand in hand with the ecological destruction of Nature’s processes and the economic destruction of poorer people in rural areas.

Women make the most significant contribution to food security. They produce more than half the world’s food. They provide more than 80% of the food needs of food-insecure households and regions. Food security is therefore directly linked to women’s food-producing capacity. From field to kitchen, from seed to food, women’s strength is diversity, and their capacities are eroded when this diversity is eroded.

In India, cotton was not traditionally grown as a monoculture: it was grown with sorghum and pigeon peas and chillies. The knowledge of these biodiverse systems was women’s knowledge – a knowledge that has declined as a result of the introduction of Bt cotton. But it is a decline that is perversely hidden. The monoculture of the mind, focusing only on Bt cotton, falsely projects women’s dependence on cotton-picking as an increase in employment and empowerment.

In a single African home garden, more than 60 species of food-producing trees have been counted. In Thailand, researchers found 230 plant species in home gardens. In Indian agriculture, women use 150 different species of plants for vegetables, fodder and health care. In West Bengal, 124 ‘weed’ species collected from rice fields have economic importance for farmers. In Mexico, peasants utilise more than 430 wild plant and animal species, of which 229 are eaten.

Women are the biodiversity experts of the world. Women’s work in cotton-picking (which Monsanto projects as an increase in absolute terms) has increased because monocultures have replaced mixed cultivation of cotton with food crops. The increase in cotton is because of the replacement of biodiverse farming with cotton monocultures, and the expansion of acreage under cotton. It is not because of higher yields of Bt cotton.

The introduction of the Bt gene into crops is not a yield-increasing technology. It is a toxin-producing technology. In addition, even though Bt cotton is supposed to control pests, the bollworm has become resistant and new pests have emerged. Now cotton farmers are using 13 times more pesticides than they did for conventional cotton. High costs of seeds and pesticides lead to debt and debt leads to suicides – creating Bt cotton widows, not liberated ‘housewives’.

Dr. Vandana Shiva is a world-renowned scientist, activist and author of many books, including Earth Democracy. She writes on issues of globalisation, farmers’ rights, economics and the interconnectedness of life on Earth. She has been a keen campaigner against industrial agriculture and Genetically modified crops. The author of Earth Democracy. This article featured in the Issue No.264, Resurgence & Ecologist (Resurgence, at the time), is reprinted courtesy of The Resurgence Trust. Visit http://www.resurgence.org.

Photographs by Ananth Somaiah
Gaia’s Dance:
A Vision of Wholeness

“From a Gaian point of view, we humans are an experiment — a young trial species still at odds with ourselves and other species, still not having learned to balance our own dance within that of our whole planet...” , says Elisabet Sahtouris

The following is an excerpt from the book Earth Dance: Living Systems in Evolution, written by evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris in 1999. Inspired and encouraged by scientists Jim Lovelock (Gaia Theory) & Lynn Margulis, Dr Sahtouris shares here the vision of wholeness that Gaia science and theory provides us with.

“Everyone knows that humanity is in crisis, politically, economically, spiritually, ecologically, any way you look at it. Many see humanity as close to suicide by way of our own technology; many others see humans as deserving God’s or nature’s wrath in retribution for our sins...”

Our intellectual heritage for thousands of years, most strongly developed in the past few hundred years of science, has been to see ourselves as separate from the rest of nature, to convince ourselves we see it objectively — at a distance from ourselves — and to perceive, or at least model it, as a vast mechanism.

Philosophers such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Plato were thus the founding fathers of our mechanical worldview, though Galileo, Descartes, and other men of the Renaissance translated it into the scientific and technological enterprise that has dominated human experience ever since.

What if things had gone the other way? What if Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus, the organic philosophers who saw all the cosmos as alive, had won the day back in that ancient Greek debate?

In other words, what if modern science and our view of human society had evolved from organic biology rather than from mechanical physics?

We will never know how the course of human events would have differed had they taken this path, had physics developed in the shadow of biology rather than the other way around.

Yet it seems we were destined to find the biological path eventually, as the mechanical worldview we have lived with so long is now giving way to an organic view — in all fairness, an organic view made possible by the very technology born of our mechanical view.

The same technology that permits us to reach out into space has permitted us to begin seeing the real nature of our own planet to discover that it is alive and that it is the only live planet circling our Sun.

The implications of this discovery are enormous, and we have hardly even begun to pursue them. We were awed by astronauts’ reports that the Earth looked from space like a living being, and were ourselves struck by its apparently live beauty when the visual images were before our eyes.

But it has taken time to accumulate scientific evidence that the Earth is a live planet rather than a planet with life upon it, and many scientists continue to resist the new conception because of its profound implications for change in all branches of science, not to mention all society.

The difference between a planet with life on it and a living planet is hard at first to understand. Take for example the word, the concept, the practice of ecology, which has become familiar to us all within just the few short decades that we have been aware of our pollution and destruction of the environment on which our own lives depend.

Our ecological understanding and practice has been a big, important step in understanding our relationship to our environment and to other species. Yet, even in our serious environmental concern, we still fall short of recognizing ourselves as part of a much larger living entity.

It is one thing to be careful with our environment so it will last and remain benign; it is quite another to know deeply that our environment, like ourselves, is part of a living planet.

The earliest microbes into which the materials of the Earth’s crust transformed themselves created
later species, much as cells create their surroundings and are created by it in our own embryological development.

As for physiology, we already know that the Earth regulates its temperature as well as any of its warm-blooded creatures, such that it stays within bounds that are healthy for life despite the Sun’s steadily increasing heat.

And just as our bodies continually renew and adjust the balance of chemicals in our skin and blood, our bones and other tissues, so does the Earth continually renew and adjust the balance of chemicals in its atmosphere, seas, and soils.

Certainly it is ever more obvious that we are not studying the mechanical nature of Spaceship Earth but the self-creative, self-maintaining physiology of a live planet.

Many still take the live Earth concept, named Gaia after the Earth goddess of early Greek myth, more as a poetic or spiritual metaphor than as a scientific reality.

However, the name Gaia was never intended to suggest that the Earth is a female being, the reincarnation of the Great Goddess or Mother Nature herself, nor to start a new religion (though it would hardly hurt us to worship our planet as the greater Being whose existence we have intuited from time immemorial).

It was intended simply to designate the concept of a live Earth, in contrast to an Earth with life upon it...

We now recognize the Earth as a single self-creating being that came alive in its whirling dance through space, its crust transforming itself into mountains and valleys, the hot moisture pouring from its body to form seas. As its crust became ever more lively with bacteria, it created its own atmosphere, and the advent of sexual partnership finally did produce the larger life forms ~ the trees and animals and people.

The tale of Gaia’s dance is thus being retold as we piece together the scientific details of our planet’s dance of life. And in its context, the evolution of our own species takes on new meaning in relation to the whole. Once we truly grasp the scientific reality of our living planet and its physiology, our entire worldview and practice are bound to change profoundly, revealing the way to solving what now appear to be our greatest and most insoluble problems.

Humans are not the first creatures to make problems for themselves and for the whole Gaian system. We are, however ~ unless whales and dolphins beat us to it in past ages — the first Gaian creatures who can understand such problems, think about them, and solve them by free choice.

The tremendous problems confronting us now — the inequality of hunger on one side and overconsumption on the other; the possibly irreversible damage to the natural world we depend on, just as our cells depend on the wholeness of our bodies for their life ~ are all of our own making.

When we look anew at evolution, we see not only that other species have been as troublesome as ours, but that many a fiercely competitive situation resolved itself in a cooperative scheme. The kind of cells our bodies are made of, for example, began with the same kind of exploitation among bacteria that characterizes our historic human imperialism, as we will see.

In fact, those ancient bacteria invented technologies of energy production, transportation and communications [during] their competitive phase and then used those very technologies to bind themselves into the cooperative ventures that made our own existence possible.

In the same way, we are now using essentially the same technologies, in our own invented versions, to unite ourselves into a single body of humanity that may make yet another new step in Earth’s evolution possible.

If we look to the lessons of evolution, we will gain hope that the newly forming worldwide body of humanity may also learn to adopt cooperation in favor of competition. The necessary systems have already been invented and developed; we lack only the understanding, motive, and will to use them consciously in achieving a cooperative species maturity...

The new view of our Gaian Earth in evolution shows an intricate web of cooperative mutual dependency, the evolution of one scheme after another that harmonizes conflicting interests.

Is it not more likely that nature in essence resembles one of its own creatures than that it resembles in essence the nonliving product of one of its creatures?

The leading philosophers of our day recognize that the very foundations of our knowledge are quaking — that our understanding of nature as machinery can no longer be upheld.

We are learning that there is more than one way to organize functional systems, to produce order and balance; that the imperfect and flexible principles of nature lead to greater stability and resilience in natural systems than we have produced in ours — both technological and social — by following the mechanical laws we assumed were natural.

Like Gaian creation itself, human understanding or knowledge ever evolves.”

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Elisabet Sahtouris is an evolution biologist, futurist, author and consultant on Living Systems Design. Dr. Sahtouris shows the relevance of biological systems to organizational design in businesses, government and global trade. Original article on creativesystemsthinking. All images courtesy http://bsnscb.com/earth-wallpapers.html
Several geographically-distant but related events signalled a dramatic mind shift in humanity’s troubled relationship with nature last month. First, the New Zealand parliament passed the Te Awa Tupua Act, giving the Whanganui River and ecosystem a legal standing in its own right, guaranteeing its “health and well-being”.

Shortly after, a court in India ruled that the Ganges and Yamuna rivers and their related ecosystems have “the status of a legal person, with all corresponding rights, duties and liabilities ... in order to preserve and conserve them”.

The history of the rivers makes these proclamations remarkable. The Ganges has long been considered sacred and millions of people depend on it for sustenance, yet it has been polluted, mined, diverted and degraded to a shocking extent. The Whanganui has witnessed a century-old struggle between the indigenous Iwi people and the New Zealand government over its treatment. Notably, the Iwi consider themselves and the Whanganui as an indivisible whole, expressed in the common saying: “I am the river, and the river is me.”

Rivers are the arteries of the earth, and lifelines for humanity and millions of other animals and plants. It’s no wonder they have been venerated, considered as ancestors or mothers, and held up as sacred symbols. But we have also desecrated them in every conceivable way. Can giving them the legal rights of a human help resolve this awful contradiction?

Perhaps, if we are able to think beyond the material limits of how we relate to nature, we can encourage political and economic measures to create a deeper and more ethical relationship.

New Zealand and India have recognised the intrinsic rights of rivers, beyond their use for humans. Both recognise rivers as having spiritual, physical and metaphysical characteristics. These crucial extensions of law are based on ethical principles rarely recognised since the industrial age, but this is how indigenous peoples have long treated nature.

What does it mean for a river to have the rights of a person? If the most fundamental human right is the right to life, does it mean the river should be able to flow free, unfettered by obstructions such as dams? Does the right extend to all creatures in the river system? How can a river, with no voice of its own, ensure such rights are upheld or ask for compensation if they are violated? Who would receive...
any compensation? And can such rights undo past wrongs?

Officials and civilians take an oath for a clean Ganges on the banks of the river in Allahabad, India.

The New Zealand law recognises that past activities, including a hydroelectricity project, caused damage. The implication is that any such future activities could violate the river’s rights. The Indian court’s orders are vague on some of these aspects, but with a number of hydroelectricity projects being built or planned for the upper reaches of the Ganges and the Yamuna, a clearer articulation of what the court’s orders mean is urgently needed.

And while New Zealand entrusts custodianship of the river to the Iwi people and the government, India puts its faith mostly in government officials and legal experts. This appears shortsighted, given that the country has so far failed to maintain the health of the Ganges and the Yamuna. How will its officials be responsible “parents” – as designated by the court – if their superiors continue to make decisions that are detrimental to the rivers, such as massive hydro-project construction? Can these officials sue their own government?

Rejuvenating the Ganges: bridging the gap between conservation and religion

Another issue is the Indian court’s equation of the Ganges with Hinduism.

Hindus do venerate this river, but communities of other religions have lived along it for centuries. In an atmosphere of increasing religious divisiveness in India, these court orders must not be hijacked by forces of intolerance.

The decisions in New Zealand and India come amid a growing global movement towards recognising the rights of nature. Since 2006, dozens of communities in the United States have enacted the world’s first laws recognising such rights. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to secure the rights of nature – Pachamama – in its constitution; Bolivia enacted the Law of Mother Earth three years later, and in 2009, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 22 April as International Mother Earth Day.

Though the Ecuadorian government has been slow to implement nature’s rights, the country’s courts have issued several decisions upholding them. In a case brought in the name of the Vilcabamba River in 2011, the provincial court of Loja ruled that the rights of the river had been violated by government road construction, and ordered the restoration of the affected river corridor.

Crucially, in the US and Ecuador, people and governments can “step into the shoes” of nature; when people witness the failure of a government to uphold nature’s rights, they can bring cases on its behalf.

At a time of accelerating species extinction, ecosystem collapse, and climate change, this movement marks a transformation in humankind’s relationship with the natural world. Recognising such rights does not stop all human use of nature, but means that our actions must not interfere with the ability of ecosystems and species to thrive. Eventually, respect for nature should be built into how we live, and not because a law is telling us to do so.

Mari Margil is the associate director of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund. Ashish Kothari and Shrishtee Bajpai are members of the Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group.

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Images courtesy creative commons/flickr and Ananth Somaiah
We need as many ways as possible to encourage ecologically wise living on Earth. This is the belief with which the Bhoomi Network has installed an annual award for community based local ecological projects. Through this award, we hope to -

• celebrate the spirit and honour the work of individuals, organisations and communities that have taken responsibility for and engaged in local issues / projects for ecological and social wellbeing.

• promote public understanding of the root level problems created by the globalised technoeconomic system and focus attention on localisation as one of the solutions the world needs.

• involve youth in any location / college in India in nominating candidates for the Bhoomi Award and thereby create awareness of the importance of local ecological projects and campaigns.

The Bhoomi Award 2017- was conferred on Shri Piyush Manush from Salem, Tamil Nadu to honour his work and outstanding contribution towards reviving two major lakes in Salem - the 47 acre Mookaneri and 20 acre Ammapet lakes. Also for initiating a unique community forest project covering over 300 acres - “Coop Forest”, in the nearby drylands of Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu.

The Mookaneri lake after the initial clean up
Calling for Nominations - for The Bhoomi Award - 2018

The young shall certainly inherit the problems that older generations have created on our planet. And hearteningly many more youth are coming forward to contribute to solutions of all kinds at various levels to deal with these problems. The Bhoomi Award has been instituted to honour those who take a different path and work on large eco projects in their own local spaces.

The Bhoomi Award is unique in that only students or youth (less than 40 years of age) can nominate a person or organisation for it. The Nominee needs to be an Indian national (or organisation) who has made outstanding contributions to local community based ecological projects in any state in India. Nominations for the award must be received by the Bhoomi Network office by October 31st of the previous year.

The students of the Bhoomi College, the Bhoomi Team and The Trustees of KNA Foundation, will engage in a selection process to identify the recipient of the Bhoomi Award each year. The selection process will be governed by rules and regulations framed by the Trustees.

About the Bhoomi Award: This Award will include a certificate, a plaque depicting the Bhoomi logo and Award money of 10 Lakhs INR (minimum). The Bhoomi Award will be conferred annually to the selected person/organisation during a ceremony to be held at Bangalore in the month of April.

The Mookaneri lake after revival

Photograph by Ananth Somiah
Exclusive interview with **Prafulla Samantara**, winner of the 2017 Goldman Environmental Prize, who has been a key leader in the long struggle against bauxite mining in a forest safeguarded by indigenous people for centuries.

The battle for the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha pitted indigenous residents of the Dongria Kondh tribe against a multinational seeking to mine aluminium ore. It was a battle waged through rallies and marches in one of the deepest forests of eastern India and then through litigation. After 12 years, the rights of the residents over the land was affirmed by the courts.

Now the 80,000 - odd members of the tribe have a chance to continue worshipping the hills they consider sacred. Prafulla Samantara, one of their leaders, has just been declared winner of the 2017 Goldman Environmental Prize – often called the world’s most prestigious prize for grassroots environmentalism.

The struggle has been on since October 2004, when the government-owned Odisha State Mining Company (OMC) signed an agreement with UK-based Vedanta Resources to mine over 70 million tons of bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills. Activists estimated that this would destroy 1,660 acres of
pristine forest, plus pollute the air, the soil and critical water resources.

At that time, Samantara had been leading agitations against other mining projects that affected the environment. When the bauxite mining agreement was signed, he was among those who went from village to village, informing the residents of the development and its implications. They organised rallies and marches. When that did not work, they went to court.

After years of litigation, in a judgement with far-reaching implications, India's Supreme Court declared that village councils in the area had the right to vote and decide if they wanted the mine. The votes went against continuation of the mining activities.

Soon after Samantara received the news about the Goldman Prize, he recalled the long struggle and its implications in an exclusive interview with the thirdpole.net. Excerpts

**Ques: What made you take up the issue?**

**Ans:** I was already fighting against environmental destruction by mining projects in Odisha using the legal route. When the issue of Vedanta bauxite mining came up, my friends expected that I would take it up. Then in 2003, I read in a local newspaper about the announcement of public hearing for the project that was a crucial part in granting clearance. But I realised that the information about the public hearing wouldn't even reach the tribes in Niyamgiri, who would actually be affected by the project and who live in remote areas. So, then I wrote to the state pollution control board to cancel the hearing. Then I started cycling and walking to meet the Dongrias – who had hardly interaction with the outside world – to explain to them the dangers of the project.

**Ques: Was that very challenging?**

**Ans:** Yes, for one there was a language barrier. They didn’t speak Oriya and secondly, they didn’t believe us initially for a year. I was an outsider for them and it was only when officials started visiting them for enquiry, that they realised that the threat of losing their land was very real. It was the local people who faced a lot of challenges. When the (aluminium) plant came up in 2005 in violation of several laws, massive displacement occurred and they were bulldozing the villages below the hill. People were put in jail, there have been several cases of violent deaths and the whole state machinery turned against them to threaten them to leave their homes.

No one was sympathetic to the tribals.

I was also attacked at least thrice. Once my vehicle was also held and several attempts were made to stop me from addressing people. I was branded as an anti-development person by the elite and the corporates.

“It is not one man’s achievement. The prize is given for Niyamgiri, for the gram sabha (village council), and for my role, and I can say my role is just that of a catalyst. The people are supreme. I feel this prize is a global recognition for the Dongria Kondhs and the fact that saving biodiversity-rich forests of Niyamgiri is very relevant.”
People need to understand that the presence of bauxite in hills is crucial to manage (the) environmental cycle. Bauxite helps hold the rainwater which is released through springs in summer. Of course, mining is important but there is no policing mechanism in India that says how much should be mined and how much should not be.

Ques: So how did you achieve success, and how did you get so much national and international attention on this agitation?

Ans: I never own any movement or say that this is my organisation’s movement. All we say is that let’s give support and after that let people decide who they want to give their support to. I provided support and brought many leaders to give united support, so that it becomes an issue. We had no money to fight. Young lawyers like Ritwick Dutta and Sanjay Parikh joined us and all this help started the debate and (it) became a national issue.

Later, in 2007 I was invited by a London-based lobby group that was against mining companies. Vedanta’s headquarters were in London. Later Survival International also joined us. In various reports and (the) Centrally Empowered Committee’s reports it turned out that many violations were done to set up the project of bauxite mining. And many things came out like how bureaucracy was misused to push for Vedanta’s mining and how the Indian state was working for the corporate interest.

The Norway government that has some investment in Vedanta took note of that and formed an ethics committee to enquire all over the world about Vedanta, so they did this enquiry but Vedanta didn’t answer their questions and ultimately, they blacklisted Vedanta and withdrew their investment. This became a morale boost for us and it also positioned the campaign internationally. Because of these, celebrities started joining us. The fact that what (the) corporate was doing here can happen at other places too turned the local movement into a global one.

Ques: What is your current plan?

Ans: People need to understand that the presence of bauxite in hills is crucial to manage (the) environmental cycle. Bauxite helps hold the rainwater which is released through springs in summer. Of course, mining is important but there is no policing mechanism in India that says how much should be mined and how much should not be. The 80,000 strong Dongria Kondhs are still being threatened and being demoralised by the state though they have taken a leadership role and it is totally their movement on (the) ground.

What we are doing now is fighting against the plant that still exists. Just shutting down the plant is not enough. This plant should be dismantled as we don’t want any environmental pollution in the area. These forests are pristine and an important corridor for elephants and home to various rare species. We also want to focus on health, education and development of the Dongrias who are mainly fruit gatherers and cultivators to make them more economically empowered.
Tribute to Viji, the Turtle Girl

A moving tribute to J. Vijaya, one of the most memorable personalities in Indian wildlife conservation, by Janaki Lenin.

When you delve into the history of herpetological conservation in India, as I did recently, you keep bumping into one personality called J. Vijaya. I have never met her and all I knew of her was that she spent most of her short life working on turtles and that there is a small memorial to her right next to the turtle pond at the Madras Crocodile Bank. Viji (as Vijaya was called) was India’s first woman herpetologist when such a career was unknown in this country.

Student Days

Viji came to the Madras Snake Park as a volunteer in late 1975. She was then a first year zoology student at Ethiraj College, Chennai. She assisted the keepers in cleaning the cages, made sure that visitors didn’t throw stones at the animals, helped in the office and library and filled in for anything else that needed doing. Shekar Dattatri, then a school boy joined the Snake Park as a volunteer a few months later and remembers her as a very quiet person with the insular, focused interest of a Dian Fossey.

While Shekar played truant from school and spent all week hanging around the Snake Park, Viji could only visit on weekends. Besides doing little projects at the Snake Park, the duo went on short field trips together with the Irula tribals – to Vellore looking for rock lizards, to Mambakkam, Ottiyambakkam and Chitlapakkam and other places looking for small creatures like scorpions, lizards, snakes and geckos. Caring for animals in captivity at the Snake Park and observing wild ones in their habitat was a steep learning curve.

The first published mention of Viji surfaces in the September 1980 issue of Hamadryad, the newsletter of the Madras Snake Park in its early years and later Madras Crocodile Bank, when she wrote a short note on the breeding behaviour of mugger crocodiles. A September 1981 editorial mentions that she was working as a Research Associate on a project (which included checking wild scats and feeding captives) to assess the effectiveness of monitor lizards as rat predators. She had graduated by then and was working full-time at the Snake Park.

A Turtle Biologist is Born

In those early days when herpetological conservation was still nascent, Romulus Whitaker, her boss at Madras Snake Park was assigning various people to different critters – Satish Bhaskar to nesting sea turtles, Valliappan to sea turtles in the meat markets of Tuticorin – and he might have put Viji onto freshwater turtles. Once, Rom and a team from Snake Park including Viji, went to the Indian Institute of Technology campus to catch a couple of crocs that had escaped from the Children’s Park Zoo. Near the edge of the huge sewage treatment ponds, they came upon hundreds of turtle eggshells, dug up and strewn around by mongooses. That was the first inkling they had about how common the Indian flapshell Lissomys punctata and the Indian black turtle Melanochelys trijuga were. Viji began collecting data on the turtles’ nest size, number of eggs per clutch and nest survival (precious few!) and

Viji was an excellent field biologist whose best traits were her perseverance and her ability to observe...her name was formally given to the cane turtle that she spent so much of her time studying - vijayachelys silvatica
that may have been the decisive moment.

Shekar remembers returning from a field trip to Sri Lanka with Viji clutching an old frayed bag of the Indian black turtles. At the Customs check, she had to open the leaking bag for inspection when the turtles began pissing in unison. It made an already cumbersome procedure smellier. He laughed as he recalled affectionately, “She’d do things that I wouldn’t dream of doing.”

At this time, Edward Moll, the Chairman of the World Conservation Union’s Freshwater Chelonian Specialist Group needed an assistant for a nation-wide survey of turtles and Rom, who was a member of the group recommended Viji, who was just 22 then, for the job.

The First Surveys

The survey got underway in August-September 1981 and she traveled up to West Bengal (the major consumer of freshwater turtles in the country) to meet up with Pankaj Manna of the University of Calcutta, the other team member. With Pankaj as translator, they began with the meat markets. Thousands of Indian softshell turtles Aspideretes gangeticus and narrow-headed softshell turtles Chitra indica came for sale during the winter months – when the water was low and the creatures were easy to trap, hook, or catch with bare hands. The price of turtle meat plummeted from Rs. 18 to Rs. 5 per kilo during these months; “it was cheaper than beef,” Viji reported.

From Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, she wrote about the movement of the turtle trade – most went to Bengal but some found their way to Assam. Initially turtle exploitation was confined to the states immediately around Bengal. But by the time of her visit, states further upriver like UP were being exploited for the Bengali markets (Viji would eventually discover that turtle exploitation extended as far up as the Punjab). On a typical day, 10 baskets of 10-20 turtles each, along with freshwater fish from reservoirs and rivers, were sent by train from UP alone. The market was big and the business competitive; at least 20 agents worked the River Rapti. Viji also documented how turtles were caught by harpooning and hooking. The hapless turtles were flipped on their backs and their flippers stitched together with binding wire for the journey to Bengal. In 1981, the catchers were already complaining about the small size of turtles (5-10 kg range); 10 years earlier they were easily able to catch 40-70 kg, ones. Based on Viji’s findings Ed Moll estimated that 50,000 to 75,000 Indian flapshells, 7,000 to 8,000 large softshells and at least 10,000 to 15,000 hardshell turtles were coming into the Howrah market in Calcutta annually. He felt that the latter was probably an underestimate, because on one day in May 1983 (off-season), he witnessed over 350 large hardshell turtles being auctioned off.

It can’t have been easy doing this work as most of the places Viji visited were the ‘badlands’ or ‘wild west’ of India – the Chambal ravines with its dacoits, Bhagalpur (at time of the infamous Bhagalpur blindings), crowded, goon-infested parts of UP. But she was totally oblivious to anything besides turtles. The black and white pictures she took of the gory Ridley sea turtle slaughter on Digha beach and in the meat markets of Calcutta, shook the public when India Today magazine ran them in the early 1980s. This was the first media expose ever done on the free-for-all trade in sea turtles and highlights the difference one individual can make for conservation.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took action (another woman who dramatically affected conservation in India) immediately and overnight, sea turtle exploitation was cut to a trickle. Mrs. Gandhi also wrote to the Coast Guard asking them to protect sea turtles, a tradition that still continues. Ironically, the present govt. has abdicated its role as caretaker of India’s wildlife by allowing ports and other developments along the coast that are detrimental to the turtles’ continued survival.

The Forest Cane Turtle

The forest cane turtle (at that time Heosemys silvatica) was at the top of the agenda of the Freshwater Chelonian Specialist Group. Viji decided to go and look for the obscure little turtle in Kerala which hadn’t been seen for 67 years. Only two specimens of the species had ever been recorded by a Dr. Henderson (of the Madras Museum) in October 1911 from Kavalai. Henderson describes the locality as “20 miles from Chalakudi, the starting point of the forest tramway service.” When Viji planned her trip, she discovered that ‘Kavalai’ meant ‘crossing or junction’, the tramway had long since fallen into disuse and every district in Kerala seemed to have a village by that name. She somehow made contact with the Kadar tribals in Chalakudi and sought their help. She wrote: “The ’Moopan’, or head-
Research and Conservation

Rom remembers a clutch of Indian flapshell turtle eggs Viji had been incubating under a tin roof shed at the Croc Bank. It had already been about 300 days when Rom remembers writing them off as dead, but Viji persevered. The Irula tribes had told Viji that the sound of thunder makes turtle eggs hatch. By the end of 1982, Viji had a captive breeding group of cane turtles and Trachemys scripta or ‘cane turtles’ under leaves when frightened, just the way an aquatic turtle would dive into the water. Henderson also recorded the fact that this turtle ‘did not affect the neighbourhood of water, a fact borne out by the absence of webbed digits.’

Silvatica in her

Shekar remembers that first turtle well. “The first time Viji got one back to Madras, she brought it to my house. So long as it was daylight and as long as someone was watching it, the turtle would not come out. When it was pitch dark, it would slowly put its head out. The moment you shone a torch, it went back in. This was the most bizarre creature I’ve ever met.” Perhaps what captured everyone’s imagination most was that Viji saw wild cane turtles ‘dive’ under leaves when frightened, just the way an aquatic turtle would dive into the water. Henderson also recorded the fact that this turtle “did not affect the neighbourhood of water, a fact borne out by the absence of webbed digits.”

In December 1982, one of the female cane turtles Viji brought back laid a clutch of two eggs. She discovered that this species wasn’t a vegetarian as earlier thought. Besides eating fruit and fungi, it fed on invertebrates such as millipedes, molluscs and beetles. From knowing virtually nothing about the animal, Viji made a quantum leap in documenting what this turtle was about.

Unbeknownst to the scientists who considered the turtle “lost” for close to 70 years, several cane turtles were sold in the European pet trade as Triceratops hill turtle Melanochelys tricarina or Indian black turtle in the 1960s and 70s. One of the turtle hobbyists who bought several was Reiner Praschag who maintained them in captivity in Austria for many years.

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Research and Conservation

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In addition to capture-mark-releasing of turtles, Viji also carried out the first studies in Indian forests on tracking the movements of turtles. In 1983, Viji’s operating budget was about Rs. 900 a month. There was no way that the Snake Park could afford radio telemetry equipment but she did the best she could with what was available. She stuck a spool of thread onto the carapace of the turtles with Araldite and let them wander. Following the thread, she could then get at least a general idea of daily activity patterns and even figure out the approximate home range of the animals she was studying.

The End

Viji was an excellent field biologist whose best traits were her perseverance and her ability to observe. She did not have a strong biological background to interpret the data she was collecting and Ed invited her to Eastern Illinois University to do her Masters. In September 1984, Viji left for the States to do her post graduation under Ed Moll and later returned to India to do field studies. In April 1987, she was found dead, of unknown causes, in the forest she loved; she was 28.

In 2006, 19 years later, her name was formally given to the cane turtle that she spent so much of her time studying – Peter Praschag, the son of Reiner Praschag, and several other herpetologists analysed the DNA of Reiner’s now-dead turtles and recently re-named the turtle Vijayachelys silvatica in her honour. It is a monotypic genus, which means that there is no other turtle like it to share the name of vijayachelys. Just as there are very few other people like Viji.

Janaki Lenin, a former filmmaker, currently tries to make a living by publishing books while spending more time with what she loves best - writing.

First published in Sanctuary Asia XXVI No. 2, April 2006

All images courtesy creative commons/flickr
More mutant humans are being born all over the world, displaying strange bodily formations, lifetime handicaps, irregular behaviour, extreme violence. Mutant humans are spreading terror all over the world, and populations are retaliating against them out of fear. This is leading to wars and general breakdown of law and order worldwide. The forests have all been reduced to deserts, due to unexplained infestations, that wiped out all natural plants. The world is facing an apocalypse.

It all began a few decades ago. The first GM crops were allowed into farms in the early 21st century. At that time, they were claimed to be perfectly safe. The symptoms began showing only after many decades. However, by then it was too late, the GM strains had mixed with other strains of crops and now were not reversible. There is no escape from this.

Is this an imagination running wild? An exaggeration? If you objectively compare what the Green Revolution was marketed to be with what it has turned out to be, you wouldn’t feel that way any more.

When I look at the issue of Genetically Modified (GM) crops and the Government’s adamant attempts to introduce them without public consultation or scientific debate, as a lay person, really basic questions come to mind. Questions such as:

Will introducing GM crops offer me health and nutrition in the future?

Are GMOs in alignment with nature?

What is the record of artificial methods of crop improvement over the past few decades? Were they beneficial or detrimental?

Then a set of serious questions strike me:

Why is the Government sneaking GM crops upon us without due process?

Why is a democratic government fighting citizens’ wishes in this particular instance? Who is it working for?

Why is the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) avoiding scientific discussions and transparent public consultation? Why this trust deficit?

What are they doing to verify if GMOs are safe for us to eat, and safe for the environment they grow in?

Doing a bit of research I discover an entire Pandora’s box. This industry that deals with seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides is mired in controversy.

Without going into the entire history, I shall take just the most recent big transformation devised by this industry globally - the Green Revolution - to explain my point. We all know what it was meant to be a saviour of nations and satisfy global hunger. But this entire storytelling is suspect. It is quite obvious that it was a cunning marketing campaign by one of the most devious industries to take control of the world’s food chain.

What is the Green Revolution really? It is a replacement of everything natural in a farm with chemical inputs and hybrid seeds which support each other. What that means is simply that farmers who were independent of any providers were manipulated into becoming consumers of everything they once got on their farms for free, influenced by a false promise of MORE. More yield, more output, more crop resistance. Essentially, it turned farmers into consumers. Farmers were sold on the hybrid seeds that these companies promoted, but then these seeds only work with chemical fertilisers. And since the chemicals did not require a healthy ecosystem to work, farmers destroyed their farms with their new found freedom from the ecosystem, thus destroying their environment, and losing their sensitivity and relationship with their land.
The Green Revolution was touted as safe, but little did we realise that all its negative effects would take decades to manifest... What if, like the Green Revolution, the GM movement goes bad, but this happens only 30-40 years from today? We are looking at a horror story scenario.

If you understand nature, you know that the land provides everything if maintained naturally. With properly covered soil, proper vegetation, intercropping, seeds collected from previous crops, farms thrive and do not require any external inputs. Big corporations were aghast that they were not profiting from this largest segment of producers of food, which is the biggest business there is since we all need to eat everyday.

They devised the Green Revolution as a means to change this and make us all dependent on them. It was no mean feat; it took them decades to infiltrate governments, bureaucracies, agricultural universities, scientific institutions and research bodies. Much like how the pharma industry destroyed the holistic health sector with the false promise that modern medicine is a cure. When they were done, government officials, politicians, professors, agricultural universities, agriculture departments were all corrupted to parrot their mantra - ‘Use chemicals, get more profits’.

Close to 300,000 Indian cotton farmers have committed suicide since 1997 owing to expensive GM seeds and chemicals, forcing them into a cycle of debt.

Connecting the Dots

The game may be new but the companies behind it are the same seed, fertiliser, pesticide and herbicide manufacturers. The game of migrating farmers to GM seeds has a familiar marketing line: We cannot feed the millions without GMOs - the exact line they fed us in the 50s when the Green Revolution was being marketed.

Looking at a few instances of GM seeds that were introduced and how they fared, you see that this round of exploitation of our plates will not be as simple as the Green Revolution. Take the example of Bt Cotton which was also released into the country quite surreptitiously without proper approvals. Farmers who, influenced by the marketing, migrated to Bt Cotton are now the worst affected in the country. Their crops don’t fare well, the supposed benefits of genetic modification which made them pest-resistant have worn off because nature decided to upgrade the pests, and now due to huge losses, thousands of farmers have committed suicide.

The larger damage this has caused is that almost 95 percent of native cotton plants have been lost. We just cannot put a value to the loss. Once we lose all our traditional seeds, for which we did not have to depend on anyone, we become slaves to the corporations who can sell again and again to our farmers.

“This is the easiest way to colonise a people: Make them dependent on seeds which are engineered to be dependent on certain chemicals in order to perform. So first, farmers have to buy the seeds from you, then the chemicals. You have the farmers cornered and the governments in your pocket. Well crafted, wouldn’t you say?

Women, traditionally involved in manually weeding mustard fields face loss of employment with the new herbicide-tolerant GM mustard.

The Road Ahead

The manner in which the GEAC is rushing decisions without revealing their basis, and avoiding public disclosure means they are following the dictates of some small lobby that intends to profit massively by the allowing of GM Crops.

By turning the entire population of the country into guinea pigs, our government officials are waging war on its own citizens, playing with our lives and futures to benefit a few. There is another word for this: genocide.

For our own sakes, and for the sake of our future citizens, I hope the decision to allow GMOs into our fields is never passed. Or else, I dread the day a few decades later, when our children will be similarly analysing the decision made now against all warnings, just like we examine the ‘Green Revolution’ of the 50’s.

The Green Revolution was touted as safe, but little did we realise that all its negative effects would take decades to manifest. But, this damage is reversible, with a lot of effort. All it requires is that we stop using chemicals and hybrid seeds on our farms, so the soil returns to health and hardy native seeds revive farmers’ fortunes, and restore our good health.

Now that we are attempting to manipulate the basic nature of plants in rather devious ways, how can anyone with all this previous wisdom, advocate that we play with our future? What if, like the Green Revolution, the GM movement goes bad, but this happens only 30-40 years from today? We are looking at a horror story scenario. Once we release GM crops into farms, there is no way to limit them from pollinating non-GM crops. They would all get mixed up, leaving no specific areas where GM plants grow. We cannot reverse this contamination from GM crops all over the world? So, should we even set this Frankenstein’s monster loose? Is that good decision making?

Sandeep Anirudhan, founder of Aikyam Community for Sustainable Living, has been working tirelessly to create eco-consciousness in Bangalore by building and fostering a community that makes earth friendly decisions as consumers and citizens.

Article first published on Eartha. (http://earthamag.org/)
Balaknama - A Newspaper for Children

Balaknama, read by 10,000 readers across four states in the country, publishes stories and editorials by children who are mostly ragpickers, or help their parents in their jobs like working in households or selling vegetables.

"Since my photo got published in Balaknama, I’m much more interested in studying and reading." Jyoti, who lives under a bridge at a bus stop in Delhi, has been extremely motivated since she saw her photo published in Balaknama in 2012. Ragpicker by day, she works as a journalist with a publication that is planned, written and edited by kids who work on the streets, and in factories. Balaknama, read by 10,000 readers across four states in the country, publishes stories and editorials by children who are mostly ragpickers, or help their parents in their jobs like working in households or selling vegetables. The unique quarterly newspaper will complete 14 years this July, the first and only of its kind in the country.

“We started with a group of 35 street and working children in 2003. Now, there are more than 10,000 of us across India,” recalls Subhash of Chetna (Childhood Enhancement through Training and Action), the Delhi-based NGO whose initiative this is. They also offer support groups and workshops to help children deal with trauma, provide counselling, healthcare services and drug rehabilitation.

“We simplify complex issues in the paper so that kids take interest in it,” said a 19 year-old Shanno, the editor from Sunder Nagari slum, who interviews street kids and tells their stories. Having joined the newspaper when she was only 11 years old, after having worked in a garment factory and learning to read in outdoor charity classes, Shanno assures her mother that a bright future is in the offing. Her father passed away last year and her mother works as a seamstress. Her mother is often worried about procuring funds for Shanno’s education. “Don’t worry, I’ll get an education and then we’ll have everything,” she assures.

The newspaper does not only create a safe space to voice the issues of the children involved in child labour, but also equips the kids with a sense of purpose. It empowers them with a focus on issues that affect them personally, like child marriage, abuse and police brutality. In fact, Chetna’s director Sanjay Gupta says that writing for Balaknama helps the young people heal from the distress and suffering they have experienced. Sold for Re 1, the paper runs on a contribution of Rs 5 per month from each kid, that helps in both funding their basic education, as well as the production of the newspaper, while a large part of it is run on the sponsorship of a federation for street children in northern India, called Badhte Kadam.

“The monthly contribution fee ensures that each child feels a sense of involvement. Even those children who are still learning to read and write insist that the stories in the paper are read out to them by others,” says Subhash, himself a street kid who used to sell magazines at traffic intersections, who has now completed his graduation in social work. 20 year old Vijay, who used to work in a wood-carving unit in Delhi’s Kirti Nagar, encapsulates the essence of Balaknama’s power best when he professes his hope that some new children from the team will soon fill in their shoes, and continue to teach more kids how to read and write. “I’m very happy that Balaknama will reach out to so many kids and those children will become powerful. From those, a few will emerge as the future editors of the magazine,” he says.

Aditi Dharmadhikari has been writing about music and culture for the past five years, and is currently based out of Bombay. Awake since the late 90’s, she will readily work for filter coffee.

Originally published on Vikalp Sangam.

Photograph courtesy creative commons/flickr
“How could I look my grandchildren in the eye and say I knew what was happening to the world and did nothing?”

– David Attenborough

“We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.”

– Wendell Berry
Formal education and popular worldviews have created a big split between ‘respectable’, (ie. masculine) and certain others which may be called feminine or ‘soft’ careers. There is broadly a split between science/technology and the arts, crafts, school education and community based work etc. Many colleges have shut down their arts departments and it is mostly women who take up courses in the fine arts, home science and even the environment sciences. Agricultural colleges which ought to teach the science and craft of caring for soil, plants and people have instead been coopted into the technological world of labs and genetic modification and exploiting the maximum from the Earth.

Engineering, allopathic medicine, management, finance etc are the arenas of the popular careers today. These are also the ones that pay a lot more, and extract much more from us and the earth than we can cheerfully bear.

But, increasingly we have more and more youth - both men and women - who are getting disillusioned with careers which are joyless and meaningless, thinking for themselves and going beyond stereotypes to find work that gives them a sense of wellbeing. They are looking for careers which nurture them and also are nurturant to others and to Nature around them.

Typically, the careers that nurture oneself as well as one’s community and place -

- include diverse tasks and goals, not boringly repetetive ones.
- help us get in touch with and collaborate deeply with many human beings
- gives us the opportunity to see the direct impact of our work on the community and place around us.
- does not require us to sit or stand in front of a machine most of the time.
- give us a deeper feeling of satisfaction.

In this issue of Eternal Bhoomi, the last printed quarterly issue we plan to bring out, we present the stories of some of our students who have decided that the wiser path is a nurturant path. In a way a path that balances the feminine principle of nurturance, humility and earth consciousness with the masculine principle of macho toughness, pursuit of the ‘big’ and conquest. And a path that shows their concern to contribute their bit to live with ecological wisdom in a world which is hurtling in an insanely suicidal direction.

We are happy to round off the theme of Rejoicing in the Ecofeminine with these ten stories of the nurturant career paths taken by students of the Bhoomi College.

- Editor
Reviving a lake

Hema Bapat: “When I began the Sustainable Living course in Bhoomi, little did I imagine that I would get so committed to reviving the Hado Siddhapura Lake. It may be a long journey, but with so many people who are supporting me, it seems possible for an ordinary person like me.”

There was a time when the high rise buildings and the illuminated malls used to attract and impress me. I was a typical city dweller, happy and proud about its huge infrastructure.

But very soon after moving around the streets of Bangalore I realized the truth—about the price the city was paying for it's development. The garbage piles grew taller and larger than the multiplexes; the lakes were hosting sewage and trash. It all started bothering me and I wished to do something positive beyond just being unhappy about what I saw.

After a long debate with my eco-conscience, I finally decided it's time to face the reality and explore what I could do. I needed to learn - I needed more understanding, more skills, people to work with and most of all a sense of direction. That is when I joined Bhoomi's course on 'Science and Management in Sustainable living'.

In the beginning I had no clarity about what I would do at the end of the course. But I had a strong intuition that I will be on right track and will definitely make a difference to the place I lived in. I am more of a practical person, unlike some of my fellow students who were more into intellectual, adventurous or poetic pursuits. As the course progressed I felt pulled to focussing on water or garbage management. The reasons being that these are the major issues cities were facing. Bhoomi offered me an internship program on 'Water'. Which included a survey on water and garbage management in the surrounding areas, and exploring possibilities of revival of the Hadosiddapura lake, which has almost dried up and needed rejuvenation. Perhaps because it was a small lake of about 9 acres and outside the BBMP (city corporation) limits, it had not attracted much attention, unlike the bigger lakes of Bangalore.

This internship gave me an opportunity of interacting with people from different backgrounds. Many of them were excited with the idea of lake revival. And showed enthusiasm and support. I realized that most people are aware of their surroundings and also want to contribute through community efforts, but lacked initiative and motivation.

The most interesting part was working with the government offices to obtain documents and information. The basic issue is not a matter of getting into action, desilting the lake, planting trees etc. It was to work along with the Government agencies were in charge of the lake. Being outside the city limits, the Panchayat, forest or minor irrigation departments could be involved. But initially none of these officials showed the least interest in supporting me. Language was a challenge, but I managed to persist with the help of anyone who could.

What has given me hope that the revival of this lake will surely happen is the support I got from several water and lake activists around the city. We Bhoomi College students had visited the Jakkur Lake and met Dr Annapurna Kamath, who spoke with passion about the community efforts to continue to monitor and look after the lake that they had rejuvenated.

I also met Priya Ramasubban and Ramesh Sivaram who had worked on the Kaikondrahalli Lake and got it adopted by a citizens trust. I also heard about two ladies Niveditha Sunkad and Malavika, who single handedly had revived a lake in Rajarajeshwari nagar.

Shuba Ramachandran and others from Biome, Bhargavi who was earlier with Environment Support Group are some of the others who inspired me.

The time is also right for citizens to work on local lake projects in Bangalore. The National Green Tribunal slapping clean up orders on the BBMP regarding the dismal condition and burning waters of the Bellandur lake; the Supreme Court judgment on lakes and clear guidelines available about what constitutes lake encroachment - all these have created much more awareness and it is possibly easier now for a community to come together to take care of lakes in their vicinity. Certainly it also helps that this lake is located behind Bhoomi College and the Prakriya School - who will join me in my efforts.

My role then is to keep pushing every step of the way. Like making a dozen visits to Government offices to just get a survey map; organising Kere Habbas and other events on the lake shore, keeping up everyone’s interest in reviving the lake. I am sure now, that it will happen. It is happening!

Hema Bapat has participated in the course on Sustainable Living by Bhoomi college 2016 - 17. She now works with the Bhoomi Network. Photograph by author
Pursuit of the Wholistic

Priyanka Das Sarkar: “I left the Corporate Sector to become an educator and discovered a whole new world that has made a big difference to the way I think and live.”

I chose to do a course on Holistic Education at Bhoomi College because I wanted a transition to the field of education from the corporate sector, where I had worked for close to a decade as an HR professional. The trigger for the change in career was having a child and spending time with him in his learning pursuits. I realised I enjoyed learning and facilitating children learn. I had read about alternate schools and since my education was primarily mainstream, I was interested in working in alternate schools. Also, I hoped to understand myself better through this.

The whole idea of schooling as modelled on factories and children being groomed to become good industrial workers is a sad commentary on education today. I reflected on my own schooling and since my education was primarily mainstream, I was interested in working in alternate schools. Also, I hoped to understand myself better through this.

We also learnt much more about the importance of the processes of learning versus learning content only. About many aspects of experiential and holistic learning including real life projects, thematic and mixed age group work, theatre and multiple ways of presenting content to children which can enhance learning. It was a bonus that I discovered aspects about myself, which I was not aware of, while others got reconfirmed. But the things I learnt, are so relevant, especially for children in these days of chemical ridden processed foods that children eat. Being a hardcore non-vegetarian all my life, it was an eye opener for me to know how the human digestive canal is not entirely suited for eating meat since it is much longer like a herbivore’s and not like those of a carnivore.

The concept of our blood being alkaline, and that hence, we should eat sufficient alkaline food, i.e, fruits and vegetables was also new; also the importance of eating millets not only from the perspective of our health but also thinking about the water crises, since millets need less water and also about public health since they are extremely nutritious and are easier to grow organically.

What Difference Did It Make?

I am more tolerant of the diversity around me. I learnt to focus on strengths and not be bothered by the areas of ‘weaknesses’. I learnt about what my filters are and how I happen to judge people through them.

Instead of breaking up learning into different subjects one should lay emphasis on the connectedness and relatedness of everything and value ‘wholeness’. This can be called the basis of holistic enquiry.

Lastly, “A teacher is a guide on the side, not a sage on a stage.”

The resource persons I met through this course have kindled a fire somewhere, which I carry with me as I come to the end of this programme. It has made a difference in the way I think and live. Hopefully, I will be able to make a difference to some other lives.

I am reminded of an Urdu quote: “Main akela hi chala tha, janib-e-manzil magar, log saath aate gaye aur kaarwaan banta gaya.” (I started walking alone towards the destination but people kept coming with me and it has become a group now.)
Call of the Wild

Aliston Texeira: “Nature is not a place to visit - it is home... I plan to use the Sharavathi Rainforest farm space to create a central repository for all types of useful plants, local and exotic, while studying and making accessible to others, indigenous knowledge of ecosystem interactions and ways of living.”

A while ago, as I was completing studies in engineering, around 2008, I developed a deep fascination for plants. During that time I was continually frustrated at the lack of guidebooks to the wonderful world of plants, insects and fungi that surround us. Descriptions of plant behaviour, trophic interactions, evolutionary history were rarely mentioned, most volumes instead favoring identification through black and white monographs, sketches and tons of dense vocabulary.

After completing my studies, it occurred to me that since no one was putting together books on native wisdom, I might as well take on such a project both to learn for myself and to share with other enthusiasts. But there was little support from a business-oriented family background that I was tied up in. So I bailed on them. But work in this sector doesn’t pay, and running around trying to make a living leaves little time for real living i.e. an immersive observation of nature. So I went back home to live as an outcast, politely putting up with taunts, always focusing instead to learn more from nature.

The Search

What is nature? As I took up volunteering positions and internships in farming, forestry & building with natural materials it dawned on me from the spaces and people I was blessed to meet, that Nature is not a place to visit, an escape from what is man-made - it is home - and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places. Often there are areas that are difficult and remote, but all are known and even have names.

And home is our living classroom. The less familiar can be magnified to familiarity. The remote can be a sanctuary of undisturbed life.

For most cultures in history, the careful observation of all the calendrical and ecological niches that a home territory offered was satisfying enough to devote a lifetime to. This created a sense of belonging to that land inextricably well. This was the territory I found myself navigating and yearning to learn about.

And in doing so I inevitably found myself exploring what it meant to be “Wild and Free” because the people that I was fortunate to meet in these circles, for better or worse, informed my decisions in crafting an escape from the fetters of mundanity.

Both the above words have become consumer babbles. Civilizations all over the world have been racing head-on into a collision course with nature and yet their terms for it too are wildness and freedom. Yet scarcely anyone seems to have noticed.

As I’ve learnt to define freedom over the years, the most meaningful to me is the simple acceptance of impermanence and the choice it grants us.

Wildness comes from those last wilderness shrines saved from all the land that was once known and lived in by the original people; the little bits left in groves & deep valleys across the country as they were the last little places where nature lives - also wails, blooms, nests, glints and wisps away.

I’ve seen more happiness in children growing up in this home with nothing but mud on their faces than I’ve ever seen in the civilized.

Along the way the gathering of like-minds in far-off villages & places of unspoilt nature taught me everything I know of ecology and sociology today. The permaculturists and whole systems builders; the cybernetic shamans and anarchists; the mindful educators and trickster behaviorists.

The Dream

Yet what seemed genuinely lacking was a place to put action to where my mouth was. And along came Bhoomi. They have offered me a space in Sharavathi to work on my ideas and provide valuable perspectives without any hesitation. A space that I plan to use to create a central repository for all types of plants, local, useful or exotic, while studying and making accessible to others, indigenous knowledge of ecosystem interactions and ways of living. Also I am very keen on building appropriate technology devices that supplements this knowledge of ecosystems with autonomous power generation devices.

Thereafter, I hope to work with a team on end-to-end consultation to implementation services of holistically designed forest farms that sequester carbon, bring in income, generate power and build rural livelihoods.

Aliston Texeira lives and works in a remote farm in the middle of the Sharavathi Rainforest. He participated in the course on Sustainable Living (2016-17) at the Bhoomi College.

Photograph by Ananth Somaiah
Certain decisions in life are so instinctive that they seemingly lack any linear logic or justification. Leaving the corporate sector and joining the Science and Management for Sustainable Living course offered by Bhoomi College was one such instinctive decision that I made.

Quite often our deeper knowing pushes us to where we need to head exactly at the time we need to be there! I can now say that this has been a decision that has enriched me in my journey of life.

The very first evening I landed in the campus, I felt good and right about coming here. The earthly campus, simple accommodation and classmates from across diverse field of work, ages and geography – I knew I belonged here in the present phase of my life. As we settled down, we eased into the ‘Bhoomi way of living’. And my mind and body spontaneously knew this way of living, though my mainstream-wired brain raised its doubts once in a while. The Bhoomi team, true to their name, embrace you into the community they have built right on the outskirts of Bangalore. They accepted each of us with all our incompleteness, cluelessness and mental blocks.

Having come from the finance stream and having been an academic achiever most of my life, I was surprised when the course began with the module ‘Connecting to land, community and self’. My mainstream education and corporate jobs had left one lacunae in me – self-ignorance. I had never found the time or interest to put in efforts to find out who am I as a person. The faculty and the group here somersaulted my understanding of concepts like perception, learning, sharing and acceptance. ‘Inner and Outer Ecology’, a week-long event that involves connecting to oneself, opened me to a whole new realm of trusting my emotions with others, opening myself to co-travellers and acceptance of my incompleteness and struggles of life. This module made me realise that until we are aware of our own self, we may not have much to offer the world!

We then moved onto other modules that introduced us to varied topics like food and health, agriculture, communications and expression, systems thinking, economics of well-being, waste and water management, eco design, social entrepreneurship and social equity and justice. In each module we were introduced to diverse topics and each of us delved into the topics as per our areas of interest.

The best part of the course is the emergent curriculum. While there is a broad framework and many elements of the course are well designed, it does not become restrictive or close ended.

The Deep Ecology module in the Sharavathi rain forest was a deeply nourishing experience. The five day long programme with the solo time and circle time gave us enough time and space to feel into the energy of diverse life all around and truly experience our belongingness in the larger Earth community...

The internship at the end of the course enables all of us to pursue our area of interest, to take our learning forward consolidate it for ourselves. Bhoomi is a learning space for all those who are willing to be integral to what they believe in and ready to own up their emotions, feelings and are fearless to stand up and say, ‘I refuse to be blissfully ignorant anymore!’

Akshatha, alumnus of Bhoomi College, plans to work in a rural area in Karnataka promoting organically grown millets. Photograph by author
Towards Sustainable Communities

Manvendra Singh: “I landed in my ancestral village to practice the farming I had learned. Alas, the restless heart was not ready for the solitude and stillness the farming life brings. I left and went on to work with Greenpeace India on sustainable agriculture campaigns for three years.”

Finding one’s purpose in life can be a challenging prospect, especially for a young student. Manvendra Singh Inaniya talks about his experience discovering his purpose while working on sustainability in the Himalayan mountains.

There was a moment in my college when I had 13 backlogs. By the last semester, only three were left. Then I quit. From “So close, should have finished it,” to “You are a coward running away from your responsibilities and hard work,” I heard it all.

Thus began my irrational life, with its own moments of fear and wonder. The moment I realized I could do anything with my life, the world opened up to a million possibilities, and I frantically looked around for answers.

The lost became found when one entered Bhoomi College for a course on Sustainable Living. The ideas about living in harmony with the Earth, and before that, in harmony with oneself, inspired me. Nobody ever talked about these things before—I wondered why.

The learning at Bhoomi College is open-ended enough to let each participant unfold his or her own interests but at the same time is sufficiently structured to introduce several new themes and ideas. We also meet several people who have done amazing work in the area of sustainability.

I got to learn hands-on with small projects on reforestation in remote locations of Andhra Pradesh, about building houses using earth-bag construction in Tamil Nadu, and the philosophy of organic farming wandering across the length of the country meeting established organic farmers.

I landed in my ancestral village to practice the farming I had learned. Alas, the restless heart was not ready for the solitude and stillness the farming life brings. I left and went on to work with Greenpeace India on sustainable agriculture campaigns for three years.

The challenges we face as a species are so interconnected that trying to explain them to the people in a way that moves them to action is always a challenge in itself.

For some time now, I have been living in a hut jutting out of a hillside, with no electricity or water connection. It has helped me understand that communities are dependent on forests for firewood, water, fodder, and food. With every water source drying up and the forests dwindling, one has to walk much further and forage much longer to meet basic necessities.

With the pines’ monopoly over the hills, animals are forced out of forests on to people’s farms, causing havoc for both the sides.

That’s what I am going to do here. I’m going to help communities better manage their forests so that they can sustain lives better—so that songs shall still be sung as they walk through these forests sustaining birds, animals, and mankind in harmony.

Manvendra Singh Inaniya works with an NGO called Alaap in the Kumaon Hills. He participated in Bhoomi’s course on sustainable living in 2012-13.

Photograph by author
The Way Ahead

Chandan Muhlekar: “Sustainability education is still in its early stages in India and the world. On one hand we as a species urgently need to move to a lifestyle involving fewer needs. On the other, we are too used to contemporary lifestyles to the point where a dialogue on change is not even possible at times.”

“If my body really needed broccoli and red capsicum, they would be growing right here in this soil (in India) already! You think Nature is stupid?”

I remember these words well. Narsanna Koppula - my permaculture guru – was cautioning us about exotic varieties of plants, as I sat listening up on the branch of a Pongam tree.

It was a late afternoon in September 2014, at Bhoomi college where I was attending a month long course on a variety of eco friendly farming practices – the most comprehensive one in a series of courses in my journey of exploration.

I had quit my teaching job in March that year, to go travel and learn about how to create an alternative lifestyle that is truly fulfilling. After working in the industry and in teaching for 3 years, my only takeaways were some financial savings and bad health. This is one of the unspoken truths in our diseased corporate culture – one that is kept delicately hidden from fresh graduates lest they question it. The only way out is to take a break from it all. That’s what I did.

First Steps

My journey began with a workshop titled “Deep Ecology” hosted by Mark at the Dharmalaya Institute. Deep Ecology focuses on finding our place in Nature first. This was invaluable in helping me develop a wide perspective of the issues of our time. I then witnessed natural architecture in action at Dharmalaya and did a course on solar passive design at SECML in Ladakh, taught by Saurabh Phadke, Sonam Wangchuk and Robert Celaire. It was an unforgettable.

As my journey went from recalibrating away from conventional city life, I felt the need to develop skills. The few skills we are taught in formal education help us somehow survive in the bubble of the made-up human economy by building up financial assets. This fictitious economy however rests upon the real natural world, in which we are never taught how to build and conserve natural assets. This search for real life skills is what brought me to Bhoomi.

I looked through many places to learn such skills from. There are many camps in the farming world – organic farming, zero budget farming, etc. and usually courses are designed around only one. The Bhoomi course was different. From Biodynamic farming to Applied Permaculture, from urban farming to healthy cooking – we discovered many aspects of human nutrition from the soil to the plate, and back to the soil (We used compost toilets!).

We visited farms around Bangalore and met the heroes in the farming movement such as Kavita Kuruganti, Narayana Reddy, Narsanna Koppula ji and others.

Back to the City

The next logical step of course would be practise. But I had no farm, not even a terrace to grow plants on. I experienced firsthand that taking a pause to find your calling is looked upon as pretty much the lowest possible thing that a young middle class man can do in our society. Still I kept at it – volunteering at organic farms, learning how to make a greenhouse, how to design solar power systems...

By early 2015 I was both financially and emotionally bankrupt by the time I came upona small social enterprise working on sustainability education whose website instantly caught my attention - the Academy for Earth Sustainability. It has been two years since I joined them and the adventure continues to this day!

At AES

Some wise person once said that “It is better to dig a ditch with friends than to build a skyscraper with a bunch of sociopaths.”

It is the people that make all the difference and I discovered this in a positive light for the first time, at AES. It was a for-profit company yet nobody was trying to get rich from it. Motivation came from a desire to create positive change; and encouragement from the company of passionate lovable people.

AES was created in 2014, in response to the need for effective education and skill building around sustainable living, eco-leadership, environmental entrepreneurship and social responsibility. By the time I had joined, the team had been working with several orphanages, helping them grow their own food, recycle their trash, and build a sense of confidence in the children. Today, I strive to develop such skills and instil empathy in school students from all walks of life who are otherwise too sheltered and disengaged from our collective impact on the world. Across schools, we innovate different ways to transform apathy into action – to help communities create their own solutions to the sustainability challenges they face.

We have tried to do this in a variety of ways; and we keep trying and learning. Today, innovation is needed here in the communication of ideas more than anywhere else. For instance, it is easy to say that each kg of sugar uses more than 3000 litres of water to
produce. The fact itself sounds vague and not relatable. But when you play a game where people carry even 30 litres of water for even a short distance, the experience is entirely different. In this simple act, a city dweller instantly empathises with her rural counterpart who doesn’t have the privilege of piped water. A sense of connection is felt, deeper conversations and reflection is sparked - opening the door to curiosity, questions, knowledge and informed action.

The Way Ahead

Truly holistic education in this field of sustainability is rare because of its multidisciplinary and holistic nature. Fortunately, the wide range of training and experience I went through has given me an excellent foundation to tackle this – something I couldn’t find in any post graduate course out there.

Sustainability education is still in its early stages in India and the world. We as a species urgently need to move to a lifestyle involving fewer needs, even as we are addicted to ways of living that we are not able to give up. There is a pressing need to establish and strengthen centres for sustainability education and research space, and I am thrilled to be working with some of them.

Chandan Muhlekar is an engineer, ecologist and educator who designs sustainable systems, spaces and learning experiences at the Academy for Earth Sustainability. He was part of the Food and Farming module at Bhoomi College.

Photograph by author

My journey towards “change” started many years ago in the United States, when I was working hard at finding a “work-life balance”, as many called it. I took up running, I was introduced to the book Fast Food Nation which gave me insights into the terrible foods served to us by the food industry. Like everybody else with green wishes but not enough time, I did what I could—recycled everything possible and tried to eat the right local foods. I also began connecting some of the dots.

The ‘search bug’ made be a traveller with a mission. While I travelled in search of experiences, travelling just with what a backpack could hold became a way of life. It also led me to deeply value a simpler lifestyle. But being a vagabond without a mission finally got to me, as I was still in that searching mode but not getting closer to what I wanted to do.

The clarity came when I spent time at Bhoomi College as a student of their very first batch. It was a leap of faith on my part (first batch and all), and perhaps for Team Bhoomi as well. Not many have started a college exploring alternative thinking.

The path to change is full of resistance, not only from others who keep questioning your steps, but from within ourselves. Meeting folks like Devinder Sharma, Harish Hande, Dr. Balasubramaniam, and Dr. Nandita Shah and hearing their journeys was enlightening.

For me, my knowledge of the environment, the planet, and how all things connected was there, but I didn’t know what to do with that knowledge. The combination of the place, the people and experiences helped me come to a point where I decided to come back home to convert our family farm to a non-chemical one.

Since I left in 2013, our farm “Aiyor Bai” has been on the journey of change as well. We completed three full monsoon cycles in 2016 of not using any chemicals in the form of pesticides or fertilizers. I look at the farm and see beyond just “organic”. I want to redesign the farm into a multi-layered, diverse polyculture establishment. Being away from the monoculture that has taken over so many farms made us all reductionists. I took a Permaculture Design course which brought me closer to folks in Hyderabad who have been working on their lands and slowly creating a like-minded community of fellow travellers here.

I never thought that my journey would come full-circle, as my first chosen career was connected to food. Having rebelled, I had gone to Hotel Management School when women were not even welcome in the industry. Now, I was going to be part of the circle with food production. Through my farm, I can help folks understand the importance of good local food, and the impact food production has on our planet, our health, and our soils. Healthy soils equal healthy humans.

Madhu Reddy is a farmer and steward of the land at Aiyor Bai farm in Hyderabad. She was a student of the Sustainable Living course at Bhoomi College, 2012-13.

Photograph by author

From Backpacker to Organic Farmer

Madhu Reddy: “Returning to your roots after travelling is not a decision anyone takes lightly. Madhu Reddy talks about the journey that inspired her to return to her family farm and convert it into a chemical-free, organic one.”

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Madhu Reddy is a farmer and steward of the land at Aiyor Bai farm in Hyderabad. She was a student of the Sustainable Living course at Bhoomi College, 2012-13.

Photograph by author
Vaishnavi: “Learning about alternative education created an intellectual and spiritual impact on me. Investing time in my inner-self as part of the foundation module – Connecting to Land, Self and Community during the Holistic Education programme at Bhoomi College is a journey I will cherish forever. From understanding perceptions, complexity, self-enquiry and other processes, my outlook towards life changed.”

The Holistic Education programme offered by Bhoomi College seemed like the perfect fit when I wanted to take a break to understand ‘alternative education’. Little did I know then that these eight months would create an impact on me, not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

Investing time in my inner-self as part of the foundation module – Connecting to Land, Self and Community is a journey I will cherish forever. From understanding perceptions, complexity, self-enquiry and other processes, my outlook towards life changed. The positivity of the space and the reverence with which sessions were facilitated made the struggles I was silently fighting seem resolvable. Offerings made by facilitators and peers were meaningful, experiential and instilled faith and hope. Furthermore, staying on-campus provided an opportunity to collectively mull over classroom discussions and afterthoughts.

Running in parallel were discussions on sustainability, and by late August, the much-awaited modules on education began.

The energy within me changed. Understanding psychology (like brain sciences, the stages of development, windows of opportunity for learning), the need for mixed age groups, thematic learning, whole language approach, multiple intelligences, learning styles and active learning methodology (to name a few), gave perspectives I would have never gained otherwise. Prakriya-specific practices like building sensitivity, ‘Circle Time’, emergent curriculum and storytelling in the real-world context helped as well. Interacting with educationists Miss Madhu Suri, Miss Jane Sahi (Founder, Sita School), Mr Gautama (Director, Pathashaala), Seetha Anathasivan (Founder Trustee, Prakriya School) and facilitators from Prakriya helped in understanding their philosophy of education, and questioning the current system.

Why I Left the Corporate Sector to Become an Educator

To further our learning, we were encouraged to pursue a two-month internship with an educational institution. Inspired by our visit to the Valley School’s Art Village, I decided to spend six weeks at Vidya Vanam, a beautiful school for tribal children located near Coimbatore. Subjects including mathematics, science and languages are taught through art, and at the end of the term in December, children display their projects/models at the annual project day. It was heartening to see how the entire school (including teachers, management and support staff) came together to
The positivity of the space and the reverence with which sessions were facilitated made the struggles I was silently fighting seem resolvable. Offerings made by facilitators and peers were meaningful, experiential and instilled faith and hope. Furthermore, staying on-campus provided an opportunity to collectively mull over classroom discussions and afterthoughts.

give children an opportunity to learn and participate in a fearless, non-competitive environment.

My understanding of 'alternative education' emerged when we dived into the underlying connection between Prakriya's guiding principles, processes and practices. Today I have a vision of how education should be – respecting diversity, fostering eco-consciousness, learning as an eco-system; how integral every stakeholder is, and how important it is for children to grow in an environment that encourages them to just be.

Although our batch was diverse, and every individual had unique stories to share, I believe that our learning would have been more enriching had the Holistic Education's batch size been bigger – creating a space for broader perspectives, richer experiences, and deeper analyses. Also, having the flexibility to do the real life project in education (and not only sustainability) would have been more exciting and engaging for us.

Both the inner-outer ecology and deep ecology programmes set a new dimension I could tread on. With guidance from the facilitators at the college, I have started mirroring some of these sessions (like appreciating diversity, realising one's strengths, understanding blocks to creativity, etc.) back home. I believe this is one of my biggest takeaways, and I will continue to engage in this work with those around me. Concurrently, I wish to explore opportunities of working with teachers at low-income schools (taking to them these alternative methodologies) and understand policies that make our education system.

Vaishnavi Srinivasan, a student of Sustainable Living course at Bhoomi College, 2016-17. She works with governent schools through her organisation, Bhumi.

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**Nature is Within Me**

*Shruthi Upadhyay*: “I worked in an IT company in the marketing and communications space for about 10 years. I had been following Bhoomi’s work for two years before I applied for the Sustainable Living course. My journey since, has been the most transformational and wholesome.”

Something was simmering within me for a long time, it took me a while to realize that I was seeking the true meaning of my existence. Especially after my daughter was born, I felt, I had very little to offer to her apart from being a successful ‘corporate mother’ during the day and making time to play with her in the evening or weekends.

I worked in an IT company in the marketing and communications space for about 10 years. I followed the Bhoomi pages for two years before I applied to the course. My journey since, has been the most transformational and wholesome.

Today, I have a different perspective of life. On a more spiritual and philosophical plane Bhoomi helped me reconnect with nature, in the process helped me reconnect with myself and understand my responsibility towards the earth.

Nature is within me and I am a part of it. This is a part of me that probably always existed but was hidden by the many layers and filters that Bhoomi helped me discover.

The course is structured beautifully. The first module allows participants to connect with their inner being and with nature. Called as the inner-outer program, participants receive an opportunity to understand psychology of their own nature and various incidences in their life that shape them.

In the process, we identify the ‘hero’ in our self which is a gratifying and elevating experience.

The consecutive modules are complemented with hands-on training, co-working and sessions through the day. The faculty asks pertinent questions and seeds thoughts that help us evolve as earth conscious citizens. Movies, debates and discussions help us widen our horizon and is a more practical way of learning.

On a beautiful bright day, after the rains, we would enjoy planting saplings in the farm, another day we would be spent researching on impact of economic policies on the agricultural industry. Guest faculty like Agricultural
Bhoomi throws open a new challenge to a lot of us who restrict ourselves to what traditional education pedagogy offers to us. Self-learning, is difficult if one does not have interest or curiosity. Therefore, when we are meant to self-learn we really don’t know where to start.

I am nature. As nature, I feel beautiful, positive and abundant. Everything is possible now – I have met earth conscious people, engaged with ‘hopeful’ positivists and invited enlightened individuals in my life who will be my co-travellers.

Food and Agriculture policy analyst and activist Devinder Sharma, Narsanna from Deccan Development Society conduct intense sessions and workshops to enlighten us on areas like economics of environment and sustainability, food and farming. Apart from that illustrious faculty like the guru of organic farming Narayan Reddy, Social-Entrepreneur-Evangelist Abhishek Thakore and Soil Vasu interact with us. The course allows 360 degrees development of the individual in the field of sustainability as it covers media studies, social-activism, social entrepreneurship and theatre as well.

What sets this course apart from other courses is its flexible and emergent design based on the profile of the students and their requirements. One of my concerns has always been the uni-dimensional result oriented approach to education. This limits us from seeking knowledge beyond prescribed books. In our quest to ace what is prescribed we learn very little of everything else. Bhoomi throws open a new challenge to a lot of us who restrict ourselves to what traditional education pedagogy offers to us.

Self-learning, is difficult if one does not have interest or curiosity. Therefore, when we are meant to self-learn we really don’t know where to start. I also felt that the course requires rigour in writing as documentation allows us to better absorb what we learn. Environmental activism requires understanding of legal frameworks and new age digital media. I hope inclusion of these topics in the courseware will make it a truly holistic environmental course.

I enjoyed field trips the most. They were very nourishing and allowed me to experience the real challenges on the field and meet very inspirational people. I reveled in the glory of the forests and nature during the deep ecology program in the Sharavati forests.

Bhoomi has made all this possible for me!

Photograph by author

Shruti Upadhyay, an alumnus of Bhoomi College, participated in the Sustainable Living course. She is involved in an organic food marketing start-up as well as in an alternative school - Red Soil Nature Play at Bangalore.

Photograph by author
At Gubbachi: Not the usual Learning and Teaching

When I joined Bhoomi College two years ago to do the Holistic Education Course, I was certain that I wanted to work in the field of education. Issues of equity and social justice had long been a trigger for me, and kindled the activist in me.

At Gubbachi Learning Community, a community of learners who have come together to bridge migrant out-of-school children back into the public education system, these two streams converged as I found a learning space to live out the activist in me.

I remember reviewing a book by KT Margaret called The Open Classroom while at Bhoomi College and being totally absorbed by it. I was fascinated by the author’s energy, pioneering spirit, and sheer persistence. I was also enthralled by her diverse group of kids. I didn’t know then that such a world would open up for me as well! And the challenges and delights of such a journey.

It has been a year since I have taken up the humbling journey of a teacher, though I would not want to call myself that. I would rather see myself as a learner and partake in the process of exchanging new knowings with the beautiful little people at Gubbachi.

Being the adult in a room full of children has made me realize the creativity it takes to stick around, the patience it takes to earn their trust, and the wisdom to see the struggle behind the tantrums.

Just spending time with children at this place of learning has been enriching, and helped me explore their potential and the numerous possibilities that exist.

The rewards of being the teacher to these children who are oblivious of today’s technology and the fast city life are superlatively wonderful.

I teach elementary Kannada and Math, and occasionally assist during English classes. I have been a witness to the challenges faced by the children in each of these subjects as they bring out the innate curiosity of a child to learn. This paves the way for innovations and creativity from my end to make learning relevant and interesting.

During my days at Bhoomi, there was a lot of emphasis on making education holistic, and including nature in the curriculum. As I work with children at Gubbachi, I seem to be getting a practical experience of what holistic actually means.

If the topic of snakes comes up, they tell me about all the types of cobras one can find in the wild. Some of the children even know how to catch them. If the topic of goats comes up, they know the difference between goats and their cousins. They are steadfast in correcting me if I dare generalize. If I bring up the topic of cooking, they will give me an algorithm for making rotis. They can even rattle off the names of all the ingredients needed for making sabzi.

All this just makes me wonder: What are the children doing these days in a school? Aren’t we just dumbing down children?

I enjoy the synergy of a group that resonates with each other in their beliefs, stimulating critical thinking. Our discussions and reflections help us grapple with the injustices we face daily as we work with the children. I like to deeply dive to the roots of issues to enable connections and action from there.

As a team of teachers, the Gubbachi group provide me with unconditional support, and are very open to new ideas and techniques. Understanding and immensely sensitive of one’s suggestions, they give others space and freedom to innovate inside and outside the classroom. The process of designing and delivering the curriculum is commendable.

Though this job doesn’t pay me, it has been the most fulfilling and productive work of my life so far. The resilient spirit of my children reflects in their bright smiles, in spite of all that they have to face. Their open undisguised affection constantly inspires me to give them a chance for an equal footing. The joy of every day being a new adventure keeps the fire of being a learner intact within me.
Ashwagandha, *Withania Somnifera* is a herb that’s been an important part of Ayurvedic medicine since ancient times. Literally translated from its Sanskrit roots, ashwagandha means "smells like a horse," which may hint more at its essence than its actual smell. It’s suggested by some Ayurvedic health practitioners that the herb was so named because it provides the strength and stamina of a horse. Meanwhile, its species name, somnifera, is a nod to its sedative properties.

While Ashwagandha is sometimes referred to as Ayurvedic or Indian ginseng, it is not in the ginseng family. The ashwagandha plant is a shrub with yellow-green flowers and orange-red berries native to Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka.

The leaves and root are most often used medicinally. According to Ayurvedic tradition, ashwagandha is considered a rasayana herb, which means it may promote youth and longevity while alleviating suffering. It’s a broad but fitting description, as this herb has a wide range of beneficial properties, including being adaptogenic, which means it helps you manage stress.

"It also is believed to be quite helpful to the elderly by providing energy and relieving pain, inflammation, and nervous debility," according to the American Botanical Council, and recent research suggests it has brain benefits as well.

**Ashwagandha May Improve Memory and Cognitive Function**

Memory enhancement is one of ashwagandha's traditional uses, particularly the root. A 2017 study published in the Journal of Dietary Supplements bears this out, as it studied the use of ashwagandha root extract for improving memory and cognitive functions in 50 people with mild cognitive impairment (MCI).

MCI is a slight decline in cognitive abilities that’s associated with an increased risk of developing more serious dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease. Participants received either ashwagandha root extract or a placebo for eight weeks. Those who took ashwagandha had significant improvements in a number of areas compared to the placebo group. This included greater improvements in:

- Immediate and general memory
- Executive function
- Sustained attention
- Information-processing speed

The researchers pointed to ashwagandha’s sedative properties as a potential mechanism behind the memory benefits, noting they "may be indirectly involved in improving memory and cognition in human subjects, as stress, anxiety and sleep disorders can affect normal cognitive function."

Ashwagandha may also help to slow down the deterioration of brain cells in people with dementia. It was found to repair brain cell damage and rebuild neuronal networks and synapses. This herb may also help deal with depression because of its ability to combat mental and emotional stress. Separate research found it alleviated obesity-induced cognitive impairments in rats.

Researchers even wrote in *PLOS One*, "Ashwagandha leaf derived bioactive compounds have neuroprotective potential and may serve as supplement for brain health."

**Ashwagandha may Buffer Some of the Effects of Sleep Deprivation, Stress**

Ashwagandha has traditionally been used in Ayurveda as a sleep aid, and research suggests it has anti-anxiety and anti-inflammatory properties that may help to manage sleep deprivation-induced stress and associated functional impairments.

Its stress-reducing properties are well known, as ashwagandha helps your body reduce production of cortisol (stress hormone) by as much as 28 percent. In fact, when given to study participants with a history of chronic stress, they experienced significantly reduced cortisol levels and a reduction in scores on all the stress-assessment scales tested. Researchers concluded:

"The findings of this study suggest that a high-concentration full-spectrum Ashwagandha root extract safely and effectively improves an individual’s resistance [toward] stress and thereby improves self-assessed quality of life."

Beyond this, in a study of people with moderate to severe anxiety, those who took ashwagandha extract experienced a reduction in anxiety and stress along with improved vitality, motivation and general health.
Ashwagandha: An All-Around Health Tonic

Ashwagandha is best known for its calming, stress-relieving qualities, but its uses extend far beyond this. In the journal Central Nervous System Agents in Medicinal Chemistry, ashwagandha is described as an "elixir" that's used in a global fashion to not only increase longevity but also to "normalize physiological functions, disturbed by chronic stress, through correction of imbalances in the neuroendocrine and immune systems."

"Ashwagandha is regarded as tonic, aphrodisiac, narcotic, diuretic, anthelmintic, astringent, thermogenic and stimulant," note researchers in the African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine, who went on to list its many benefits for different health conditions and disease processes:

"Ashwagandha is commonly available as a churna, a fine sieved powder that can be mixed with water, ghee (clarified butter) or honey. It enhances the function of the brain and nervous system and improves the memory.

It improves the function of the reproductive system promoting a healthy sexual and reproductive balance. Being a powerful adaptogen, it enhances the body's resilience to stress. Ashwagandha improves the body's defense against disease by improving the cell-mediated immunity. It also possesses potent antioxidant properties that help protect against cellular damage caused by free radicals."

In areas where Ayurvedic medicine is widely recognized (such as India, Nepal and Malaysia), ashwagandha root may be used to treat inflammatory disorders, impotence in men and diseases associated with wasting or weakness. Some even say it may be used to treat "almost all disorders that affect ... human health." In addition, ashwagandha may be useful for:

- Improving stamina, gastric ulcers,
- Neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's, Huntington's and Alzheimer's diseases, low energy levels, mitochondrial health disorders, inflammation, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis
- Increasing muscle mass and strength, lowering blood sugar levels.

Beyond this, the American Botanical Council has compiled even more uses for ashwagandha (in this case the root), noting: "Some of the documented uses of the root of ashwagandha include as a hypnotic for treating alcoholism (along with leaf); treatment for brain fog, colds and chills, childhood emaciation, emphysematous dysphonia (difficult speech caused by emphysema, with leaf), fever, glandular swelling, impotence or seminal debility.

To counteract loss of memory and muscular energy, nervous exhaustion, rheumatic fever, rheumatic swelling, senile and general debility, spermatorrhea, syphilis, and ulcers. In Tanzania, the root is used as a sexual stimulant and to promote uterine contractions."

How to Use Ashwagandha

If you're considering using ashwagandha, talk to your holistic health care practitioner first, as even natural remedies, like herbs, can sometimes interact with other medications or supplements you may be taking.

If you're pregnant or breastfeeding, avoid ashwagandha, as studies suggest that when taken in excess it can cause spasmolytic activity in the uterus, which can result in a premature birth. In general, however, ashwagandha is associated with only mild side effects, if any, and appears to be safe for most people.

Dosages typically range from 125 milligrams (mg) to 1,250 mg daily, with the higher end leading to the most significant effects in clinical studies. Ashwagandha can also be used in essential oil form topically (diluted with a carrier oil), especially for pain relief or fighting stress. If you prefer, dried ashwagandha root can also be made into a tea, which you can sip at your leisure.

One recipe, from Cure Joy, is as follows:

**Ashwagandha Tea**

1. Take 2 teaspoons of dried ashwagandha root
2. Immerse it in approximately 3 1/2 cups boiling water
3. Allow it to boil for 15 minutes
4. Remove the root from the liquid
5. Strain to remove any remaining plant matter in the water
6. Consume 1/4 cup twice daily

Finally, while ashwagandha isn't the typical "herb garden" plant like thyme or basil, it's relatively easy to grow (as an annual if you live in an area with cold winters) and will provide you with your own ready supply for teas and tinctures. To grow your own ashwagandha, here's what you should know:

1. Your soil should be sandy and well-draining. It's best to plant your seeds in a sunny part of your garden. It is nearly impossible to grow ashwagandha in a moist environment; it thrives in dry soil.
2. The plant should not be watered all the time and should only be watered when it seems "thirsty."
3. The ideal growing temperature is between 70 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature is lower, expect the plant to grow at a much slower pace. The ashwagandha plant should be fully grown in about 150 to 180 days.

Joseph Michael Mercola is an alternative medicine proponent, osteopathic physician, and web entrepreneur.

*Image courtesy creative commons/flickr.*
**HEALTHY ALMOND MILK**

- for healthy metabolism

**Ingredients**
- Almonds - 6
- Ripe Banana (optional) - 1
- Dates - 4
- Cardamom powder - ¼ tbsp
- Dry ginger - 2 pinch
- Water - 1 glass

**Method:**
- Soak almonds and dates overnight in ½ glass of water.
- Blend dates, almonds, cardamom and dry ginger in a blender using the soaked water.
- Finally add water, mix well. Banana can be added to get enhanced flavour and consistency.

**Health benefits**
- Almonds are considered as ‘energy dense’.
- Dates are a good source of vitamins.
- Dates help to fight intestinal disorder and gain weight.
- Banana counteracts calcium loss.
- High in potassium and low in salt.

**Variation:**
- Instead of dates, Jaggery syrup can be added
Pushpa is a facilitator with Bhoomi College. She is passionate about working on the land, saving and distributing seeds, enriching the soil, and making organic fertilisers and biopesticides. She is well-versed in healing through home remedies, and enthusiastic about cooking and sharing her recipes with others.

Photographs by Ananth Somaiah and Arundathi Somaiah.

MOONG SPROUT PANCAKE
- Another quick fix breakfast

Ingredients
- Moong sprouts - 1 1/2 cup
- leaves of Fenugree, palak, bathua, drum stick (finely chopped) - each 1/4 cup
- Carrot and coconut grated - each 1/4 cup
- Green chilli finely chopped - 1
- Bengal gram flour - 2 tbsp
- Ginger finely chopped, oil - each 1 tbsp
- Cumin seeds - 1/4 tbsp
- Oil - 1 tbsp
- Salt - to taste
- Asafoetida - a pinch

Method:
- Make a fine paste of sprouted moong and water in a mixer.
- Add all the remaining ingredients, mix well, and add water to get a batter of pouring consistency.
- Heat dosa pan (preferably a cast iron tava), spread oil then pour a ladleful of batter and spread.
- Put oil around it and cook till both sides are golden brown.

Health benefits
- Strengthens the immune system since it is rich in fibre, protein and minerals.
- A source of antioxidants

NUTRITIOUS CHUTNEY POWDER
- for a quick breakfast in the morning

Ingredients
- Bengal gram, Green gram, Black gram, Ground nut/Sesame seeds, Horse gram
- Tamrind, Flax seeds - 1/2 cup
- Fenugreek (less then) - 1/3 cup
- Curry leaves - 5 cups
- Coriander seeds, mustard oil - 1 tbsp
- Copra (grated) - 2 cups
- Dry Red Chilli (Byedege) - 1 cup
- Asafoetida - 1/4 tbsp
- Salt and Jaggery - To taste

Method of preparation
- Dry roast each ingredient separately.
- Take 1 tbsp oil in a pan, heat it and add mustard seeds and fry.
- Add all the dry roasted ingredients to this and slightly roast it again.
- Cool and powder coarsely and store it.
- Take required amount of powder mix it with ghee or oil, and have it with Idly, dosa and rice.

Health benefits
- Provides sufficient proteins and nutrients to strengthen the uterus
- Good for lactating mothers, and good for hair growth.
- Quantity of horse gram can be increased for people with high cholesterol.
Join us at the Bhoomi Santhe, meet farmers, attend workshops, have fun! On the 1st Saturday of every month.
Explore new careers
for personal & planetary wellbeing!

The fast changing world we are living in calls for new kinds of livelihoods and nurturant careers we need to create for ourselves. Bhoomi Network offers opportunities to move into exciting and meaningful ways to live and make a difference!

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- One year programme to become a creative leader / educator / parent
- One year programme on sustainable living - to take up green careers
- Short programmes on Organic Farming, Water conservation, waste management and setting up Farmers’ Markets (CSA centres - Community supported agriculture)

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This is a space in the Sharavathi sanctuary in Shimoga District, Karnataka where you live simple, learn from the rain forest and discover insights that you need for yourself!

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Gumalapuram Organic Farming Gurukul

About 50 km from Bangalore, this is a centre where you can live and learn hands-on about organic farming, from the gardener/farmers as well as the expert farmers who visit us.

This learning opportunity will be ideal for someone who is keen on community building and organic farming, and is yearning to put her hands into the soil!

Sankalan Programmes

A significant aspect of personal and planetary wellbeing involves exploring one’s own ways of seeing the world, understanding inner and outer ecology and working with community.

Sankalan is an offering from Bhoomi Network which helps you become a facilitator in groups, classrooms and communities through a set of week long programmes over a 2 year period.

These programmes include Inner and Outer Ecology, Understanding ones roles and aspirations, Deep Ecology, co-evolving in a community etc.

For more information about these programmes contact: bhoomi.college@gmail.com

www.bhoomicollege.org and Facebook: bhoomicollege
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Do you wish to do your bit about the mindless destruction of Nature that is happening today? Do you wish to take up green careers/activities or want to be a teacher in an alternative schools? Do you seek to empower children to become tomorrow’s mature, responsible adults? Do you wish to learn in experiential, practical and yet meaningful ways? Do you wish to take a gap year/ sabbatical to connect with Mother Earth?

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