

PEMS

Sunday, June 2, 2019,

Phou-su Phou-su khol

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Evening's so mild; pleasant and welcoming;
Inviting and likeable; we choose we play *phou-su*;
Mother's presence so agreeable 'come, help me';
'It's time we do, husking, let's husk for a week!';
'Get ready! Clean up *sumbal*; clean up *suk*;
'Yes mother' I play around so innocently, dull and tiresome;

I knew I'll be, behaved like an idiot, quiet and still;
Happier I was mornings so censored; I choose to fancy;

Gathering *phous*, one a *thunok* two a *thumok*
Three a *thumok* four a *thumok* and gathering whole a *phoura*;

Slowly and steadily she's engaging and I;
Hurriedly and steadfastly before nightfall,
Packing and transferring; pouring and spilling;
Rhythm by rhythm swinging and swaging,
Up and down; down and up '*hunh hunh hunh hunh*';
Dhuk dhuk; dhuk dhuk; dhuk dhuk dhuk.

Faster I breath I opened wider, mouth so drying;
Keeping my eyes onto *sumbal*, I stand tilted;
Learning and angling, we bent and we warped;
Digging and ploughing; cutting and harrowing;
Beating and thumping; pounding and defeating;
'*hunh ha hunh; hunh ha hunh; hunh hunh*';

Dhik dhik; dhik dhuk dhik; Dhik dhik; dhik dhuk dhik;

Dhikdhuk, Dhikdhuk, Dhikdhuk ,Dhikdhuk dhik;
I dance to the belting; I moved to those stepping;
Moving in and shifting out; carrying and fetching;
Lugging and lifting; oh my hands! So badly,
Poorly hurting, peeling off pieces incorrectly;

I dragged and I pushed in, spiting again and after;
Unhappily it worn out, holding *suk* so tightly;
Up and down I dig; higher and lower.

Melting those wounds; I prey upon *yangkok*;
Spreading and husking; leveling and picking;
'*cherp cherp cherp; cherp cherp cherp cherp*';
'*cherp cherp cherp; cherp cherp cherp cherp*';
'*chagei chagei chagei; chagei chagei chagei*'
'*chagei chagei chagei; chagei chagei chagei*';

One a pouring two a pouring; throwing up and low;
Bending in and up; sweating and glowing;
Lifting and engaging; she moved along thumping;
Dhik dhik; dhik dhuk dhik; Dhik dhik; dhik dhuk dhik;

Dhikdhuk, Dhikdhuk, Dhikdhuk ,Dhikdhuk dhik;
Sweeping and embracing; we play rhythm by rhythm;
One a leg, two a leg; one a leg, two a leg;
Switching and collecting; all in all one hole;
'*hunh ha hunh; hunh ha hunh; hunh hunh*';

Still breathing alive by those echoing;
Those *phou-su phou-su khols* haunting twin light;
Bewitching all I could regain mesmerizing 'Dear mother'.

Courtesy The Wire
By :Nandita Jayaraj

Bengaluru: Harini Nagendra and Seema Mundoli have been talking trees for years. As researchers at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, they have published a number of research papers together on a range of issues involving trees in cities.

Cities and Canopies, however, is only the first book they've written together. Released earlier this month, the book has so far been very favourably received, and the authors are elated that it's not just adults reading it. In this interview, Mundoli and Nagendra reveal some behind-the-scenes incidents, discuss the value of being an optimistic ecologist, talk about the politics of writing about 'ancient science' and reminisce about the trees of their childhood.

The interview is presented in full and has been lightly edited for clarity and style. The author's questions are in bold.

I get the feeling doing the research for this book involved not just hours of scouring through the literature but also travel, cooking, concocting and conversations. Can you give me a glimpse of what went on behind the making of Cities and Canopies?

Harini Nagendra: A lot of the literature-scouring was done for the book during the year we worked on it. However a lot of the other parts of the research – cooking, conversations with varied people, visits to trees and groves in varied cities – took place over a much longer period.

Both of us have always been fascinated with trees, so these kinds of interactions have very much been a part of our experiences, joint and individual. It's been great fun, of course, but also full of poignant memories.

For me, the most memorable visit was one that Seema and I, with another colleague, made to the bamboo weavers on K.R. Road. We were referring to an archival document that described the road being lined with banyan trees on both sides, but at the road, we could not find anyone who remembered a time when there were banyan trees. Disheartened, we had almost given up when we found one elderly weaver, a leader of the community, who knew exactly what we were talking about.

He told us about how his father extracted the sap from the tree and mixed it with the rag muddle of the previous night's dinner for his mother when she had a sore throat, and it cured her. He spoke with such affection about those trees and those times, and with such sorrow of the hardships they now face, with the trees gone from the road, and their homes at risk of eviction. It was heart-breaking.

Seema Mundoli: We grew up around trees, and are always looking at trees on any walk or on our field trips. Our conversations would often have mentions of trees as well. Another incident is where Harini and I, along with two colleagues, came across a *katte* [platform with sacred trees] which had a huge peepal tree and a stone tank known as the *sisandra* that was traditionally filled with water and availed to travellers to rest and quench their thirst. A local resident was reviving the tradition. It was indeed heartening to see this. Unfortunately, during a recent visit, we saw that the tank had been removed. But we know of other *katte* with water tanks around Bengaluru that could perhaps still be restored.

I'm used to reading environment-themed material that leaves me feeling quite morose. This book, on the other hand, kept me cheerful, even though it does discuss the damages humans are inflicting. Was this intended?

HN: We're glad you spotted that! This is something we both struggle with while teaching. Environment and conservation issues are part of the so-called set of dismal disciplines: it's very hard to research, teach or write about these without succumbing to despair and gloom. While being realistic about the

Hard to write about the environment without despair, but there is hope yet



scale of the challenges we face, we wanted people to walk away from this book with rekindled memories and a strengthened affection for trees — to stimulate positive action via hope for a positive future.

SM: We may have our personal moments of despair. But we both feel that cynicism is not a very helpful emotion to have, especially in these times, when the challenges are so formidable. And as much as there is hopelessness, we also hear about those positive steps, small as they may be, that people have taken to protect the environment and that is always energising.

From the book: Rarely are we, the people who live in cities, consulted by planners and developers. They decide on the fate of plants and trees with one eye at checklists and budgets, models and paper sketches, while they should also consider traipsing around on two feet, asking people how they would like to live.

Are you both generally optimistic people when it comes to the environment? As teachers today, how do you keep yourselves from getting disheartened by the relatively nature-aloof lifestyles of youngsters in cities?

HN: I'm generally an optimist, but the relentless human destruction of the environment often doesn't leave too much room for optimism. But pragmatically, though, I don't think we can completely despair. If we give up hope, what do we have left?

And the situation is not yet so bad that it can't be turned around. Making the change requires collective will, though, and can't be done by individuals alone. It is our hope that Cities and Canopies can connect to the growing numbers of nature groups across Indian cities, doing birdwatching, nature trails, tree plantation drives, lake restoration, and so much more.

About the young: I actually have a different opinion. Many of our students are so engaged with nature, and have so many creative ideas of what to do, that much of our hope for the future comes from them.

SM: I think I did go through my period of pessimism! And at times I do despair. But as Harini says, engaging with students recently has changed a lot of that. There are many students who care about the environment and it is always heartening to engage in discussions with them. And the least we can do for them, in the context of the very challenging future they all face, is to be hopeful and not pessimistic.

From the book: The sacred beliefs that our ancestors associated with nature are important even today, not just because of our religious beliefs, but also because of the awe in which we hold the natural world. We need to reconnect with the heritage value of trees in our cities, for our own survival. There's a lot in the book about ancient knowledge of trees and their uses. Sadly, 'ancient science' has developed a negative connotation with scientists in the current political climate and in nationalist debates. Did you at all feel conscious of treading this thorny path?

HN: We believe that there is a specific reason why the human connection to trees is so resilient in India: because we have an ancient connection to trees, clearly manifest even today via deep spiritual and sacred affinities to nature. It is however very clear these sacred and spiritual affinities are not the prerogative of any single religion. Across the spectrum, in dargahs, temples, churches, mosques and Buddhist and Jain shrines, we have found embedded traditions of nature worship. Traditional communities of all kinds, from priests to fishers and cattle grazers, have their own knowledge systems.

Some of these are quite subaltern. There are beautiful stories of lake conservation by communities that go alongside songs that commemorate horrific caste inequities and describe human sacrifices for lake protection. So reality, as always, is complex and impossible to fit neatly into hyper-nationalist or monotheistic frameworks of supposed glorious pasts, where humans lived in harmony with nature. We have tried our best to present the real-life range of traditional to contemporary human-nature relationships in all their complexity.

SM: It is especially in these times that we need to refer to traditional knowledge along with modern science. Especially to emphasise that traditional knowledge is a product of the close engagement that communities have had with nature, and goes much beyond the very parochial view today that it is linked to a particular religion. We need to challenge the appropriation of traditional knowledge by any specific group. And presenting the ancient with the modern in this book is our way of doing this.

From the book: Unknown to the bee, which is busy extracting pollen, focused on the upper rows of stamens, the lower stamens shoot out a jet of pollen.

My favourite sciencey part of this book was the description of buzz pollination. Books like this one and nature documentaries, for me, do

such a great job bringing to life biological terms and phenomena that textbooks made so bland and clinical. What are your views about science and environment education in India and what are you trying to do differently as teacher-researchers today?

HN: Thanks. Researching and writing about buzz pollination was one of my favourite parts of the book. My 11-year-old daughter was my test reader, helping me to modify this section until she could understand what it was getting at. Several of my friends' children are now reading Cities and Canopies, and that is such a pleasure to see!

I wish we had more science books that make science fun in India. There are some great books for very young readers now, including a number of fabulous multilingual books, and that has been a pleasure to see. But there is a gap for the older reader – 10 to 16 years or thereabout. This is a gap we would love to fill, and we've been tossing some ideas around.

We hope some of these move from idea to book in the coming years. Meanwhile, taking off from Cities and Canopies, we're experimenting with workshops on arts, crafts and games around trees for kids, which we would like to see taking off across the country.

From the book: Bringing down a mango with a well-aimed shot is as satisfying as eating it with some salt and chilli powder. Mangoes seem to taste even better if the process of plucking them involves being chased by cantankerous owners of the house in whose compound the tree stands.

It's clear from the book that each of you had some profound experiences with trees, growing up. Can you tell me more about your relationship with trees?

HN: There are so many experiences to share! Let me just describe one of my earliest childhood memories. It is of long walks in Deer Park in Delhi when I was about six years old, with my father feeding the deer with grass we plucked from the park, and removing burrs and thorns from our clothes which we unknowingly picked up along the way as we walked. And the thrill of occasionally finding a discarded snake skin, peacock feather or porcupine quill! I went back to revisit Deer Park with my sister a few years ago. Much had changed from my hazy childhood memories, but the thrill of the park still remained. I am now fortunate to have a mango tree that my daughter loves to climb. And I hope she gets to forge the same special memories with this tree that we all did with various trees of our childhoods.

SM: I was very lucky to grow up in the Andhra University campus in Visakhapatnam and was always surrounded by trees. We spent most of the time on them, below them or running between them. We feasted on the fruits of jamun, mango, star gooseberry, cashew, guava. Trees were always landmarks for us to meet at, and at one point even leave messages for each other.

One of the incidents I remember from my childhood is how the engineering college students would come to steal coconuts from two trees in front of our house. The one who could climb the tree would shin up, while the others stayed below holding a lungi to catch the coconuts thrown by the one on top. We would wake up to the thud of a coconut that missed falling into the lungi. And by the time my father reached the front door, the students had made off with whatever they could get. Of course, they would come back another night!

Every time we visit the city, we pay a visit to our old home. Many sadly have gone, but others are still there, even having survived Cyclone Hudhud.

***Nandita Jayaraj is a science writer and cofounder of The Life of Science.

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