

## Our Environmental Health

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Much as one loves India --- and I am xenophobic about it --- one cannot help but ask the question, are we a nation which worships symbolism more than substance? Our national approach to women's issues has been one of either total blindness or only very selective sight, which has caused us to fail in reading the very clear signals on the status of women. The first is the increasingly skewed sex ratio. The male-female ratio shows no sign of improvement --- in fact it has worsened in those States where sex determination tests, female foeticide and infanticide are not unknown and where a girl child is considered a liability.

There is a narrow, retrograde, almost Taliban type attitude of the so called 'khap panchayats', or community panchayats, especially amongst the Jats and Gujars of Haryana, Western U.P. and Eastern Rajasthan. Women are treated almost like male property to whom every aspect of personal deportment and behaviour, the social mores and the norms of moral behaviour are dictated by males. A woman either obeys or has to face penalty. Society can and must inculcate values and devise the norms and patterns of social behaviour, always within the bounds of civilised behaviour, but within these guidelines both boys and girls must enjoy equal rights.

This is not an essay on women and their rights but on the environment. However, the opening paragraphs are not on women or on nature. They are on our blindness in reading signals, our inability or lack of desire to understand problems and our uncanny ability to offer sops and then forget the matter till the next crisis. What is true of our attitude to gender related issues is equally true of nature. House sparrows, crows, vultures, mammalian predators, even a large number of reptiles, are no longer seen. For example, my house, because of its green cover and that of its surrounding areas, has always been a bird watcher's paradise. I have even seen a painted partridge in my garden, never seen by me in the typically partridge country of Morena, or in the magnificent forests of Madhya Pradesh. In the last three or four years I have seen no house sparrows, very few crows, not more than a couple of vultures, no golden orioles in the Bhopal skies, hedge rows and trees. Suddenly a tiger dies or a panther is snared by villagers. All hell breaks loose, task forces are formed and the T.V. channels run non-stop programmes full of twaddle and garbage. The dust settles and we all go back to slumber --- that is, till one more symbol, a tiger, dies.

Twenty years ago India's tiger population was over 4000. Madhya Pradesh (including Chattisgarh) alone had about 1800. Today it is estimated that about 1800 is the total tiger population of India. The situation in one sanctuary alone, Sariska, caused government to set up an expert committee, headed by Sunita Narayan to study and report on the situation and suggest remedial measures. My view is that the committee missed the wood for the trees. That is because our conservationists have developed a siege mentality. A purely defensive posture never builds an empire nor can it protect wildlife.

There is a very pessimistic group of conservationists who feel that soon the only place where wildlife will exist, especially the tiger, is the sanctuaries. Therefore, let us restrict intervention to the sanctuaries. I beg to differ.

Let us consider what the signals were. Around Ranthambore there was a drought. The land was parched but the protected tiger reserve had grass and water. Unable to see their cattle starve or die of thirst the villagers entered the park. When they were stopped, force was used against them and they were ousted. Their natural reaction was, “The park is for the tiger, our cattle would endanger the tiger, therefore, our cattle can die so that the tiger thrives. If the tiger is liquidated our cattle can once again enter the forest. Therefore, eliminate the tiger, poach him out of existence”.

Wildlife, like humans, requires a habitat, or home. It must be spacious, clean and rich in bio-diversity. It must have a whole hierarchy of plant and animal life so that from largest predator to the lowest lichen or moss the habitat has food. It is only if the habitat is healthy that wildlife will thrive.

What are we doing to our watersheds? The Himalayan rivers are rain fed and are charged by snow melt. They all originate above the tree line and whereas the health of the forests in the catchments of feeder rivers which flow down below the tree line is vitally important so long as there is snow and it melts these rivers will have some perennial flow. However, the rivers of peninsular India are totally rain fed and if their catchments are deforested the rivers will have no dry season flow at all. At Uttarkashi the dry weather flow of the snow fed Bhagirathi is six percent of peak season flow. At Mandla, Hoshangabad and Mortakka the dry season flow of the Narmada averages 12.50 percent of peak season flow. This is because the forests of the Upper and Middle Reaches of the Narmada may be under stress, but are still reasonably dense and this facilitates both permeation of the sub-strata and ground water recharge. Throughout the year there is flow of recharged sub surface water into the rivers, which explains the relatively high percentage of dry weather flow.

The watersheds of peninsular rivers must be protected, nay, enhanced and improved. Government had launched a very successful mili-and-micro watershed programme in the late eighties of the last century and many of our drought prone districts benefitted immensely from it. Even wildlife has made a comeback as the water regime changes and vegetation cover increases. The misfortune is that the provenly successful watershed management programme has been subsumed by the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, whose objective is employment generation, not asset creation. The consequences are disastrous.

What we need is an aggressive policy of afforestation. Expand the habitat and many things will happen. Dead rivers will revive. Fuel and fodder availability will improve and villagers will become more responsible in how to harvest the forests. Drought will be tackled and agriculture would prosper, together with animal husbandry. More important still, wildlife will make a comeback. The presence of wildlife will be the proof positive of the state of our total environment. What must be eschewed is tokenism. A few trees are transplanted in Delhi because a road widening scheme is being undertaken. Someone organises a mohalla tree census. All very good. But does NHAI emulate Sher Shah Suri, who built the Grand Trunk Road, but planted so many trees that in the old days a drive along it was like passing through an endless cool, green tunnel?

\*\*\*