

FROM THE EDITOR

THE INDEFATIGABLE BEAR-GRASP

There is an unforgettable Punjabi anecdote recorded by Ved Mehta: Two villagers walking along a river-bank saw what they thought to be a blanket floating by. One of them jumped into the flow to recover it, but was seen being carried off by the current. "Let go of the blanket, you fool, and swim back to the shore!" shouted his friend.

"I want to let go of the blanket, but the blanket won't let go of me!" cried out the drowning man. The fact is, he was in the grasp of a huge bear that had fallen into the current.

Among the educated people of India there is hardly anybody who does not have at least a vague idea of the grim consequences that follow from deforestation and indiscriminate destruction of hills. Yet the process goes on. The township of Mussoorie and the magnificent monuments of Fatehpur Sikri may be imperilled by contractors hauling stones away from their bases and we may even take such losses in our stride if we so please, but at stake are much greater issues involving the possibilities of uncontrollable catastrophies and not only ecological imbalances impossible to set right but also psychological imbalances.

But we are in the bear-grasp of expediency—and I suspect something even more vicious than that. At the fag end of a sleepy little town stood a modestly high hill. It was flanked by two hills. I had idled away an enchanting evening atop it, feeling jealous of the townsfolk who owned such a vantage point though they did not seem to be making use of it. On a visit there five years later I found to my horror that a huge chunk of one of the hills had been knocked out. It looked agape, as if too stupefied to cry out its curse.

"Who did this to your hill?" I demanded of an old resident, a retired teacher.

"The contractor, of course!"

"That's no answer. How did you people allow this to happen?"

He looked a bit puzzled. "Who are we to allow or disallow? The hill belonged to the Government. It let the contractor do it. That's all!"

I stood unconvinced and the old man decided to give up his apparent naivete. "The demands of urban expansion, factories and commerce tempt some people to invade the woods and the hills and the politicians are too much dependent on those people to stop their vandalism. And we the common men either do not care or do not understand!" he explained.

"What about our highly qualified bureaucrats?"

"They are qualified for bureaucracy. And the bureaucracy rests on politicians and money makers and it keeps polishing these two pillars providing them with smart arguments for their follies," he enlightened me.

I am not able to judge the old man's observations on bureaucrats. But I remember how loud their voice had been in regard to the Silent Valley project in Kerala. The Chairman of the State Electricity Board, supposed to belong to the discipline of science, argued that since the elected representatives of the people had approved of the project in the Assembly, it had the approval of the people and hence it must be executed!

Luckily for the whole country, such strange logic failed to prevail. We congratulate the people of Kerala and the Government of India for its delicate and sensible handling of the issue.

Often even the protesting people of an area the ecology of which is threatened can be silenced in with the prospect of job and several avenues of 'prosperity' for them. But that is a deception played on them to say the least. It is neither politicians, nor the bureaucrats, nor the local people, but ecologists who are entitled to utter the last word on such issues. Short of a total

moratorium on any further destruction of nature, the state governments concerned must always invite such people for their opinion.

"I know why there are so many people who love chopping wood. In this activity one immediately sees the results," said Einstein. It is the lure of the immediate result that is prompting us to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. The latest research in botany is revealing. It was known that some plants defended themselves against attack by their natural foes in a strange way. A willow tree, for example, changes its chemical properties when attacked by caterpillars and makes its leaves tasteless for the insects. But what Biologist David Rhoades of the University of Washington has just established is perhaps the most astounding finding since Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose's discoveries.

He has proved that the willow trees, when attacked by worms, can send signals to the trees of their fellow species 60 metres away so that they too can change their chemical properties. There is no underground communication through any intertwining of roots. Another scientist, Jack Schultz, believes that they communicate through the air. He says, "Trees do some amazing things, and we are just beginning to find out how complex they are."

While we are only beginning to gather some knowledge about them, we are almost finishing them. The complex and myriad ways in which they help mankind may remain beyond our grasp for a long time, though it ought to be common sense that in the process of evolution our life had shaped itself under nature's influence and hence any radical damage we cause to nature is bound to have its impact on our life. One day if we find out that a forest under attack from men sends signals to distant fellow-forests and they withdrew some of their subtle blessings for men, it should not sound more fairytale-like than what Rhoades and Schultz have already established.