

Soliloquy

Notes from the rain forest

Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, India

By: Sanjeev Shankar, FoAM



photograph by Prashant Nandiprasad

Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Kerala, India is an inspiring place dedicated to the conservation and restoration of native plants. It is a refreshing example of how we can solve complex problems with humility, patience and hard work. It radiates hope for the future and demonstrates how we can give more to a place. In Gurukula, you will find confident rural women who sing while working in the fields, friends from Mallorca and Britain tilling the forest farm with local farmers and snakes roaming freely. It is a place which has evolved over numerous years, where everyone has learnt to grow with natural rhythms. In their attempt to spread the message of sustainability and respect for natural, localized solutions Gurukula educates local people and school children. Here creativity meets self sustenance, local solutions provide for self regulation in plants, nothing is a waste and a research based approach facilitates awareness and collaboration at an all India level.

From cosmopolitan Delhi to the verdant greens of Kerala

The 48 hour trip from New Delhi to Cochin in an overcrowded Indian train was a familiar sight. The noisy festive crowd notwithstanding, everyone was anticipating a refreshing journey to the south Indian state of Kerala also known as “God's Own Land”.

Sanjeev reached *Thalassery* at 5:00 am and took the 6'o clock bus to *Mananthavadi* in *Wayanad* district. As the bus started moving, his mind wandered back to the three words which triggered this journey: '*rain forests*', '*sanctuary*' and '*Gurukula*'. "Gurukula" is a type of ancient Hindu school in India where students resided together as equals, irrespective of their social standing. After speaking to Ms. Suprabha Seshan, director of the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, Sanjeev was invited to experience the place first hand. As the bus finally came to a halt at *Periya* village and sanjeev walked up the hill, the fragrance of fresh red mud along with the all pervasive rustic beauty promised a refreshing destination ahead. He finally reached a wild and luxuriant forest canopy with the subtle mention of “Gurukula” to his right. Walking up the laterite steps, he was warmly greeted by Mr. Lorenzo who was dressed in traditional whites. After being ushered into a traditionally designed room, he was asked to join everyone later for breakfast.

Silent whispers

As I walked softly through the sanctuary and sat under the filigreed canopy of leaves, I began to hear whispers! *Are you listening my child? Stop thinking and slow down. You cannot read this with your mind alone. You have to slowly let go and dissolve. You have been away for way too long. Give yourself some time. Say nothing. The story is beautiful and the price is silence. The price is respect. If you are patient, you will be enchanted.*

Completely dazzled with what was going on, there was a growing sense of calm within me. As a city boy, the urban experience runs deep in my bones. The state of flux, the pace, the music and what about plants? Well they are few in number and always seem distant and silent as compared to the active and interactive world of animals. We are unable to establish the same relationship with plants as we have with other life forms. While I reflected on this troublesome fact, the morning breakfast bell beckoned everyone to the hill top. In the main hall, I was introduced to other members_ Suprabha, Sandy, Shruti, Suma and Laly who are residents at the sanctuary along with Wolfgang, who founded this place. Francesca, Peter and Graham who had come from Europe are old friends. I was also welcomed by Natasha, Hoomus, Falaafel, Gustav and Humphrey who are the sanctuary dogs. The food was a healthy combination of locally grown vegetables on the farm. As we began discussing about the place and its uniqueness, what deeply struck me was its simplicity and spontaneity. Much like a family, the contribution of everyone was felt in the air.

The Sanctuary

Spread over 55 acres, the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary is a garden of wild plant species grown at the edge of a large rainforest reserve in the Western Ghat Mountains of Kerala, India. It is dedicated to conservation and education. Founded in 1981, the Sanctuary restores endangered species and habitats in a highly fragmented landscape, where only a fraction of original forest remains and much of the native flora has been tragically and sometimes deliberately extracted or “cleaned up” for human use. While witnessing the exuberant growth of *anthuriums* and *begonias* around us, we discuss the impact of the growing popularity of ayurveda and organic teas on the forests and how their price does not reflect the real price we all are paying in the long run. I am told the amount of

bio mass which goes into their production is shockingly high. Of course there are issues of the rise and fall of tea and coffee prices and how economics and ecology have become interlinked. We move on and see the epiphytic orchids in the orchidarium conserved in the most impressive manner. I am told that out of 300000 known plants about 30000 are orchids. The sanctuary itself is a repository of over 2000 plant species which is about one-third of the entire regions flora. These have been rescued from degraded and destroyed environments. While we are told about a pit viper which is often seen coiled up among the plants, another viper quietly waits next to the pond, attracted by the numerous frogs that breed there. Conservation in this district of Wayanad, where the original settlers were small migrant farmers with immediate survival needs, is an exceptionally challenging job. Fighting for the last bits of rain forests is not a choice, but a crucial need and responsibility. When I see the care and patience with which these plants have been brought back to life, I feel there is no other way to protect them. Such single minded focus is what makes this place special. There is no dilution in the form of converting it into an eco-resort or a retreat! I hear Suprabha saying, "Plants and conservation are our top priority. Everything else comes next. Discussions on blogs and virtual media indeed deceive people into believing that something is happening."

The Sanctuary is run by a small group of resident gardeners, naturalists and educators, and supported by a wide circle of well-wishers. Together it offers an approach that is connected to the climate, landscape, ecosystems, plants, animals and people of the region. In Suprabha's own words, "The focus here is to find creative, localized and effective ways to restore natural places. Termed as ecosystem gardening, this involves working closely with plants and their environments: tending, cultivating, growing, reseeding, intervening, as much as leaving wild spaces alone. There is clear evidence that the forests will return if we give them a chance." I notice that a large part of the land area is left alone to harness natural restorative powers. In other parts native species are given quick access by pulling out exotic plants. Then there are very small areas where the intervention happens in great detail, where every plant is known and tended carefully and systematically. I witness this with two resident gardeners who are preparing specific solutions for orchids. I see the soil being heated at one end on a customised wire mesh tray to rid it of fungi and numerous casts being prepared to act as tiles or barks for the stag horn ferns which are quiet striking in their form and survival methods. From using the right type of organic manure, to growing a specific plant in the most appropriate location in the entire site to the use of locally available products, I realize that this place has developed answers and solutions over an incredible 25 year period. It has not been easy. During this period, the residents have discovered ways to grow these tender specimens to achieve self-regulation, a time when the plants propagate themselves in complex milieus that resemble their original habitats. It does seem self-sustaining now. Improvisation and recycling has been a crucial key to keep the overheads minimum. It's heartening to know from Suprabha that, "over time, the distinction between healing areas and the natural forest has diminished. Both, species diversity and forest structure have made a marvellous comeback in areas that had been completely devastated." This is indeed felt in the surroundings. Over the years as the micro habitats have become more established, everyone has noticed an increase in local fauna_ from butterflies, small mammals and amphibians to birds and snakes. This has been a wonderful bonus for the sanctuary. Apart from conservation and education the work at the sanctuary includes: developing horticultural and conservation skills in local young women; habitat restoration and forest recovery; research in biodiversity, forest ecology, plant taxonomy; and sustainable agriculture and integrated land use to grow the forest farm.

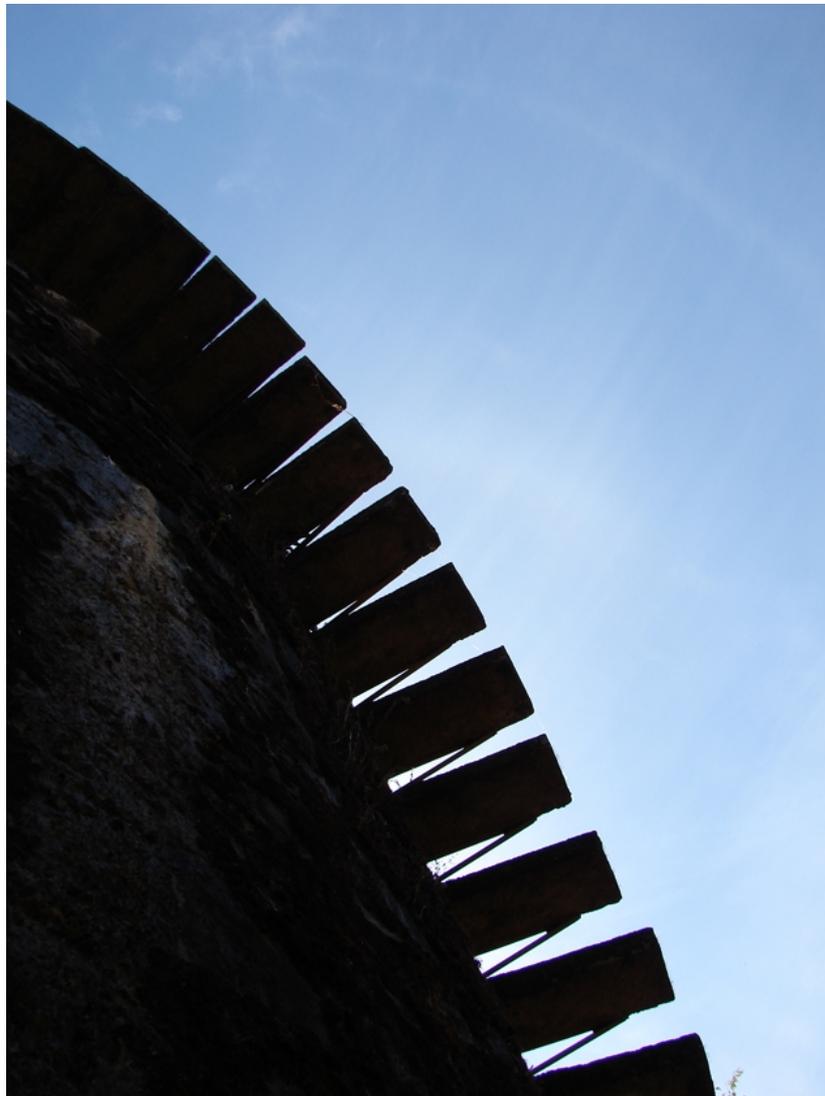


Stag Horn Fern, opposite the main hall_

An epiphytic perennial or “air” plant, the Stag horn fern shows an interesting evolutionary feature. The leaves on top catch the dried leaves falling from the canopy above and convert it into nutrients for the plant while the ones below play the role of photosynthesis.

Later that evening we all sat and exchanged our thoughts over tea and fresh fruits. At night, we prepared a sumptuous meal next to the kitchen which seems to be a source of wonderful energy for everyone. The library below, which has an eclectic mix of books on a wide range of subjects especially ecology, biodiversity, sufism and permaculture is another place of calm and reflection. Next morning was a period of intense activity as everyone was back on the fields. While a new green house was being constructed at one end, Sandy worked in the wood workshop to repair the tools. Peter and I transported cow dung manure to the paddy fields below where Graham was preparing the fields. Everything worked at a lovely pace in a seamless way. People communicated by calling out aloud across the fields. I thought to myself, that we all get our meals too easily. The price is not at all reflective of the work which goes into growing food. Farming is intense activity indeed. It is tough physically and demands great skill and understanding of the natural rhythms around us. Suddenly Laly, a lovely young resident gardener, walks by and greets us. Peter tells me, “She is so good with the plants that they seem to have taken a liking to her.” Others tell me that “she

sings with them”. Suprabha tells me, “They are no university graduates but everyone here has a wonderful, personal method which they have learnt on the fields.” Later on I observe Laly and notice her enjoying and talking with her colleagues in the fields. It brings back memories of remote tribes in north east India and the way they allow their work and rituals to become a seamless extension of their life. However, here, the difference lies in a strong sense of independence and pride in the work. Everyone can speak in English and that is a great equaliser. I see joy, love, and complete immersion in everyone’s eyes.



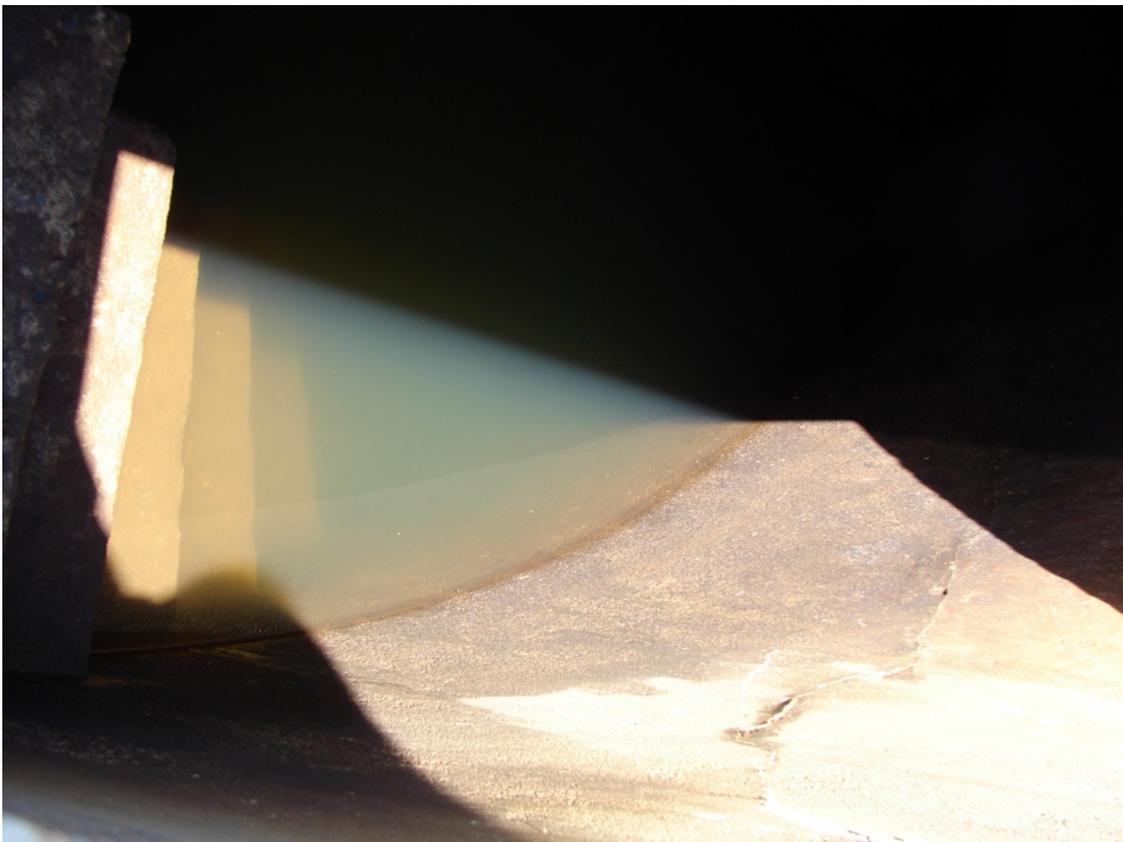
Water tower

A wonderful vantage point to see the entire village

That evening, I met John and Joey. Joey works with the soil association in Britain and is currently in India to explore organic farming techniques. She suggested me other places in south India which I must visit: the *rain forest retreat* in Coorg founded by Dr. Sujata and Anurag Goel, trained microbiologists who now promote ecological awareness and develop sustainable agricultural methods through organic farming. Next on the map was *Krac – A – Dawna* family farm near Mysore founded by Juli and Vivek Cariappa who have been working with organic and sustainable farming systems since 1986.

The results in Gurukula are due to a clear understanding and acceptance of the complexity of the problem and of the diversity of techniques required, including detailed long-term observation,

scientific knowledge, sound horticultural practice, rigorous experimentation and excellent team work. I am told that over the years a broad knowledge base of 120 plant families covering ecology, biogeography, taxonomy, plant pathology and horticulture has been developed and this has inspired not just the local and national communities but also many international organizations. Later that night while walking up the hill to the water tower, I started wondering what had kept us away so long from such magnificence! Why are we so disconnected from the Earth? Is India, despite its legacy of traditional agricultural methods, losing its intimate connection with the Earth? The tragic shift is indeed happening. That night, we all sang on the tower, one by one, with joy in our hearts and gratitude in our minds. Sitting on the steps going into the water reservoir below, our sounds resonated with Peter's mouth harp adding to the wonderful surreality of the experience. The pitch black sky above, the shimmering stars and the wilderness in all its exuberance, this was beyond magic. Where were we? Indeed, the human mind and body has a profound and deep connection with the wild. We are yet to fully fathom its depths and its sense of wilderness. It is mysterious and beyond our individual identities. I felt the silent angels around me breathing with a deep sense of relief. Relief, for we knew, we had been reconnected!



Water tower steps

In pitch dark, we all sang sitting on these steps

Next morning, I accompanied Wolfgang and Suprabha to Calicut from where I would take the train to my next stop. As we approached the fast cars and crowded lands, Wolfgang showed me the exact spots they salvaged their plants from. Indeed this is a treasure for all of us to cherish and celebrate.

I silently thank everyone who made this journey possible. Washed in early morning mist, the sanctuary and its residents are luminous and colourful in every aspect. With many thanks to Ms. Suprabha and Mr. Wolfgang for inviting and hosting me and to everyone in the sanctuary who made this experience memorable and honest.

Hosts: <http://www.gbsanctuary.org/>

Visitor: <http://fo.am>

Catalyst: <http://fo.am/groworld/>