

'Breakfast with birds' in pristine surroundings

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A WHITE EYE nesting in an Ashoka tree. — Kishor Rithe

William Barrett in an introductory essay to the Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, writes: "For the readers of this book the question will hardly arise of becoming a Buddhist, but that does not lessen the importance of Zen to them... " In the beautiful words of the Master Huyen: "When water is scooped up in the hands, the moon is reflected in them; when flowers are handled, the scent soaks into the robe."

Any forest will put a bit of itself in you, while at Tadoba the forest places all of it in you. It happens when gazing at the Tadoba Lake, the still expanse of water leading to the insides of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR). For two days, one sat on the steps of the Centenary Rest House (1962) whiling away a few hours watching a cold, whistling wind softly coaxing the falling raindrops sprint the surface of the lake.

One morning, my friend Kishor Rithe while looking at a Tailor Bird sensed some activity on an Ashoka tree, a few feet away. Two birds were winging in and out of a spot located some 7 ft. up on the Ashoka tree. He waited for the birds to fly away before approaching the tree and was in a trance at the nesting of the White Eye. With our binoculars we watched the activity from about 10 ft so as not to disturb the pair.

The White Eye is a sparrow-sized, greenish yellow bird with a white ring round its eye and we had a good glimpse. Usually, birds avoid the Ashoka tree for building nests but for the two White Eye it did not matter. The nesting season runs from April to July and the nest is best described by Dr Salim Ali: "A tiny cup of fibres neatly bound with cobwebs - a miniature Oriole's nest — slung hammockwise in the end fork of a thin twig, normally between 5 and 10 ft. up."

In our case, the nest hung between the stems of two Ashoka leaves and in two days, the male and female had used the leaves to curtain their nest from any predator. Never did the two directly land on the nest. They took a detour to hide their wing prints in the air. They would land on top of the Ashoka before clambering down to their nest. By now, the eggs might have been laid and sometime a new generation of White Eye will inhabit Tadoba.

After a two-hour treat, we walked to the canteen at about 9 in the morning to have some *poha* and tea when a golden-backed woodpecker landed on the trunk of a teak tree some 10 ft from us. It pecked away for a few minutes before landing on the ground in search of food. The woodpecker did not bother about us as it moved past a crowd of common babblers in search of breakfast. The best thing about the golden-backed woodpecker is its crimson crest, bobbing up and down every time a worm was spotted.

The common babbler comes in groups of seven (and hence called *satbhai* in Hindi) and the rains had helped raise enough tasty morsels for the birds. While sipping tea, one heard the Indian Cuckoo call — 34 calls in 34 seconds (one measured it) — before shutting up; after about an hour the music session started leaving one amused.

Kishor dubbed the morning show "Breakfast with Birds." With nothing much to do, we got to talking about wildlife and the Tribal Bill which, if passed by Parliament, will be the obit for the country's forests. Perhaps, it all started long ago when the car and the gun became common in the world. In many ways, they are an offshoot of the Industrial Revolution in England. The first planned attack on India's forests came when the royalty and a section of Britishers hunted wild animals by freezing them with the headlamps of vehicles before gunning them.

Environmentalism: A Global History forming a portion of the three-part Ramachandra Guha Omnibus, tracks the worries of many foresters over the loss of forests beginning some 200 years ago. Their concerns match that of men like Kishor today. In 1876, Ruskin objected strongly to a railway line to the Lake District. The passionate Ruskin mentions: "... . and that all other efforts in education are futile till you have taught your people to love fields, birds and flowers. Come then, my benevolent friends, join with me in that teaching."

In May 1864, the well-known New York firm of Charles Scribners published a volume called *Man and Nature: or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* by a Vermont scholar George Perkins Marsh. The writer did not think the book would have an impact.

Guha says: "So doubtful was Marsh of the book's sales that he donated the copyright to the United States Sanitary Commission. Thoughtful friends purchased the copyright and gave it back to the author." That title started the green movement in America and Guha suggests the formation of the Indian Forest Department was a part of that historical process.

While some of the best forest officials try hard to keep Tadoba pristine, ministers would like it to be something of a municipal park promising the public a sighting of the tiger. With the Tribal Bill, there may not be any tigers left.