

Nenmeli: Where the trees are happy

By sharonstjoan



On the way to Nenmeli, a restored sacred grove in Tamil Nadu, there is a hill with a temple.

I am told that every day for two thousand years a pair of vultures flew from the Himalayas, pausing on their way to be fed by the priests of the temple, before continuing their journey on to Sri Lanka.

Every evening the pair of birds returned to the Himalayas.

Three years ago they stopped coming and have not been seen since. This vanishing of the sacred vultures coincides with the disappearance of 98 % of the vultures in India, due to the drug Diclofenac, which is given to cattle. Vultures feeding on cattle who had died were poisoned by the drug. Though the drug was banned in 2006, it is still available in other forms, and the vultures of India are still in danger of extinction.

The mythical realities of India are in some danger too, as the perceptions of the spiritual and the magical are supplanted by the more prosaic views of the modern world.

Or, on the other hand, who knows if perhaps it may be the modern world itself that is endangered and may soon be gone, leaving only the world of myth and magic and the stars shining beyond in the sky?



In any case, the sacred grove, Nennmeli, is a restoration of the beauty and enchantment of the ancient past.

At the entrance stands a tall, older, dignified man dressed in the traditional dhoti that many men in rural India still wear.

He is the guardian of the grove, who ensures that it is respected and protected by all the people in his village.

A photo taken around fifteen years ago shows a patch of barren land. There is nothing here at all, except a rock in the center of a field, lying at the bottom of a forlorn looking

hill where nothing seems to grow. And yet it was known that in the past, perhaps decades or centuries ago, this was the site of a beautiful grove of trees.

We walk into the grove and are greeted by a host of young trees; Their average height may be twelve to fifteen feet (about four to five meters)—and they convey nothing, if not the impression that they are happy.



The hill behind them is covered in green with a small lace-like tree near the bottom and a lovely variety of bushes and trees covering around twenty-five acres (ten hectares) starting from the base of the hill. In one section, a low stone wall runs along the ground.

The botanist, Mr. Amerthalingam, of the CPREEC Foundation (C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre), has conducted careful scientific research into all the vast variety of plants that used to grow in the sacred groves of south India in order to duplicate them precisely. For every tree and plant that he points out, he tells us the medicinal use.



The atmosphere in the grove is delightful and uplifting. There appear to be happy tree spirits dancing among the sunlit branches. We see the stone, the same one that was in the photo in the barren field, though now, miraculously, it is surrounded by green plants in all directions.

In 1995 the people of Nennmeli came to the CPREEC Foundation, asking for help because there was no longer any rain with which to grow crops and because even when it did rain, the waters tumbled over the bare hillside, not sinking into the soil, but just washing away the earth into the tank below. (A “tank” in India is a man-made lake. There are a great many of these; usually every temple has at least one.)

The hill of Nennmeli had gotten into this state because of the depletion of topsoil.

As, over time, the people no longer revered the earth and the trees as sacred, they no longer felt any prohibition against removing the trees and the topsoil.

As CPREEC states, “This was a textbook case of environmental degradation.” CPREEC proceeded very thoroughly and professionally to correct the damage of many decades and to restore the grove.



Under the guiding hand of Mr. Selvapandian, an education officer with CPREEC, work was begun to restore Nemmeli to the sacred grove it once was.

First they did a lot of research on the conditions of the soil and water. Then they gathered together local stones to strengthen the contours of the hill.

Mulching and bio-fencing were used to retain moisture.

The tank, which had filled up with silt during the years when the water ran unchecked down the hill was thoroughly cleaned out, with CPREEC and the local people working together.

Then they did an initial planting of trees on 4.5 acres, putting in 26 carefully selected species. One year later, a survey revealed that there were 39 different species of birds visiting what had before been just a wasteland! But now it was a newly restored paradise for birds.

In the years following, the mammals have returned too, among them porcupines, foxes, and mongooses. Indian porcupines are vegetarian and can live for around twenty years.

Bengal foxes are long-eared, medium-sized foxes that live in the southern parts of India, in the Himalayan foothills, and in some of the national parks.

There are more than thirty species of mongoose in the world, living not just in India, but in Africa, Asia, and southern Europe. Mongooses dig a lot and are known for attacking snakes. They are immune to the neurotoxin venom that is produced by some snakes.



At the bottom of the Nenmeli hill is a temple to the village goddess and near it is the tank where several women and girls, sitting on the stairway that goes into the water, are washing clothes.



All the heads of household of Nenmeli have promised in writing not to sacrifice animals—this is a practice that can still occur in parts of India.

Back near the building at the entrance are some enormous banyan trees. These most probably are as old as the original grove. To one side, a rectangle about twenty feet across by the entranceway building is filled with ashes. Lying very comfortably right in the middle of the ashes are three or four dogs, stretched out asleep. I have no idea what these ashes are for, and it is explained to me that this is a site for fire-walking ceremonies that are held now and then!



Over the years, as the planting continued and expanded after the initial planting of 4.5 acres, the women of Nenneli worked together with CPREEC to establish a communal herbal garden with no less than 76 herbal species, some of them shrubs and trees. Soon they were planting their own kitchen gardens, maintaining a compost pit, and constructing smokeless culhas—a kind of stove made of concrete that can reduce indoor pollution by as much as 90%.

Nenneli is just one of 50 sacred groves in south India that CPREEC has brought back to life. CPREEC not only restores the groves, but they fully involve the local people, who are then entrusted with the future preservation of their sacred groves.

How amazing it is that the state-of-the-art environmental science of India and the traditional reverence for the land that has always been present in India have come together now to bring back the sacred groves, to plant trees where there was only dust and dry grass, and to recreate the beautiful world of nature in which both animals and people can thrive.

Imagine using science to save rather than to destroy the planet earth.