

Nature's profusion

Spaces where one relearns the meaning of life

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Indian scimitar babbler & silk cotton flowers, Panchgani © Ashish Kothari

Nature is always a delight. But sometimes, it delivers a more-than-usual sumptuous feast for the eyes and ears and spirit. Just two weeks back I was treated to a spell-binding display of colour and sounds and diversity, all around a single tree.

I was in Panchgani, a hill town close to Pune in western India, where I live. In the sprawling campus of the Initiatives of Change (IofC), where I'd been invited to interact with a lively group of youth from various parts of India, I was pointed to a Red silk cotton tree that was in full bloom. Known variously as *semul*, *pagun*, *tula*, *kaddu-olaga*, *shimbal*, *kapok*, or *Bombax ceiba* in scientific terminology, this tree is distributed across much of India. As winter turns to spring and summer, it begins to put out its startlingly red flowers; in full bloom, it looks like it is aflame (rivalled only by another species native to South Asia that flowers around the same time, *Butea monosperma*, also called, very appropriately, Flame of the Forest).

Well, this particular tree stood in a stately manner in the middle of the gardens in front of the IofC's main buildings. I approached it very early in the morning, at dawn (naturing is the only thing that gets me up that early!). Even before I saw them, I heard the excited calls of parakeets that had gathered on the tree's branches. With the sky beginning to lighten up behind it, the tree and parakeets were both mysterious silhouettes, the latter walking up and down the branches in their very deliberate steps. They were soon joined by other birds that clearly believed in the 'early bird gets the worm' adage, except in this case it was flowers instead of worms.

As the sun began coming up, I moved quietly to the other side of the tree, so the flowers and birds were no longer silhouettes. With light improving rapidly, I was treated to an explosion of colours, or rather a continuing parade of hues, shades, patterns. Bright green parakeets were joined by comparatively drab Common mynas, and their sleeker looking cousins, Brahminy mynas. From early morning I'd also been hearing the rapidfire calls of the Whitcheeked barbet, and now two of them suddenly flew in to inspect the red flowers. Amongst them, a female Golden oriole, its subtle yellow contrasting with the red, was quietly taking its breakfast. Also quieter but equally determined to get their breakfast were Indian blackbirds, their startling orange beaks and eyerings giving the silk cotton flowers some competition! Meanwhile, unbothered by the nervous energy of the birds, squirrels were also enjoying the flower's nectar and petals, sitting on their haunches.

Every once in a while, the entire flock of parakeets would depart, leaving relative quiet, to be quickly filled in by the loud calls of the barbets or the rude chatter of the mynas. And in would come a handful of Redwhiskered bulbuls, their whiskers merging magically with the flowers as if they were made for each other. A solitary Indian scimitar babbler surprised me, coming in to check out the tree, probably curious as to why so many birds were coming to it. It did not stay long; as a predominantly forest bird, it must have realized that this was a bit too open for its liking.

Over the space of about 45 minutes, birds flew in and out in this somewhat chaotic parade. Many stayed for several minutes, walking or hopping branch to branch, checking out flowers not yet devoured by others. Some were much shorter guests, like the Scimitar. Amidst all the bigger birds, I nearly missed seeing the Indian yellow tit, sparrow size and strikingly attired in yellow and black, complete with a crest. And I was not even looking at a host of insects that were hovering over the flowers.

On two separate days, I was mesmerized by this dawn party for about a hour each. The tree attracted about 20 species; it is likely many more visited through the rest of the day. The *semul* was demonstrating the value of even a single tree, so critical for so many creatures, and how unaware we are when we say "oh its only one tree, no problem cutting it." It also was a great place to introduce birds (and other wildlife) to people who have never really done birding (or naturing); unlike a dense forest, here one could just stand and observe, and even without binoculars one could see the sheer diversity, and identify most of the birds. And explain interdependence in nature: birds get sweet nectar and tasty flowers to eat, and in turn help pollinate the tree. I have a feeling many of the participants of the workshop I'd gone to speak at, got hooked on to birds on the one occasion they had gathered around the tree to gaze up in awe.

A forest presents challenges to the first-time birder, but it has its own mesmerising charm. Behind the IofC buildings, dense forest rose up the slopes to the famous 'table-top' of Panchgani, a huge plateau that is a frequented tourist destination. Siddharth, Director of IoFC, taking me on a short visit into the forest, said that when the campus was first set up in 1968 (as the Moral Re-Armament centre), there was a single tree there (an exotic Silver oak). Having just protected the slopes from disturbance, the dense forest with many local species had come back on its own. Nature's regenerative power (probably helped by the deeply spiritual and ethical atmosphere of IofC), was in full display, as we walked quietly on a leaf-strewn path through the forest. And in two small clearings, that workshop host and old friend Jaya Iyer had pointed me to, I was witness to another explosion of birdlife. Somewhat quieter, somewhat less colourful (nothing matching the silk cotton's ostentatious flowers here!), but no less delightful.

For an hour Jaya and I stood in one place and watched. Warblers of various species (the Tickel's leaf warbler most conspicuous in yellow), smaller than sparrows, flitted busily through the bushes and trees, pecking at leaves, inspecting the bark, emitting the occasional chirp or song. Babblers of four species hopped past or hung around preening, mostly in flocks: the small and lovely Tawny babbler, the shy Puffthroated babbler, the noisy Jungle babbler ('seven sisters'), and the loud (but mostly melodious) Scimitar babbler. A pair of Paradise flycatchers, the male with the astonishing 2-foot long white tail, paid us a brief visit. The previous day a Changeable hawk-eagle (so-called because it has confusingly varied plumage) had settled heavily on a tree just above my head, then, disturbed by a Large-billed crow, flown off. A brilliant Crimson sunbird, and its equally striking Purple-rumped cousin, left us open-mouthed.

On both mornings, having come to the forest after the dawn silk cotton party, I had to reluctantly drag myself back to the IofC buildings ... after all, I'd come to do sessions on environment, development and radical alternatives with the workshop participants! But such immersions into nature, even if all-too-brief, are actually where the energy to continue struggling for a saner world comes from; as it does from even a couple of hours of interaction with a committed, thoughtful and fun-loving set of youth as had gathered for a year's programme on social and political leadership called Disom.

These spaces are where one relearns the meaning of life, feels again the humility of us being just one of so many species, realizes once again that as an individual one is made of the fabric of the collective, and connects with the deepest and most meaningful of beauties and truths. It is where this simple truth comes home: in the destruction of the rest of nature is the destruction of humanity, and in its conservation and nurturing is our salvation. It is a lesson so many of us have forgotten in the pursuit of 'development' and 'progress'; but a single hour under a single tree, or in a small forest patch, can bring it cascading back into our consciousness.

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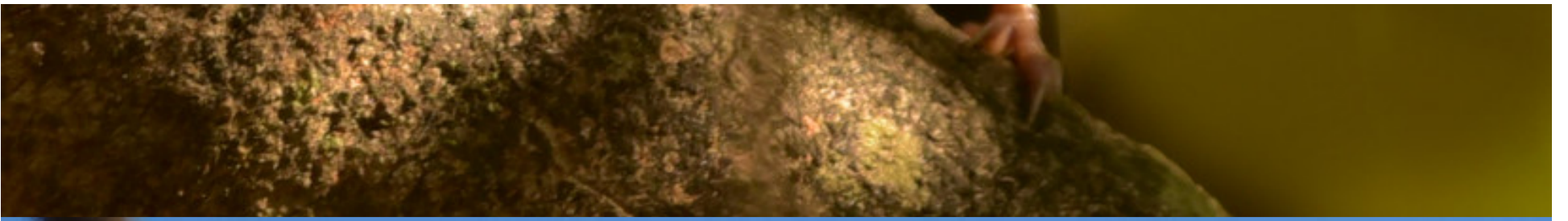
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Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, served on Greenpeace International and India Boards, helped initiate the global ICCA Consortium.

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2. Tawny babbler, Panchagani © Ashish Kothari
3. Roseringed parakeet & silkcotton flower, Panchagani © Ashish Kothari
4. Redbreasted flycatcher, Panchagani © Ashish Kothari
5. Indian blackbird & silkcotton flower, Panchagani © Ashish Kothari
6. Tickel's leaf warbler, Panchagani © Ashish Kothari

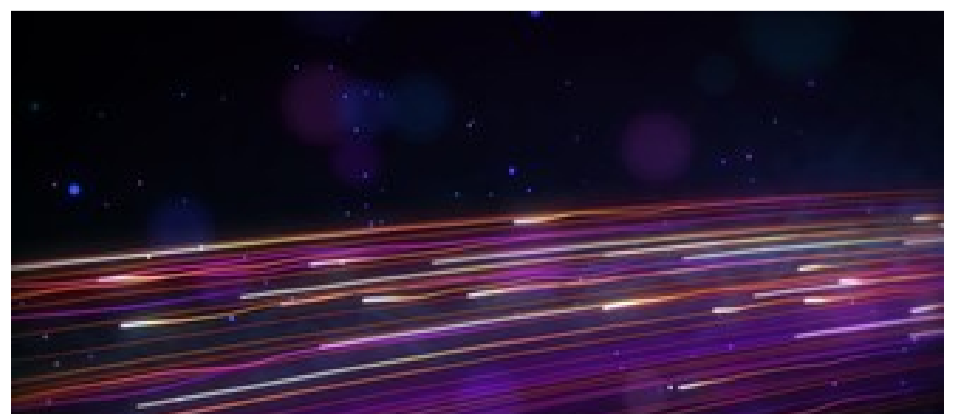
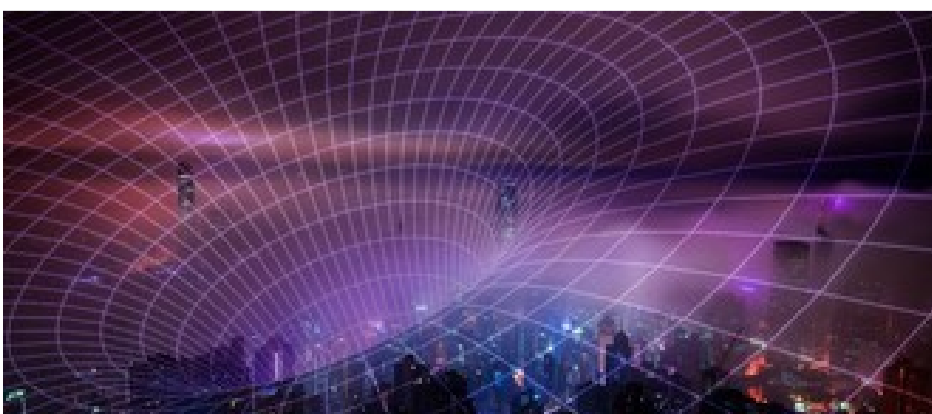
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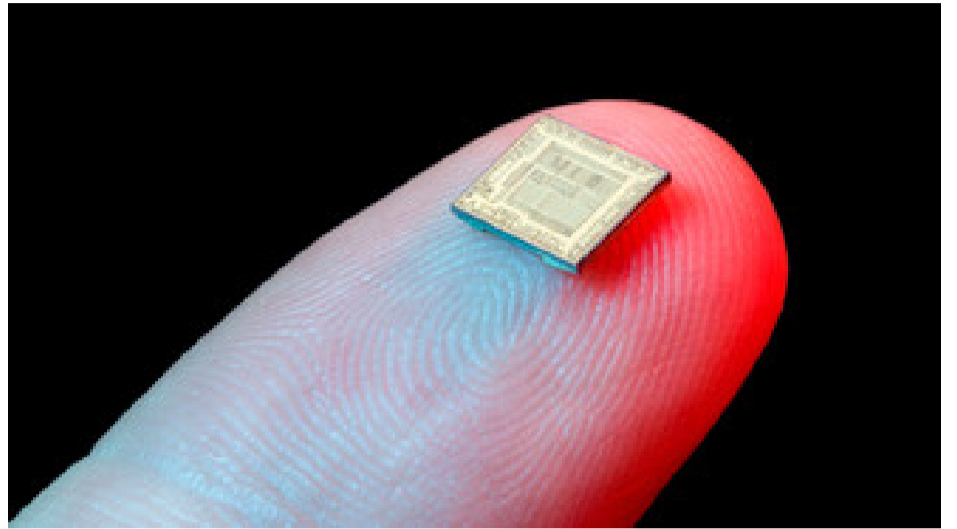
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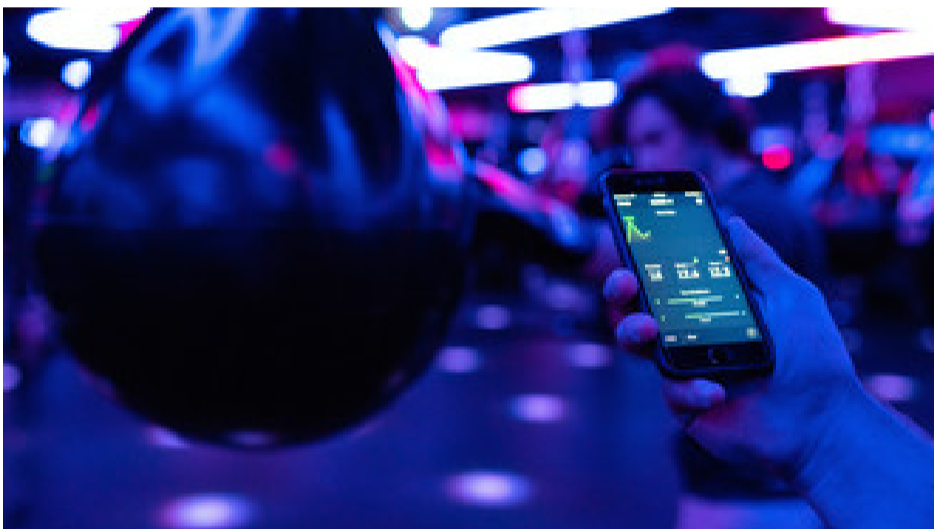
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