

Green thumbs & shoots to save the Earth

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Recently, the catastrophic disappearance of emperor penguins from Antarctica made global headlines. The colony of adults and nursing chicks was among the largest in the world. It sank without a trace due to global warming, because of weakened ice collapsing on unchilling waters.

The tragedy is similar to the proverbial collapse of a star caused by the death of a sparrow. In the case of the penguins, the spark may have been lit by something equally small, if not trivial: the chopping down of a sapling on the street.

A much bigger cause, some scientists say, may be an invisible bovine in the room. And of course burning of fossil fuels, which stands for an even bigger pachyderm in our parlour. But that should not let animal agriculture and meat-eating off the hook.

Collectively, we can no longer afford to cut down forests to expand grasslands, just to grow feed crops meant only for animals slated for slaughter. Monoculture, however, is also not the right answer to the challenge of re-greening the planet.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Ancient seers in India knew this as well as modern ecologists: “The tiger dies without the forest,” Bhishma exhorts King Yudhishtira in Mahabharata. “Similarly, the forest is destroyed without the tiger. The tiger should, therefore, protect the forest and the forest ought to defend the tiger – Tasmad vyagrho vanam rakshed vanam vyagraham cha paalayet.”

Alas, the ancients also practised ecocide. That is the sacrilege of burning ancient forests to set up swanky new citadels. Notice the heart-rending detail in which the Epic of Gilgamesh, often regarded as the world’s oldest epic tale, depicts the murder of Humbaba, the guardian of the sacred cedar forest where the gods lived.

Although Humbaba was a kind king who lived in ‘the harmonious Palace of Woods’, he appeared as “a lion-faced terror with a flood-like roar” to mortals who coveted the sacred trees.

Humbaba was decapitated by Enkidu, the hairy beast-man-turned-bosom-friend of King Gilgamesh and the duo hacked down the divine trees, to haul them off to ‘timber-less’ Mesopotamia.

Closer home, the founding of Indraprastha (Indra’s City) is at the expense of the great Khandava forest. Like the Assyrian god Enlil of the sacred forest, Indra, the King of the Gods himself protects the Khandava forest. He battles his son Arjuna and Krishna, against the great conflagration that the two set up.

Eden gets destroyed when Arjuna/Adam’s fire proves mightier than his Rain Godfather’s aqueous element. This is the root of the enmity between Takshaka, the Naga King and Kuru Kings, which augurs the genocide of snakes (Sarpa-satra) at the beginning of the epic.

The good news is that today, Adam’s progeny is earnestly trying to atone for their ancestral folly: Planet Earth is literally a greener place than it was just 20 years ago. Satellite images from NASA reveal a ‘counterintuitive’ source for most of this brand new foliage: China and India, the two emerging countries with the world’s biggest populations are leading the surge in greening on land.

The combined effect of tree-planting and intensive agriculture works out to a leaf area increase equivalent to more than two million square miles, equal to doubling the area of all the Amazon rainforests or an increase of 5%.

More amazing, China and India account for just 9% of the planet’s landmass, yet they are responsible for a third of its greening. And they are adding even more green thumbs, and shoots too.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/green-thumbs-shoots-to-save-the-earth/>