

Revealing mysteries of the woods in the Western Ghats

Shyam Sunder recalls a life in the wild, from picking the right seeds, keeping avaricious politicians at bay, to saving the last evergreen forests

G. Ananthakrishnan

A career in government could leave an enthusiastic professional disappointed at the hurdles to creative expression and enterprise, and having to live under the shadow of political and administrative compulsions. But happy endings are possible. What it takes to succeed is a strong belief system, clean hands, plain perseverance and a good measure of luck.

That is the story narrated by S. Shyam Sunder, who began his career as a forester after training in Geology. An astonishing sequence of events led him to a job in the Forest

Service in the 1950s and with many twists and turns, concluded with his elevation as the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests for Karnataka.

Away from public view

Forest officers in India work in locations that are away from public view, and perceptive accounts of how they go about their job are rare. Several officers like to keep the mysteries of the woods to themselves, especially when the prying individuals are journalists and researchers. It is equally true that others love partnerships to expand forests and conservation. So when someone is ready to tell a forester's story, breezily peppered with anecdotes and portraits

of people high and low in the system, it is bound to be a refreshing book.

Simple logic

Shyam Sunder, a nephew of litterateur Shivarama Karanth, lays bare all his efforts in this memoir: from picking the most promising trees for planting, monitoring and setting new regulations on the commercial use of forest produce including timber (sometimes levelling the field for villagers vis-a-vis wealthy contractors), keeping avaricious politicians from distributing good forests as patronage, and often ensuring that "development" projects do not devastate the environment, notably

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the surviving evergreen forests of the Western Ghats.

As a young forest professional, he trained not just in Dehradun's Indian Forest College, but in France, Ivory Coast and Latin America. Transforming extractive forestry into a socially beneficial enterprise is a demanding goal, considering that the British-era view of the forest was

primarily that of an economic resource, seemingly inexhaustible, to be exploited for fuel, furniture, railway sleepers and construction material for everything, including ships that fought wars.

Of course, extraction inevitably touched such destructive lows that Karnataka, in the final days of wooden railway sleepers, was ready to offer money to the Union government for wood, but had no more trees to offer.

King cobra and a jumbo

A forester cannot spend life in the woods without encountering diverse wildlife. In Shimoga, Shyam Sunder describes a near-encounter with a

king cobra hidden in a tree stump, and a life-saving manoeuvre executed by a colleague, Gaviaiah, who dived and pushed the officer to the ground, away from the snake. In Kollegal, a tusker confrontation on a narrow hillside road during a family trip left everyone shaken. The jumbo decided to retreat down a slope, rather than charge at his jeep.

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This memoir weaving past and present is richly detailed, enlivened by a vivid recollection of places, people and shared moments.