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BIOPHILE Column

Simply sustainable

'living narratives'

As Sustainability discourses become a buzz word, a household topic, it has become more confusing - removed from ordinary people's perspective.

Yet the very essence of sustainability lies in its simplicity, and its accessibility to any lay person.

We are living in an extremely specialized world where the simple stuff is often forgotten. The way of commonsense is pushed aside for an apparently more sophisticated product approach to life - like the organic insect spray in a fancy plastic bottle instead of the good old garlic-chili mixture, and marigolds and companion planting to maintain insect free veggie patches.

The focus of this column will be to

1. Dig out the much forgotten 'good-old' ways of living, simply using common sense and nature's wisdom, learning to dance with nature
2. Share from around the world *simply sustainable living narratives* - stories about real people living simply and sustainably not because they believe it is 'cool' or fashionable, because that is all they know, because they have not been polluted by 'development'; because they have not progressed (regressed???) into sustainable development.

Often these stories are tools for reflection – to look deeper into the well meaning well-intentioned projects to 'De-velop' that are often filled with contradictions. Most often the damages and destructions faced today are the resultant outcome of such development projects that force communities to compromise the process of living simply with in a local context.

Column article for current issue

A touch of madness...touched by modernity

Stories from Payyallore, a tiny village nestled under the foothills of Western Ghats of Palakkad province in Kerala, South India

This tiny little village, my home-town, now boasts of more than ten buses plying through the only dusty main road. The majestic backdrop of the Western Ghats made this little village picturesque, almost out of a living canvass of nature.

Every couple of years I return to the village only to be shocked to see another development... another paddy field filled up to construct another horrendous concrete building. The number of old buildings in the area are vanishing fast. No more mud bricks. No more Kerala style old buildings with timber, stone and mud bricks or the poorer homes with thatch equivalent palm leaf roof structures with bamboo supports. Bamboo used to be the main fencing material, but has been totally replaced with either brick walls or barbed wire fencing or a combination. When I lived at home, my mother lovingly cultivated many shade loving trees interspersed with the bamboo fencing, making it more like a green wall. Most of these were Neem and another local species we call *vaka*, the bark of which was used for soap. The touch of modernity brought home by my retired father saw the demise of the entire Neem family from our homestead along with the bamboo fence now replaced with a concrete wall and barbed wire fencing.

Concrete and brick housing has become a symbol of upward mobility and status. The emerging construction industry has moved to all corners, buying up paddy fields and luring the locals to lease their land for brick kilns.

Scattered across the paddy fields, spewing smoke and fume, stand the brick kilns – bringing modernity to the homes around. Studies after studies have shown that brick kilns are killing the fields, making the land unarable for years. But the construction industry is hungry for bricks; people want concrete houses. Mud bricks are not fashionable. Laborers are not interested in building with mud bricks. And are losing the knowledge.

And yet...far away in towns, tired of modern buildings, sustainable architects have been working with compressed earth blocks for many years. Take Auroville an eco-township in Pondicherry, the south of India. Led by Sat Prem Mani, who has dedicated his life to working on sustainable architecture, the Earth Institute has developed multiple ways of working with compressed earth blocks, practical, sustainable, labor intensive as well as able to meet the demand in volume, if need be – contrary to the constant criticism that proponents of cob-house and such other designs have to hear from mainstream urban housing Mafioso.

What is most disturbing is the trend to discard what has been working generally well, adopt something that is new and in the process destroy the foundation of

what did work previously, only to discover that we may have to go back and improvise what was working before. By this time, a couple of decades have gone by, generations destroyed.

Is there a better way to learn, become wiser, wake up to the reality of appreciating what one has, exploring the possibilities of building on what is locally available?

Is there a better way to bridge common wisdom without losing it entirely?

Is there a way to support local craftsmen and women without becoming slaves to sustainability experts busy taking over the few craftspeople with local knowledge ?

Is there a way of making sustainability choices accessible to all ?

Is there a way to create consciousness around sustainability stemming from an educational paradigm that facilitates one and all to make conscious choices about pro-active citizenry?

Is there a way of thinking that becomes the norm, the backbone of any society that enables citizens to challenge unethical lifestyles being promoted by business couched as good living ?

Take the case of Payyallore, my village. People have become conditioned to the idea of a false notion of modernity. Swept by the winds of modernization, old and new alike suffer from feelings of shame. Shame of being old fashioned, shamed of the old dwellings. Shamed wearing old fashioned clothing. Shamed at the unaffordability to buy the glittering new materials goods that the shops are inundated with. Purchasing power of the money is low. People's ability to sustain themselves is great but is afflicted, dis-eased under the onslaught of glitzy media and television giving evangelical gospels about good living.

In our little small holding my mother planted almost everything we needed. There was very little we needed to buy from outside, soaps, textile perhaps...even the textiles came from the nearby weaver. The pots that my mother cooked came from the local potter.

The small holding went through a make-over once my father returned, retired from the military. A victim of modernity syndrome, he came to live in the village full of new ideas, deeply convinced of the need to modernize village life. Totally skeptical about old ways, rituals and festivals, temples and deities. He pooh-poohed all of this as nonsense, superstition and doomed to keep the villagers, 'lazy and backward'.

Where my mother did veggie patches with companion planting, trees and shrubs and bushes growing in harmony, my father cleared the land. Where she managed with one well to water her entire veggie patches, my father got a bore well and motorized pumping. My father believes true development must be accompanied by real technologies. His real technologies have chased the humus away from the garden, the lush undergrowth, mostly edible weeds have become a forgotten species of the past. No more frogs in the

garden, no more snakes and no more abundance of bird life that always sought lush green gardens and insect life as their priority living habitats.

My father opted for cash crops that don't generate immediate returns but that may yield income in four to five years. By that time, if he is lucky the prices will be good. But the market is not a dependable mechanism and must not be the core determining factor in the pursuit of sustainability.

Years and years of accumulated humus and undergrowth gone. The soil exposed to harsh tropical sun had to be coaxed to produce anything. The tall growing coconut planted mainly as cash crop casting ever longer shadows prevented lush undergrowth and no humus to accumulate.

The small holding, that grew enough for a family of five soon became dry, parched barren naked soil with no undergrowth to hold the moisture during the dry hot season and no undergrowth to drink and absorb the excess moisture during heavy monsoon.

After many years, of working passionately in the garden my mother withdrew from the modernist male domain especially after her daughters left home. She neatly put away her few pieces of gardening equipment, a small sickle, a pick and a hoe, became aloof. Her essence of life, her garden shriveled away in the tropical sun as her body withered with gloom and despair, the male ways of living too harsh for her soulful living. She became bed ridden...for many years, just waiting to move on, which she did last year. She passed away on my lap, looking into my eyes in despair and fear for what awaits humanity. I had to reassure her, it is okay to leave, the modernity era is coming to an end, the goddess era is awakening.

Many women removed from the land get sick...so many women removed from their mothers garden live life with no meaning anymore, nothing makes sense to their old ways of living. Men rushing, men impatient, men raking deep, machines grinding. Eyes glassy, eyes frantic, seeking searching, caught in the prison of inertia and matter. Depression gets deeper. Breakdowns increase and not breakthroughs from the cul-de-sac of lifeless living. Life wrapped up in colorful wraps of material living, urban living – a touch of madness, afflicted by modernity syndrome.

Those afflicted by this dis-ease return to the villages, like my father, eager to make their simple village dwelling into a small urban shanty – sad testimony that urban development is addictive, it hooks simple folks from village with all the pomp and glitz only to slowly leach the simple living in harmony with nature spiced with common sense a thing of the past.

My mother passed away last year. Watching the villagers pour in I realized how the local village communication system is so self organizing, no ADSL, broadband, telecommunication glitch holding news...news just travels. People flock by. Nothing is done for money. It just is the custom. She was cremated on the land. The tree from the land was chopped down. A tamarind tree. Usually the best. It burns even when it is just

cut. The best tree always used for cremation. Our local custom does not allow the body to be kept after the sunset... here in this part of the tropics, everything is taken care of according to the law of nature...rules and rituals are created to follow the rhythms of nature. With no refrigeration and modern, cooling system body will rot in no time. Cremation is the best way to dispose of the dead. Of course wood has to be chopped. But almost every household maintains trees, especially tamarind...for the dead...no one has to be told to grow trees...

It is a different story when the developers come, the rich new monied class want terrace buildings, concrete apartments, bulldozing the entire eco-system to grow concrete jungles. And then the bickering starts, sustainable architecture...sustainable urban dwellings, and spatial development.

How sustainable is this approach???? We are witnessing this trend globally. Where is this taking us? This kind of displacement of the old for the new that has no sustainability other than to sustain the newly emerging sustainable industry – of developers, architects, planners, agri-business you name it...all making the old look really redundant and yet, taking the new to an unsustainable level, uprooting and distorting the old. At the same time bottling convenient remnants of the old in new packages with new labels to be traded as sustainable development with a liberal garnish of modernist technology.