

On Stories, Childhood and Ecological Consciousness

By Professor Avijit Pathak

In this article, the author rediscovers two beautiful stories and reflects on childhood and ecological consciousness in the context of a technological society.

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We live amidst stories. And stories are everywhere—in our life trajectories, in our dreams and aspirations, in our pain and struggle. Yes, stories exist in mythologies, in literature, in politics and even in social sciences. In fact, it is futile to distinguish the ‘objectivity’ of social sciences from the ‘subjectivity’ of narratives; the fact is that while some form of social sciences, because of their ‘rigor’, restrain our emotions and control our vocabulary, stories are more in tune with the rhythm of life—its curves and turning points, its mysteries and inexplicable experiences. No wonder, I strive for stories. And particularly, the stories that speak of the world of childhood fascinate me. Despite being an ‘adult’ (or, according to the official classification, a ‘senior citizen’), I remain a child, and possibly sing the ‘songs of innocence’. I strive for connectedness, for some sort of ecological consciousness—children (not yet corrupted by ‘education’, by the hyper-masculine/utilitarian/adult rationality) accompanying the eternally blue sky, the vast green field, the whisper of trees, the chirping of tiny birds, the movement of butterflies and the blooming of flowers. However, as I see the world around me and reflect on contemporary childhood—I mean urban/middle class schooled childhood—I feel deep pain. There seems to be no ecstasy, no play amidst nature, no engagement with its abundance. The tyranny of time table and loaded school bags carrying what is needed for the making of a ‘knowledge society’— history, mathematics, geography, computer; the rationale of ‘development’ that makes skyscrapers, malls, multiplexes and parking spaces more real than the radiant sun or the illuminating moon or the vast green field touching the clouds; mobile towers and Dish TV antenna replacing trees and plants with birds and butterflies; the proliferation of toy industry; and the intoxication with gadgets, video games, television cartoon shows: our children find themselves in a world in which there is no sunrise/sunset, no calling from the banyan tree. There is no ecological consciousness. Instead, in an increasingly atomized/competitive society they grow up with aggression and restlessness, or like adults, they too become consumers. However, I do not give up. I rediscover two beautiful stories of Rabindranath Tagore and Ruskin Bond, find yet another meaning of childhood filled with ecological consciousness —children not with toy guns or fighter planes, but children in communion with trees, plants and flowers. This is not mere nostalgia; instead, in this rediscovery lies the quest for contented childhood needed for the making of an ecologically sensitive/compassionate world.

(I) Your soul is becoming dense with the moist fragrance of the forest

Before I speak of Bolai—a remarkably revealing story by Rabindranath Tagore, I remind myself of the poet-philosopher: his own childhood, his discomfort with a routinized/structured/ denaturalized form of schooling, his longing for nature, his quest

for abundance (man's 'surplus'), his spirituality and aesthetics. No wonder, Bolai—the central character in the story—indicates the possibility of yet another form of childhood. As a narrator, Tagore introduces him as his nephew who lost his mother quite early in his life. What strikes the reader is Bolai's extraordinary sensitivity, his quiet and contemplative nature, his close affinity with the eastern sky, the monsoon rains and the sunshine.

My nephew Bolai, my brother's son: in his nature, somehow, the fundamental notes of plants and trees sounded the loudest. Right from childhood, he had the habit of standing and staring silently, not exploring places like other boys. When dark clouds massed themselves in layers in the eastern sky, it was as if his soul became dense with the moist fragrance of the forest in July; when the rain came thrumming down, his whole body would listen to what it said. When the sunshine lay on the roof in the afternoon, he walked about bare-chested, as if gathering something into himself from all the sky.

Bolai is different. He understands the murmur of the trees, the language of every plant, every piece of tiny grass. No wonder, he doesn't like the grass-cutter. For him, everything is alive, everything has a soul. See the way the story takes a turn. A tiny silk-cotton plant had taken root in the middle of the gravel path. For the narrator—Bolai's uncle, it is nuisance, it is an obstacle. To Bolai, this language of utility makes no sense. Instead, he would water it every day, check it anxiously morning and evening to see how much it had grown. His uncle—with the rationality of an adult—feels like uprooting it. 'I don't know what gets into your head. It's right in the middle of the path. When it gets bigger it'll spread its cotton all around and drive us crazy', he tried to persuade Bolai. But he would not be persuaded. Instead, he would appeal to his Kaki (aunt) , and she would take Bolai's side. Meanwhile, Bolai's father came and took him to Shimla for studies. The house became empty, and in his absence Bolai's Kaki felt his presence in everything that he loved and nurtured. However, the masculine/adult gaze of the narrator of the story could not fail to notice the growth of that silk-cotton tree.

One day I saw that the wretched silk-cotton tree had grown beyond all reason; it was so overbearing that it could not be indulged any longer. So I cut it down.

Ironically, it was also the time when Bolai wrote a letter to his Kaki from Shimla requesting her to send him a photograph of his silk-cotton tree. The story ends with pain, a sense of loss:

Bolai's Kaki didn't eat for two days, and for many days after that she wouldn't say a word to me. Bolai's father had taken him from her lap, as if breaking off the umbilical cord; and his Kaka had removed Bolai's beloved tree for ever, and that too shook her world, wounded her in the heart. The tree had been her Bolai's reflection, after all, his life's double.

(II) The banyan tree is like the orchestra with the musicians constantly tuning up

Here is yet another story—this time by Ruskin Bond. Bond is amazing. His profound style of story-telling, his sensitivity to the mountains and the woods, and his lucidity

charm his readers. In *The Tree Lover Bond* recalls his childhood in the fertile Doon valley, his intimacy with nature, and his association with his Grandfather whom ‘plants and trees loved with as much tenderness as he loved them.’ See the way Rusty as a child saw his Grandfather:

Sometimes when I sat alone beneath a tree I would feel a little lonely or lost; but as soon as Grandfather joined me, the garden would become a happy place, the tree itself more friendly.

It was this association that led Rusty to evolve an ethic of care, a sensitivity to nature, a way of merging with everything around—the peepul tree, the banyan tree and the constant presence of ladybirds and caterpillars which would ‘sometimes walk off Grandfather’s shirtsleeves’. See the extraordinary sensitivity with which Rusty was growing up, the way he sharpened the art of seeing, felling and relating:

At the height of the monsoon, the banyan tree was like an orchestra with the musicians constantly tuning up. Birds, insects and squirrels welcomed the end of the hot weather and the cool quenching relief of the monsoon. A toy flute in my hands, I would try adding my shrill piping to theirs. But they must have thought poorly of my piping, for, whenever I played, the birds and the insects kept a pained and puzzled silence.

The story narrates Grandfather’s enthusiasm. He was not content with planting trees in his garden. Quite often, he would walk into the jungle with cuttings and saplings and plant them in the forest. And it was from him that Rusty knew ‘how men, and not only birds and animals, needed trees—for keeping the desert away, for attracting rain, for preventing the banks of rivers from being washed away, and for wild plants and grasses to grow beneath.’ Not surprisingly, for Rusty, the thought of a world without trees became a sort of nightmare.

I shall never want to live on the treeless Moon— and I helped Grandfather in his tree planting with even greater enthusiasm. He taught me a poem by George Morris, and we would recite it together:

**Woodman, spare that tree!
Touch not a single bough!
In youth it sheltered me,
And I’ll protect it now.**

With this mission they found a small rocky island in the middle of a dry river bed, and planted trees. And when the monsoon set in, the trees appeared to be flourishing. Nothing remains static. Life moves. No wonder, the story too takes a turn. Rusty finished school, went to England, and after several years came back to Dehra. The old house where he spent his childhood with his amazing Grandfather gave him a call. Yes, the old banyan tree—older than the house, older than his grandparents— was still there; it had grown over the wall. And when he walked out of town towards the river bed, he realized the true meaning of Grandfather’s dream:

In contrast to the dry river bed, the island was a small green paradise. When I walked across the trees, I noticed that a number of squirrels had come to live in them. The trees seemed to know me. They whispered among themselves and beckoned me nearer. And looking around, I noticed that other small trees and wild plants and grasses had sprung up under the protection of the trees we had placed there. The trees had multiplied! They were moving. In one small corner of the world, Grandfather's dream was coming true, and the trees were moving again.

(III) The search for Bolai and Rusty in the technological society

As I have already indicated, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find Bolai and Rusty amongst us. But then, their sensitivity cannot be negated as idealistic or irrelevant or even 'bourgeois'. Because in their ecological consciousness lies the possibility of collective redemption. See our times. The very success of modernity with its techno-science and reckless development is its ultimate tragedy; it has led to a 'risk society'; and the possibility of nuclear war, environmental disaster and human alienation in the face of technocracy is no longer an academic question; it is real; it is happening... Furthermore, the ever growing technology is further alienating man from nature, from the flow of spiritually nourished human relationships. From the obsession with what is known as the 'selfie' to the addiction to internet and 'social media'—we see the emergence of a new creature becoming increasingly incapable of direct/living connectedness with real people and nature. Instead, technology itself becomes a need; technology becomes supreme, and man is compelled to adjust to it. This reminds me of what social philosopher Jacques Ellul wrote in **The Technological Society**:

The new milieu has its own specific laws which are not the laws of organic or inorganic matter. Man is still ignorant of these laws. It nevertheless begins to appear with crushing finality that a new necessity is taking over from the old. It is easy to boast of victory over ancient oppression, but what if victory has been gained at the price of an even greater subjection to the forces of the artificial necessity of the technical society which has come to dominate our lives? In our cities there is no more day or night or heat or cold. But there is overpopulation, thralldom to press and television, total absence of purpose. All men are constrained by means external to them to ends equally external. The further the technical mechanism develops which allows us to escape natural necessity, the more we are subjected to artificial technical necessities.

I find myself lucky. I retain my madness; I find Bolai and Rusty within me. And they whisper in my ears: ecological consciousness— an answer to the technological society—is not merely about 'theory' or 'environmental sciences'; it is primarily about an art of living— living with trees and butterflies, monsoon rains and counting stars in the clear sky; and this mode of living ought to begin right from childhood. If this is not education, is there any hope left?

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