

English and Indian science

I am in the process of reviewing a professional article submitted by three Indian scientists to an international biology journal. The science appears reasonable, but the pathetic aspect is the language used. Why none in India alone is not able to recognize is that presenting details in graceful and elegant language is half-of-the-way crossed. I am spending more time in correcting the prose rather than looking into the science of the submitted paper. Many sentences are grammatically flawed and clumsy, badly punctuated and meaninglessly wordy. The most annoying element is that the verbs are inappropriately conjugated, which made me highly irritable.

This is not the only occasion when I experienced this problem. For the students from the Indian subcontinent who have joined my research group, I am spending 4 h/week teaching basic grammar and simple ways of communicating in good English. What jolted me was when I asked them whether each has a

copy of a standard dictionary and every one drew a blank. I urged them to purchase either a copy of the *Macquarie* or the *Australian Oxford*. The next step was to educate them how to use the dictionary and what help it can provide.

My above reactions are meant to say as loudly as possible that efforts need to be made in India in not losing a great gift – the English language – given by the British to us. We only talk of the ills caused and damages done to us by them before independence. We never want to recognize that we have an edge over the Chinese, who are the strongest competitors for us in every possible sphere of life, simply because we have a better hold on the English language than most Chinese. We need to factor here that the Chinese are making a sincere effort to master the English language by recruiting native speakers of English. A systematic effort is being made by Indian politicians in downplaying the importance of English language and conse-

quently we are losing the capacity to communicate clearly, precisely and effectively. The paradox is that India is the land, which prided with writers and speakers of class such as R. K. Narayan and A. K. Ramanujan in recent years, and V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, C. Rajagopalachari and J. Nehru in the recent past. Evolution of the English language has gone to an extent to recognize a sub-genre, the Indian English, which was pioneered by Vidiadhar Naipaul from Trinidad.

How did this fall come about? Why are we losing a highly useful skill, which has been there with us for long? What is going wrong? I have no answers. I am nonplussed.

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The 'empty forests' of the northern Eastern Ghats

'The bow stretched and in a moment the blunt arrow whizzed vertically up into the trees, a moment later the man reluctantly picked the arrow, looked up and walked away. The bird flock in the canopy was momentarily silent and then flew away. The hunt was not successful and the birds escaped. The hunter then turned a trapper as he went about setting several small and big traps along the fields and forests. He came back the next day to check. It was the same story either the animals outwitted the traps or there were none to get trapped.'

The Eastern Ghats north of the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh (AP) has some of the finest forests tracts in the region. The forests in AP, especially in the Papikonda hills which also include the Papikonda National Park (1012 sq. km) are contiguous and relatively dense covering an area in excess of 10,000 sq. km. If one observes these forests from air or using *Google Earth*, they look like a large chunk of uniform green that is

dense and pristine. There are also few patches of existing and abandoned 'Podu' (shifting agriculture) practiced by several indigenous groups who sustain their existence based on cultivation, gathering and selling forest produce. As one moves north of Papikonda hills into Araku valley and Odisha's Koraput, Malkanagiri and Rayagada districts, forests give way to open hilltops covered with grass, phoenix bushes and fragmented patches of forests along the slopes. These hills were used as a lair by Maoists until recently, when they were largely flushed out of AP.

Over the last 2 years we made several visits to the forest area and what struck us was the lack of mammals or even large birds; it resembled some of the empty forests of the North East. After walking for over 50 km in the forests we only encountered evidence of wild boar, barking deer, cheetal and rarely saw a hare, squirrels and occasionally an extremely shy troupe of langurs. Rhesus

macaques along the roads and settlements were common, but were wary of people when encountered in the forests. The forests were eerily silent, the familiar calls of partridges and jungle fowls were completely missing; nothing moved except for leaves sailing down and creating some rustle on the litter. Most of our encounters of wildlife, including evidence of a tiger have been along the Godavari River in the Pocharam area, which tragically will go under water once the Polavaram hydel project comes through¹. We always encountered more hunters than animals, all of them armed with bows and arrows or with traps. On one occasion we even had to 'bless' a mass hunting ritual called 'itukalapandaga' as they went to the forests in search for any flying, crawling or climbing creatures for the pot. Hunting is often considered as the customary rights of people and therefore even the State Forest Department has been lenient on these issues and often remains a mute spectator. More-

over, many department staff are also part of the community and so it is difficult to enforce any regulations. Hunters are oblivious to what the rule and law books on wildlife protection say and live their life as their ancestors did. There is however one big difference; the number of animals and birds was much more during their ancestors' time than today; now there are just a handful of them and not surprisingly, the hunts are rarely successful. Though success of hunting was never high, there were also some who wanted to take us on a jaunt to catch a leopard for a price. So is all ritualistic hunting or is there a trade angle to it?

It appears that the vertebrate fauna, at least the large avian and most mammals populations are in the threshold of local extinction in the Eastern Ghats and much of it may be due to excessive offtake by hunters/poachers. Whether it is due to cultural practices alone or trade is not clear, but trade cannot be ruled out either. While studying the avifauna of the Chintapalli high ranges of Eastern Ghats in 1986, Beehler *et al.*² wrote: 'Illegal hunting of the larger vertebrates for food by tribal settlers as well as government employees will probably continue until virtually no larger vertebrates remain. The damaging effect of hunters increases as the remaining forest tracts become further reduced and dissected by timber and bamboo harvest as well as plantation development.'

Their predictions seem to be coming true for not only large vertebrates which

anyway are rare, but also true for the smaller ones such as birds. The forest has also shrunk by about 16% since Beeler's time (A. Vikram, unpublished) giving way to encroachments, coffee and other plantations, dams apart from land 'patta' to local indigenous communities under RFR Act, 2006 and supported by other incentives given by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency and the Tribal Welfare Department.

As we spoke with several people in the forests, it was clear they accept the loss of wildlife but are not really aware of the consequences both in terms of cultural changes and the legal issues involved with hunting. When we talked with few old timers, it was clear that hunting is not only rampant but getting unethical because hunts are unsuccessful. An old man and an ex-hunter from the area mentioned that nowadays people poison water and often the pick is good. It has been argued that wild meat meets the nutritional needs of the people and therefore hunting is often justified. However, most of the nutritional needs these days can be met with poultry and livestock, and the need to gather wild meat has largely been a carryover of the customs and a deeply ingrained habit that will not die even if the animals die out. An ongoing study in the area focuses on the status of mammals and birds in the region, which we hope will give some idea about the population and distribution of wildlife in the area. We also need to develop awareness and education programmes for the indi-

genous groups on a reciprocal learning mode to understand their take on wildlife, nature and our perspective to conserve them.

Given that the region is now safe to explore, it is imperative that ecological and biological studies are also undertaken in earnest that could answer not only several biogeographical similarities and differences with other regions of India, but also help in the conservation of biodiversity in the region. We believe and hope that not everything is lost to conserve the forests of Papikonda hills.

1. MoEF, Indira Sagar (Polavaram) multipurpose project on the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh given final clearance under FCA. 1980.F No 8-123/2005 FC, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, 2010.
2. Beehler, M. B., Raju, K. K. S. R. and Ali, S., *Ibis*, 1987, **129**, 197-211.

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