Vasudhā Calling

A newsletter for enabling sustainable living

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Vasudhā
Enabling Sustainable Living

Natural Resources Development Project
Vivekananda Kendra
LIVING IN TUNE WITH NATURE

Comprehensive Platform for Knowledge Sharing on Sustainable Living



The Jhabua Story: A Community Movement for Sustainable Development

Mahesh Sharma

When I first came to Jhabua in 1998, I encountered a society that had been misunderstood and often looked down upon. The Bhil tribal community was frequently described as uncivilised, backward and unwilling to contribute to society. Such perceptions had created a deep sense of inferiority among the people and mistrust towards the outside world.



Over the years, I realised that the real challenge was not simply poverty or the lack of infrastructure. It was the absence of mutual trust and confidence. I felt that before beginning any development activity, we had to build relationships with the people and recognise the strengths of their society.

Beginning with trust

From 1998 to 2007, I travelled from village to village, meeting families and spending time with the people. Gradually, we began to build mutual trust. I was particularly encouraged when villagers started introducing me as someone who respected their traditions and culture. This was an important change because social workers from outside the tribal community had rarely engaged with them in this way.

In 2004, we began working under the idea of *Vananchal Sashaktikaran*—strengthening the forest region by recognising the strengths of its people and traditions. We wanted to understand what was valuable in the community's culture, what strengths its traditions offered and how we could work together to build on them.

One of the first things we did was to engage young people in discussions about their villages. We encouraged them to look beyond their individual difficulties and think about the problems of the village as a whole. I often reminded them that a village, too, is a living entity. It has its own difficulties, just as an individual does.

These discussions revealed several challenges. Water scarcity meant that many families could cultivate only one crop in a year. A large number of people migrated to Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan in search of work. School dropout rates were also very high. The speaker's account of these discussions brought out the need to address these interconnected problems through collective action.

Dialogue, consensus and cooperation

We gradually developed an approach based on three principles: *Samvad, Sahmati and Sahakar*—dialogue, consensus and cooperation. We believed that people should discuss their problems, arrive at a common understanding and then work together to find solutions.

We did not want to take ready-made plans into villages. Our approach was to become involved in the community and allow ideas to evolve through people's participation. As our colleague Harshji Chauhan often emphasised, we should involve ourselves in the community and allow the work to evolve from within it.

This approach helped us rediscover the strength of traditional community practices. One such practice was *Halma*, a tradition of collective voluntary labour. When a family or village faced a difficult task, people came together to contribute their time and skills without expecting payment.

We connected this tradition with the growing challenges of water scarcity, deforestation and environmental degradation. Villagers recognised that conserving water required collective effort. People travelled long distances, carrying food prepared at home, to participate in water conservation activities. They worked together to create structures that could hold rainwater and help replenish the land.



I found this particularly inspiring. People who had often been labelled selfish and uncivilised were coming together to conserve water even in places from which they might not directly benefit. Their participation demonstrated a deep sense of responsibility towards nature and society.

Conserving the foundations of life

As the work progressed, we organised our efforts around five interconnected foundations: *Jal, Jangal, Jameen, Janwar and Jan*—water, forests, land, animals and people. We believe that the well-being of all living beings depends on the conservation of these five foundations.

We began with water conservation. Villagers started constructing and restoring ponds and other water-harvesting structures. According to our assessment, around 140 large ponds have been created, many of which retain water throughout the year.

The next focus was forest conservation. We encouraged villagers to plant trees in their own villages and protect them for six years to ensure their survival. Through these efforts, *Mata Vans* (community-protected forests) have developed in around 200 villages. Some of these green spaces cover substantial areas.

We also began paying attention to livestock. Animals need adequate fodder, water and care. We encouraged people to improve animal husbandry and recognise the importance of protecting all forms of life.

We describe this approach as *Sanvardhan se Samriddhi*—prosperity through conservation and nurturing. Our belief is that when we nurture water, forests, land, animals and people, the village becomes prosperous.

From village initiatives to a people's movement

Over time, the work expanded beyond water and forest conservation. In 2014, we organised a *Gram Samriddhi Mela* (Village Prosperity Fair). We invited people to identify the areas in which they could contribute. Some were interested in agriculture and livestock, while others chose education, healthcare, water or forest conservation.

We formed village teams and encouraged them to prepare their own development plans. Out of 1,320 villages in the region, around 900 now have groups working towards a long-term vision of village transformation. These groups meet, discuss priorities and work throughout the year to implement their plans.



We have also invested in young people. Around 25,000 youth have participated in our training programmes. Today, three generations are increasingly involved in community activities. Women, children and families are also becoming active participants in this movement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our community network helped distribute medicine kits to around 4,000 households and supported vaccination efforts. The experience demonstrated the importance of local trust and organised volunteer networks during a public health emergency.

Building villages for the future

In 2024, we began working towards a new vision for 2036. We want our villages to become places that people are proud to call their own—places with healthy natural resources, good health and education facilities, strong families and self-reliant communities.

Our work now covers several areas of development, including women's empowerment, children's education, health, agriculture and local enterprise. We are encouraged that villagers are taking up activities related to 15 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

One important lesson we have learnt is that development cannot be imposed from outside. Experts and institutions may have knowledge and experience, but villagers also possess valuable knowledge of their environment, traditions and needs. When these strengths come together, meaningful change becomes possible.

For me, the Jhabua experience is ultimately about changing the way people see themselves and their responsibilities. We want people to move from being beneficiaries of development programmes to becoming active contributors to their villages.

I believe that self-reliance grows from self-respect, and self-respect grows when we use our abilities for the welfare of others. When people come together in the spirit of *Halma*, they strengthen not only their natural resources but also the bonds that hold their community together.

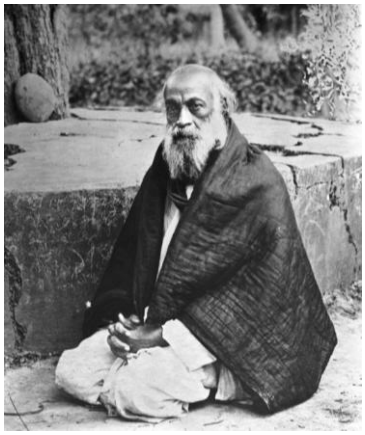
The Jhabua story is still unfolding. It has taken us 28 years of continuous effort, and there is much more to do. But the growing participation of people, especially young people and women, gives us confidence that this movement will continue.

Our experience has taught me that sustainable development begins when people recognise their own strengths, take responsibility for their common resources and work together for the well-being of their community.

Based on the webinar delivered by Shri.Mahesh Sharma through the Vasudha platform on 20th September 2026

Indian Culture in Practice[1]

Raghunandan Trikannad



Sri Mahendra Nath Gupta, or 'M' as he used to call himself, was one of the foremost house-holder disciples of Paramahaṅsa Ramakrishna. The credit of recording the teachings of Paramahaṅsa and popularizing them goes to him. After the passing away of the Master, the remaining years of his life were spent only on discussing the teachings with devotees. How sustainable living is in built in our culture is described below in a page of a diary of Swami Nityatmananda, one of the many ardent followers of M, who were inspired to join Ramakrishna Math and Mission. This dialogue took place on March 16, 1923, its topic is relevant for living sustainable life, and proves how our spirituality is founded on sustainability.

'M is teaching a Brahmachari how to wash utensils, plates, and dishes. How to finish the job quickly, using but a little water through personal demonstration. M directs: "First wipe the dal and vegetables with fingers from the utensils; second, wash with little water; third, rub with a pinch of earth or ash; fourth, take some water in a plate and wash off the earth or ash from the utensils; fifth and the last, give a final wash with clean water. Doing thus, one saves not only water but also labour, and the utensils wear out less.

"Water is not bought with money. Even so, using it thoughtlessly or wasting it is not right. Thereby, extravaganza enters one's nature. It is true that water has not to be paid for but its reaction on one's character is immense. Therefore, there should be neither wastage, nor stinginess. There was a person who used to wash in the Ganga after the call of nature. Thakur noticed it and telling him not to do so, he said, 'Here is a water-pot. Take it fill it with water at the goose-pond and then wash. *Ganga-vari, Brahma-vari*—Ganga water is Brahman itself. It is not for washing the bottom.'

"Thakur Ramakrishna, had an eye on all sides. Bhaktas who went to him were trained by personal demonstration. He would say that one who is sloppy, even careless in simple tasks of daily life will have difficulty in progressing spiritually. It is with such mind one has to approach God. If there is insincerity, He cannot be attained. Swami Yogananda was scolded so hard by Thakur for bringing a cracked vessel. He said to Yogen swami 'Is the shop-keeper Yudhishthira—a personification of Dharma? He will of course, try to sell his trash. Why did you not examine before bringing it here? You have eyes in your head' Immediately, he was asked to go back and bring a new one in exchange.

"The whole life should be spiritual, all work, as well as spiritual practice. Religious conduct for a while and the contrary afterwards will not do. Whether eating, walking, sleeping, dreaming, telling beads, worshipping, or reading scriptures, in every condition, the mind should remain centred round on one thought, one ideal: Realisation of God."

Shri.T.Raghunandan, a Chemical Engineer by training who also worked for Vivekananda Kendra in the formative years, managed a 10+2 Senior Secondary School in Rajasthan for thirty-one years with his wife Vasantha and has now settled down in Kerala for sadhana.

[1] Adapted from the book, "—M—The Apostle and the Evangelist" authored by Swami Nityatmananda, Vol-1, pp—72 to 74.

Nature's Lessons: Living Within a Web of Cycles[2]

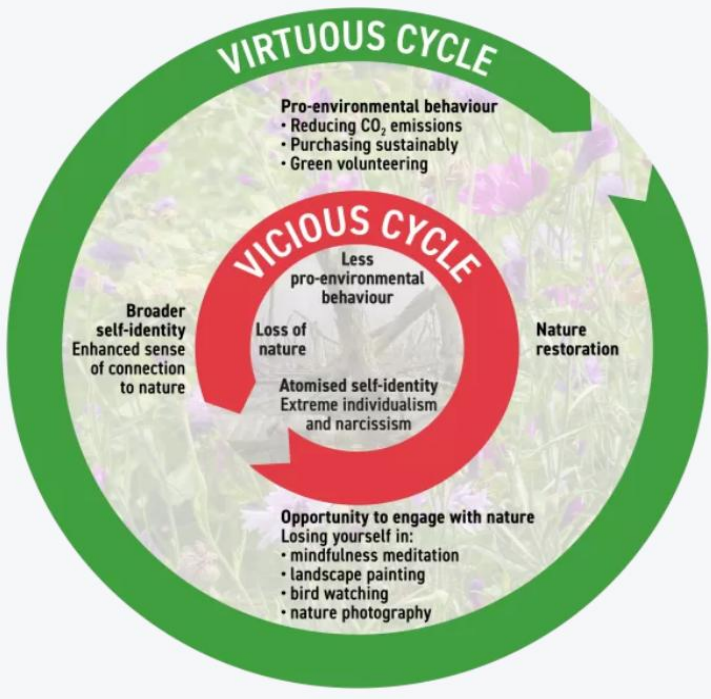
Dileep Kulkarni

A sunrise is more than a beautiful sight. As the sun rises, the air warms, plants begin their daily process of food production, birds become active and the natural world moves into another day. The changing phases of the moon, the arrival of monsoons, the cycle of seasons and the growth and decay of vegetation are all part of nature's continuous rhythm. These familiar events reveal a fundamental characteristic of the natural world: everything is connected through cycles.

I would like to invite readers to look beyond the beauty of nature and understand how its intricate systems function. Nature sustains life through interconnected cycles, mutual dependence and the continuous recycling of limited resources. I believe that the environmental crisis we face today has emerged because human beings have increasingly moved away from these principles.

Nature works through cycles

Consider the water cycle, the changing seasons or the growth of a plant. Solar energy, water and nutrients from the soil enable plants to grow. Plants provide food to animals and human beings. When plants and animals die, or produce waste, microorganisms decompose this organic matter and return nutrients to the soil. These nutrients are then taken up by plants again. Nothing exists in isolation; each process contributes to another.



The same principle operates within our bodies. Breathing, blood circulation, digestion and the elimination of waste are interconnected processes. The oxygen we inhale is linked to the carbon dioxide we exhale, while plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Our bodily processes are therefore connected to much larger environmental cycles.

Why does nature function in this way? The answer lies in the fact that natural resources are limited. They can sustain life over long periods only because they are continually renewed and recycled. The cycles of nature make this possible. We can even understand the environment as a network of cycles.

The principle of give and take

An important consequence of this interconnectedness is that every living organism both receives and contributes something. A honeybee obtains nectar from flowers and, in the process, helps pollinate them. Earthworms improve soil structure and contribute to the formation of nutrient-rich compost. Predators help regulate the populations of other species. These are examples of what I would call nature's system of "give and take".

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[2] *Based on Chapter 1, "The Environment," from Dileep Kulkarni's forthcoming book, a revised edition of his earlier work, Ahead to Nature*

The contribution need not always be a material substance. It may be an activity that helps maintain the functioning of the ecosystem. Every organism has a role, however small it may appear. The disappearance of a species can interrupt a process on which other forms of life depend.

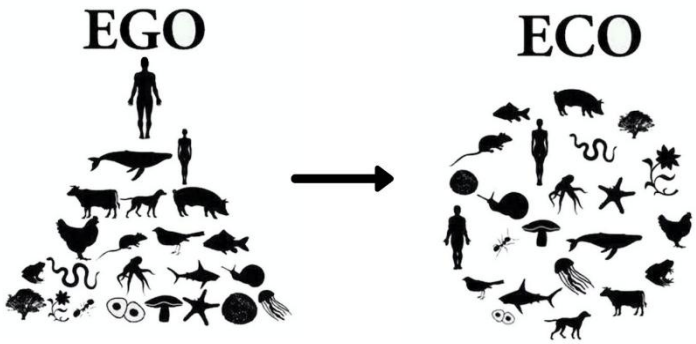


I use the idea of an *environmental niche* to explain this role. Each species occupies a particular place in the natural system and performs functions associated with it. A healthy environment, therefore, depends not simply on the abundance of a few species but on the presence and functioning of a wide variety of organisms.

This leads us to another important characteristic of nature: biodiversity. The diversity of plants, animals and microorganisms enables different ecological functions to be performed and contributes to the stability of natural systems. Nature is also decentralised. Food production, consumption and decomposition take place across countless locations rather than being concentrated in one central place.

Nature recognises limits

Nature does not permit unlimited growth. Individual organisms grow only up to certain limits, and the populations of different species are influenced by relationships within the ecosystem. For example, herbivores feed on vegetation, while carnivores help regulate herbivore populations. These relationships contribute to a dynamic balance.



This balance is not static. Natural systems continually adjust to changing conditions, including droughts, floods, storms and other disturbances. I describe this capacity to maintain a changing balance as *homeostasis*. Nature is constantly adapting while sustaining the conditions necessary for life.

Another important principle is that natural processes operate through cycles of growth, decay and renewal. What is produced eventually returns to the system through decomposition. This is why waste, in nature, becomes a resource for another process. Materials that cannot be absorbed into natural cycles, or are produced faster than nature can process them, become environmental problems.

How have we disturbed nature's balance?

Human beings are part of the natural world, but our relationship with it has changed significantly, particularly since the Industrial Revolution. The expansion of energy use, technology and industrial production has increased the scale and intensity of human activity. Instead of understanding nature as a system of which we are a part, we have increasingly treated it as something to be controlled and exploited.

I use the term “speciesism” to describe the belief that human beings are superior to other species and are therefore entitled to use them and their habitats primarily for their own benefit. In this approach, nature is valued largely for what it can provide to human consumption.

The consequences are visible in the depletion of natural resources, pollution, the accumulation of waste and the loss of biodiversity. Renewable resources such as forests, freshwater and soil can regenerate, but only at particular rates. When human consumption exceeds those rates, their sustainability is threatened. Non-renewable resources, including minerals and fossil fuels, are finite and are progressively depleted through extraction and use.

Pollution, too, is not limited to the release of toxic substances. We must also consider materials that do not readily decompose and biodegradable waste produced in quantities greater than nature can absorb. Even materials that are naturally degradable can become a problem when they accumulate faster than natural processes can break them down.

The crisis is also a crisis of human behaviour

One of the arguments I wish to emphasise is that environmental degradation cannot be addressed through technology alone. New technologies may solve particular problems, but they can also create new ones. A solution that addresses one difficulty without considering its wider consequences may simply shift the problem elsewhere.

I believe that the deeper causes of the environmental crisis lie in human attitudes, desires and patterns of behaviour. We have increasingly come to define a good life through ever-increasing consumption, material possessions and physical comforts. When we see ourselves primarily as consumers, our relationship with nature becomes one of taking rather than giving.

Indian philosophical thought, particularly the Upanishadic understanding of the relationship between the individual self (*Atman*) and the universal consciousness (*Brahman*), offers a different perspective. It reminds us that human life has a purpose beyond satisfying material needs. Recognising our deeper connection with the larger universe can encourage a more responsible relationship with other forms of life.

I also find it encouraging that the systems or ecological view is gaining attention. It understands the world as an interconnected whole rather than as a machine made up of independent parts. In this respect, contemporary systems thinking and the ecological perspective found in Indian philosophy have important common ground.

Rediscovering our place in nature

I have begun this discussion with the functioning of nature because I believe that understanding its principles is essential before we can think about changing our own way of life. Nature offers us enduring lessons. Resources must be renewed and recycled; every organism has a role; diversity contributes to stability; growth has limits; and every action has consequences for other parts of the system.

These are not merely ecological observations. They invite us to reflect on our own lifestyles and choices. The environmental crisis calls for more than cleaner technologies and better waste management. It requires a change in how we understand our relationship with the natural world. We need to move from a culture of unlimited consumption towards one that respects ecological limits and recognises mutual dependence.

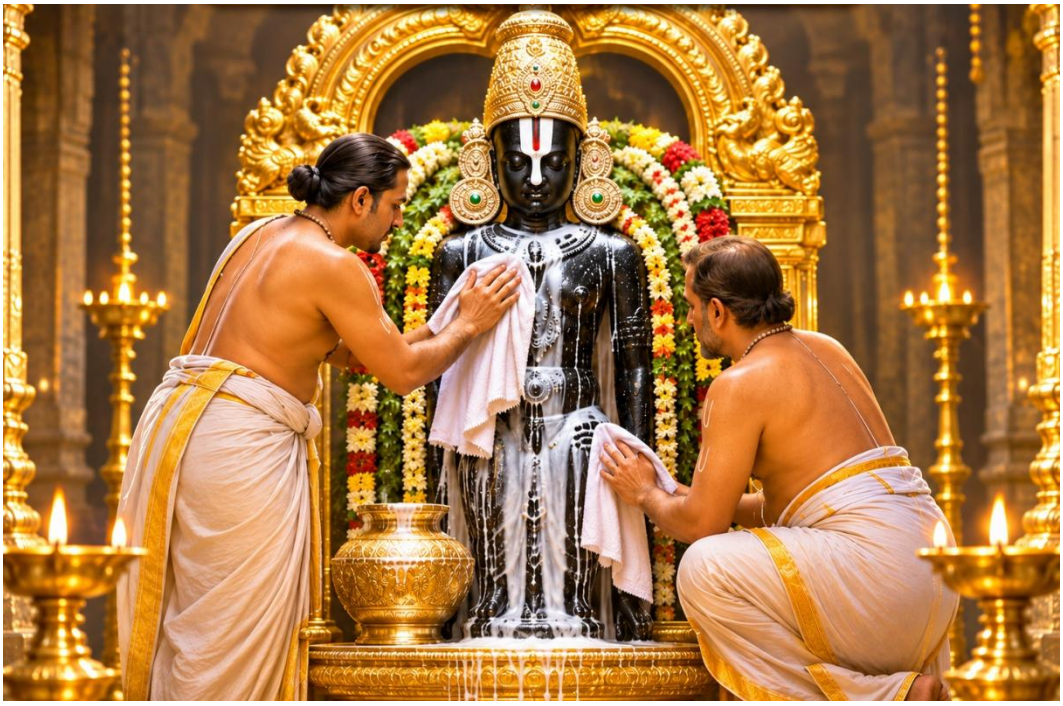
Perhaps the most important lesson is simple: we do not live outside nature, nor do we own it. We are part of its cycles, and our well-being depends on keeping them alive.



Shri.Dileep Kulkarni, Kudavale, Maharashtra has autored more than 35 books in Marathi and English on topic related to environment.

Cleanliness is Godliness

A. Madhan Kumar



A complaint reached Emperor Krishnadevaraya: the sacred idol at Tirupati was not being cleaned properly after ritual baths.

Determined to uphold purity, the emperor consulted religious scholars. They prescribed a remarkable test. Priests would clean the idol using progressively finer cloths. Finally, an officer would compare the used cloth with an untouched piece. Even the slightest stain meant repeating the entire process.

For them, cleanliness was not next to godliness; cleanliness was godliness.

Centuries later, we meticulously clean our homes while polluting streets, rivers, air and soil. Industrial waste and careless disposal threaten life itself.

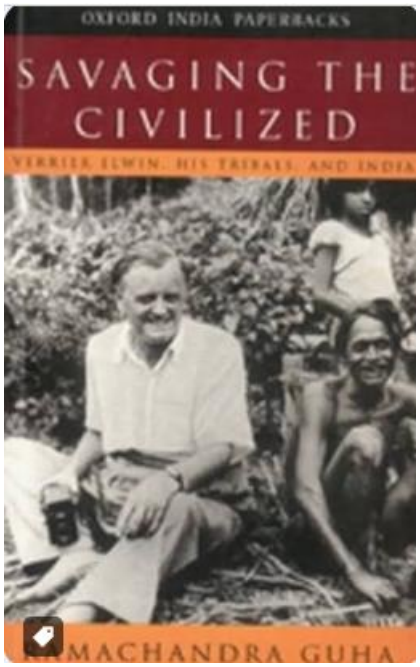
Yet hope remains. Waste segregation, recycling, pollution controls and community initiatives are emerging.

The lesson is timeless: true cleanliness extends beyond ourselves to the entire environment we share.

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Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India

N. Karthikeyan



What does it mean to live well? Is progress measured by economic growth, modern amenities and material possessions? Or should we also consider cultural identity, community relationships and the freedom to follow different ways of life? These questions lie at the heart of *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, in which historian Ramachandra Guha explores the life of one of the most unusual figures in modern Indian history.

Published in 1999, the book is both a biography and an account of the debates surrounding tribal communities, development and cultural diversity in India. Guha's subject, Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), was an Englishman who came to India as a Christian missionary but eventually made the country his home. He became an anthropologist, writer and defender of Adivasi communities, building relationships with people whose lives and beliefs differed greatly from those of the educated urban elite. His journey took him from religious service and Gandhian circles to extensive studies of tribal society and, later, an advisory role in the Indian government.

A life that crossed boundaries

Elwin was not an ordinary scholar who studied communities from a distance. He lived among tribal people, learnt about their customs and beliefs, and wrote about their art, myths, folklore and everyday lives. His personal relationships and willingness to question established conventions made him a fascinating but controversial figure.

Guha presents a man full of contradictions. Elwin had close connections with influential people, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, yet he also felt at home among communities that received little attention from the centres of political power. His life challenges the assumption that education, social status or cultural background necessarily determines how a person understands the world.

The book is not simply an account of an Englishman who became an advocate for India's tribal people. It examines the difficult questions that arose from his work and the disagreements surrounding his ideas.

What is development, and who decides?

One of the book's most important themes is the future of tribal communities in a rapidly changing India. Should Adivasis be encouraged to adopt the dominant society's way of life, or should they have the freedom to preserve their distinct cultures and traditions?

Elwin questioned approaches that treated tribal customs as signs of backwardness and assumed that progress required cultural assimilation. He believed that tribal communities deserved respect and that their futures should not be decided without understanding their needs and circumstances.

This debate remains relevant. Development can bring better healthcare, education, housing and livelihood opportunities. These are important gains. But development can also disrupt

established livelihoods, weaken community institutions and threaten cultural identities when it is imposed without sufficient consultation.

The choice need not be between preserving every tradition unchanged and rejecting modern development altogether. The challenge is to improve people's lives without treating their cultural identity as an obstacle.

Lessons for sustainable living

For readers interested in sustainable lifestyles, Elwin's story broadens the discussion beyond individual choices such as saving electricity, reducing waste or buying local products.

Sustainability also concerns how societies value different ways of living. Modern life often presents rising consumption and technological progress as universal signs of success. Elwin's experience encourages us to question this assumption. A community's well-being cannot be judged solely by the number of consumer goods its members possess or by how closely they resemble urban society.

Traditional knowledge, local relationships and cultural practices may offer valuable insights into living within particular environments. They deserve to be understood rather than dismissed. At the same time, it would be wrong to romanticise tribal life or assume that every traditional practice is environmentally sustainable. Communities must have the freedom to decide what they wish to preserve and what they want to change.

This is where the book connects with the idea of sustainable living: a good life is not defined by a single model of progress. Social well-being, cultural diversity, dignity and people's ability to shape their own futures matter too.

An enduring debate

Elwin's ideas were controversial, and Guha does not present his subject as a flawless hero. The book explores the tensions in his thinking and the difficulties of translating his convictions into public policy. His life raises questions about the responsibilities of intellectuals, the influence of personal beliefs and the challenges of balancing cultural protection with participation in a wider society.

These questions have not disappeared. Across India, debates continue over development projects, the rights of Adivasi communities, access to natural resources and the meaning of inclusion. Guha's account helps readers understand why these issues cannot be resolved simply by declaring one way of life superior to another.

Savaging the Civilized is a substantial work of biography and history, and readers looking for a practical guide to eco-friendly living may find that it requires patience. Its value lies elsewhere: in the questions it asks and the assumptions it encourages us to reconsider.

For *Vasudha Calling*, the book offers a timely reminder that sustainable living is not only about consuming less. It is also about respecting cultural diversity, listening to communities and questioning narrow definitions of progress. Perhaps the first step towards a sustainable future is to recognise that there is more than one way to live a meaningful life.

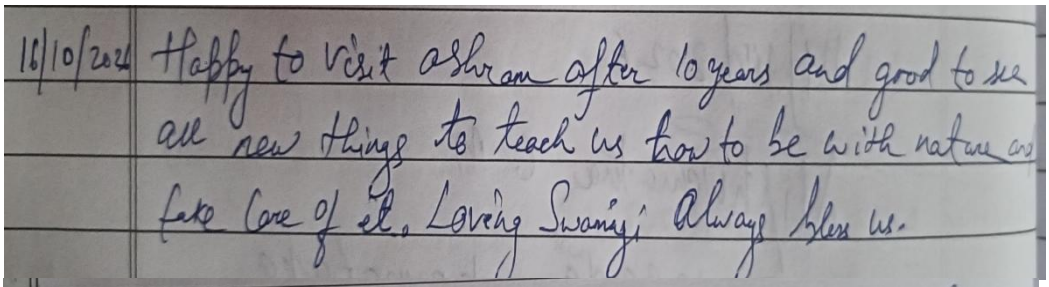


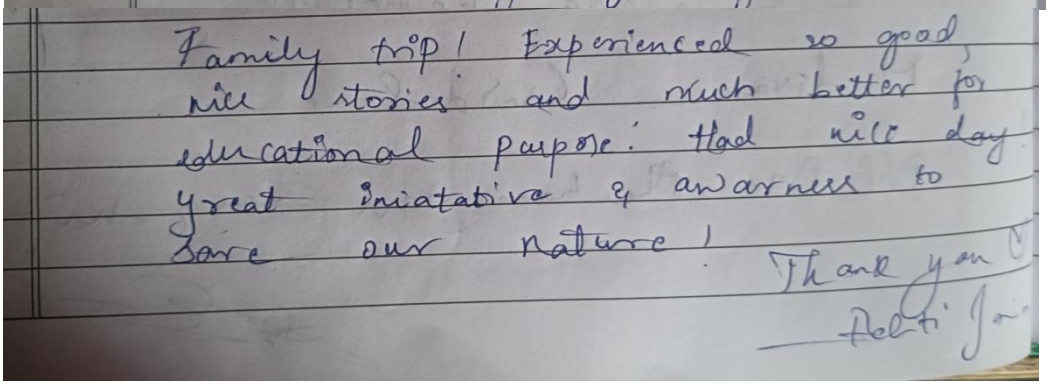
Shri N. Karthikeyan is a development economist who focuses on natural resource management, climate change, social protection, sovereign debt sustainability, microfinance, and sustainable lifestyles." E.mail id: karthinaga@zohomail.in

TESTIMONIALS

- **In the month of October 9,400 visitors visited the Vasudha exhibition.**

FEEDBACK


16/10/2024 Happy to visit ashram after 10 years and good to see all new things to teach us how to be with nature and take care of it. Loving Swamiji always bless us.


Family trip! Experienced so good, nice stories and much better for educational purpose. Had nice day great initiative & awarness to save our nature! Thank you

Selfie point



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VASUDHA – Discovering Green Warriors

VASUDHA – Vivekananda Academy for SUstainable Development and Holistic Advancement

VASUDHA aims to inspire and identify young Green Warriors by introducing college students to the book *Sacred Earth*, followed by an examination to deepen their understanding of environmental sustainability. In the month of October we organised examinations in 9 colleges of Tamil Nadu with 450 participants.



Vasudha