



The Chain of the Pendulum

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The pendulum is swinging faster and faster.

With a bit of preparation and a fair amount of hard work, I've now found myself in exactly the position I had dreamt up. The West Coast of India murmurs gently just below the coconuts on the sand dunes, the tropical sun is shining and the thatch hut restaurant has the banana pancakes on order. Living the dream, as it is, and yet I am still swinging between the extreme manifestations of this dream. It's a cliché to talk about the vast differences on display throughout India; it's not a surprise to be challenged by the diversity; and it's not at all unexpected to find that I'm struggling to describe the extremes.

The chain, then, is where the stress of perceiving and accepting all of this is concentrated. It's the mental flexibility and effort to make some coherent thread from all of these experiences and travels.

So I've decided to take those coherent threads and twist them into some sort of yarn, or rope. It's time for me to take a break from these little writing-ramblings. It's been half a year- from the summer solstice to the end of 2009, since I've really been up-to-date on this endeavour, and in that time a paradigm shift in ideas has slowly been evolving. The same energy that I'm using to share these observations, I'll resolve to write into a book.

After two months in midsummer Delhi, I was ready to escape it with a vengeance. I love the city, but I love it like I like camping on snow: there are interesting things to see, but perhaps not a place to live permanently. And there was still, the Landmark Trees of India project, needing to be kneaded into its inevitable second half. So off I went, to find a catharsis somewhere else: late summer, with my brother into the buzz of Mumbai, battling fevers in the city, then northwards through the muddy lowlands of coastal Gujarat and into the desert Land of Kings, Rajasthan, to climax with his three days in the hospital of Jaipur. Then returning to Delhi, saying farewell to him as he moves to teach in China for a year. At some

point in early August, there was the end of my scholarship; after one and a half years in India it was time to be on the outward trajectory.

But first, this required continuing on with the torturous process of extending my visa. This led to me escaping Indian Government office absurdities for three subsequent trips to the Himalaya. First, to travel from evergreen Manali over the highest mountains into the Tibetan-plateau treeless rocky desert of Ladakh. From Ladakh, into the paradise-valley of Srinagar, to the houseboats drifting on Dal Lake. Then, into the wooded oak mountains of Ranikhet, to meet a group of American wilderness medics for a recertification course. Into the mountains for the third time, through the gridwork boulevards of Chandigarh city, to the cool mountain summertime retreat of British Imperial power, Shimla, and across Himachal Pradesh to Dharmasala, where the Tibetan Government-in-Exile carries on its struggles. From there, I went down to the fertile grainfields of the Punjab, where the Sikh people developed their martial philosophies in the repeated warpaths of Muslim invaders. Their paramount Golden Temple, and several other gurudwara temples, were built with sacred historical trees as vital cornerstones, and on my return back to Delhi, I visited the banyan tree at Kurukshetra, where Krishna delivered the Bhagavad-Gita.

I had only returned to Delhi to bid it farewell. I handed off the keys, and the rental of the place for the winter, to a friend, and headed to Bangalore in the south. The last days of October was the much anticipated International Canopy Conference, a science and conservation conference for forest ecologists studying the treetops.

I had planned on attending this for almost two years, and was delighted to have the opportunity to make two presentations- one of the 2007 Willapa Bay work The Nature Conservancy, climbing trees and catching bugs in the coastal rainforests near Seattle, and on the Landmark Trees geography project. One striking observation to be made, as we listened to the more senior scientists, was a measure of despair. They realize things have gotten worse in the years of their career, and we now have the satellite imagery to watch it happen in appalling detail on a global scale. Climate change and population growth have developed, for the negative, at a rate to match the exciting developments in information technology and global environmental awareness. But hope for our planet's forest biodiversity is like a starfish-you cut away at it, and it and it just takes on new shapes.

From Bangalore, there's been a triplet of trips into the tropical rainforests. It's almost ridiculous to consider, but these three trips were part of a series of FIVE nested triangles I've charted from Bangalore towards the west coast and back. First, with a team of scientists from several institutions to the woodlands of Mudumalai National Park, where we could barely work for fear of wild elephants. We used laser technology to measure the structure of the forest canopy in the dry woodlands, coffee plantations, and montane wintergreen forests of the Nilgiri Hills. This was the some of the first I had seen of the montane tropical jungle, and in these ancient granite mountains, much of the forest cover had been lost to the countless tea plantations and eucalyptus groves.

Next triangle, to join the King Cobra scientists at the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station and help establish some measurement plots for their future forest science work. This was great fun, a few days in the powerful rain measuring trees and feeding leeches. When the work allowed and the sun came out, I joined Tengu from Treeclimbing Northwest (USA) on the ropes in the jungle as he taught a canopy access class to a squad of Indian students.

Afterwards, down to the coast, to the college town of Manipal (this must be the only one in India), the temples of Udupi (famed for its cuisine) and down the coast, revisiting north Kerala. On the coast there, two nights in the city of Calicut, or Kozhikode, where the grain and cloth warehouses abut the ocean, and across the jungles again through Nilambur, a town built around forestry. Here were two places remarkably appropriate for my pilgrimage- the giant teak trees planted by the British in 1840, and the entire museum dedicated to teak trees. Then, with a sigh, to Bangalore for another dose of air pollution, and to give an evening seminar at the city's oldest restaurant.

And the next day after that, triangle three. I am at the northern corner of it now, at the much-loved and world famous beaches of Goa, a former Portugese colony. Somewhere along the way I picked up a tiny little netbook computer, design inspired by a seashell, and now here I am living the dream...

There is an image so romanticized that I feel guilty even writing about it. I have moved my office to the beach. Unbelievable. The waves are scarcely thirty meters away, and to my left and right the beach is lit up with colored lights and candles. Countless vacationers are here, with huge smiles, tiny bikinis, soaring frisbees, strong cocktails, and relaxing agendas. It would almost appear that I am yet another person on vacation, but I am still working...sort of. I watched the sunset over the ocean with my feet in the water, pockets filled with shells and hundreds of trees scattered behind me throughout the subcontinent, from snowy Himalyan mountainsides to the tropical rainforests to the edge of Ocean.

So the pendulum swings away.

The chain of the pendulum, then, is where the meaning of percieving and accepting all of this is concentrated. It's the mental effort to make some sense of this variety of landscapes, people, experiences, emotions, challenges, and pleasures. If you've read this far, you've probably recognized that somewhere in between all those little snippets describing the Grand Tree Chase are thousands of real kilometers, dozens of days that actually happened and a large handful of people with their own stories (maybe you!).

I tell people I am writing a book, but really the Landmark Trees book will write itself; all that's needed is to line up the photos, the maps, and a bit of text. Maybe there's another story hidden away. But the real story to be told, it's getting more and more difficult, the pendulum is swinging farther and farther.

What is the pendulum?

It's me typing away and scheming documents and emails while in the company of Goan beach-vacationers, escaping from their offices and routines. It's the swinging between geographic extremes-icy rock desert mountains, and the emerald pulsing tropical rainforest. It's also the swing between cultures- the new perspectives and ambition of the modern high-tech generation of Indians, and the historical depth permeating the country. It's the difference between working with world-class science institutions and then finding myself alone on the beach trying to keep projects afloat via email. It's the contentment and pride of people with large families and the assessment of the long term relationship I have with my backpack.

The pendulum is also the difference between the wild mountain landscapes of Himalya Ladakh, and the silky white mist of Bangalore's air pollution. It's the blue moon at New Year's Eve and the midday crescent sun of the solar eclipse. It's sunshine at the southernmost beaches and the icy moonshine of Kargil in the far north. It's the smug selfconfidence of Indian chauvinism opposed to the striving ambition to be seen as a world power. It's meeting the yogis and their students, still and unmoving, while I'm spending more time on trains and buses than actually at destinations. It's the crowded outdoors and the quiet interiors behind doors. It's my overly detailed technical science skills and the true knowledge that the locals have of the forest. It's the self help and mental organization books for sale throughout the country, and the organic competencies of the coconut harvester and the fisherman. It's the story of the trees, solidly rooted, and my ongoing story, continually branching.

Like so many other foreigners I am seeing my future life inexplicably knitted into India's ongoing existence. But like so many other long term visitors, I am both enthused by, and exhausted by, the whirlpool nexus of people, history, geography, and life that is in India. Like a student, I realize there is always more to learn; like a pilgrim, I'm now a devotee; like a rainforest biologist, I've tasted the unparalled adventure of working in the tropics; like a satellite, I'm falling off towards the horizon.

There's a rhythm to the pendulum. There's a pulse of opposites, and it beats harder here than anywhere else on Earth I've seen. If we listen carefully, maybe we can realize that they are all synchronized- the sun, the moon, the satellites, and the waves...