



9000 ha. area with average size varying from 0.01 ha to 1200 ha.

At least 50 rare and endangered plant species of Meghalaya are confined to these groves and about 125 sacred groves have been surveyed and mapped by the Meghalaya Forests Department. One is not permitted to touch anything there. I was under the impression you can eat the fruits, but they don't. Some of these groves are rich in rudraksha bead, but even these cannot be removed.

Despite the strict laws and enforcement, sacred groves in Meghalaya are increasingly coming under threat as the tribal way of life changes. The area under sacred groves is also shrinking and quite a few have been turned into degraded forests. The erosion of traditional values and deterioration of sacred groves in recent times is, however, a matter of concern.

Goa too has sacred groves spread across the State. There are about 90 sacred groves listed in Goa, which is a big number.

Since they are important from the point of wildlife and environment, they need to be identified, restored and protected.

showed similar results, of blood pressure dropping. A third test on mature women showed the concentration of salivary cortisol had decreased by 26 percent, the average pulse rate was significantly lower.

The book 'Walking in the Woods' by Prof Yoshifumi Miyazaki details the concept of shinrin-yoku and while it admits that it cannot treat disease, it can have a preventative medical effect that makes falling ill less likely, and can help reduce the strain on health services worldwide that stress-related illness cause each year.

Shinrin-yoku can be very simply practiced. The book states that 'the purpose of forest therapy is to calm overstimulation from artificial and urban environments and promote relaxation. With this in mind, some of the more obvious activities include meditation, yoga, stretching and hammock time.'

All this did not happen overnight or without government support. The Japanese government has invested in developing Shinrin-yoku as a national health program, with funding for research and the development of designated forest therapy sites. There exists a Forestry Agency under the



THE JAPANESE WAY OF SHINRIN-YOKU

Many countries have got a high density of population and way low forest areas. But not all countries fall in this category. Japan for instance which was devastated by World War II and the atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, today has nearly 69 percent of its area as pristine forest coverage. This is over two-thirds of the total area. And how do we in Goa compare? Can we take pride that we have 33 percent of the area under forest coverage? It is pertinent to see how Japan manages to keep such a high percentage of its land as forest and we could even emulate that country.

The Japanese philosophy is that the tree is equal to a human being. They regard the tree on the same level as a human, whereas western civilization says God created trees and finally there is the human being who is superior to all other living beings. Not so with Japan, where the tree and the human are equal.

The concept that the Japanese follow is termed shinrin-yoku, a word coined as late as in 1982 and that very simply can be translated as 'forest bathing'. In Goa, our elders used to annually go for a sea bath in the summer months as a sort of therapy. In Japan, forest bathing is also a wellness therapy and involves little other than 'walking slowly through the woods, in no hurry, for a morning, an afternoon or a day'. While it started as a marketing gimmick to attract people to the forests, studies conducted showed that, 'our bodies still recognize nature as our home, which is important to consider as increasing numbers of people are living in cities and urban environments each year'.

In 2024, the Japanese government funded a \$270 million yen (\$2.5 million) research on nature therapy, which was supplemented by another 200 million yen. Researchers were able to build a climate controlled test room and carry out various tests and experiments.

Tests carried out on males showed that blood pressure levels of the subject dropped, the adrenaline concentration levels fell as did the cortisol levels after a day of forest bathing. The conclusion of the study was that 'a forest therapy session lasting a few hours offered physiological relaxation effects to male subjects with high blood pressure'. A test on office workers

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries that is responsible for promoting and developing forest therapy initiatives, including the Forest Therapy Base scheme. The Forestry Agency also conducts research on the health benefits of forest bathing and on the therapeutic effects of forests. The Japanese government has declared pockets or stretches, which are exclusively protected, as its natural habitat. These are natural habitats filled with biodiversity that are created by the government for the people who can go there for forest bathing, health walks as preventive medical health therapy.

FINLAND'S THERAPY FOR HAPPINESS

Communing with nature is not restricted to the Asian way of thinking and living. For, if Japan has Shinrin-yoku, then Finland has a concept called Jokamiehenoikeus. As per the United Nations World Happiness Report, Finland is the World's Happiest Country as the main therapy for happiness is its connection with nature, forests and

outdoor activities. Finland is a country rich in forests and the Finns are encouraged to spend time in nature for its calming and restorative effects and this practice is called "Jokamiehenoikeus" where in the activities like walking, hiking and forest bathing are common ways to connect with forests.

The concept of Jokamiehenoikeus, the word can be translated as 'everyman's right' or 'freedom to roam', permits its citizens and its visitors the right to freely access and enjoy Finnish nature. This includes the right to walk, hike, cycle, among other activities, on public or private land, as long as it doesn't interfere with the landowner's use of the property or cause damage to the environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During my time in Parliament, I had sought to know how much forest land in Goa has been encroached. The reply I received was that wherever there have been encroachments, the government is pursuing them. What is actually happening on the ground

is that the government is regularizing the forest encroachments. They first finished the community land, then they finished the revenue land and now they are encroaching on forest land. The High Court and the Supreme Court have come very strongly against these encroachments. Today we hear that the government will be wire fencing certain forest area just because the wild animals have strayed into villages and residential areas and destroyed farms. Wild animals are straying because humans have encroached on their habitat. We can't have wire fencing and hence I wish to recommend that the government must transform from being reactive to being proactive in protecting the forests and I make these suggestions.

The first is that the government should constitute an authority under the Forest Department that will be responsible for the protection of forest land. It may appear that this is duplication of work as the Forest Department is already protecting the forests, but what is happening today is that the Department is in a

manner of speaking allowing people to encroach upon forest land and to cut forest trees, because if there is any tree cutting that occurs, the Forest Department officials go there and collect money in the form of fines. My suggestion is that this authority must be made responsible for every square metre of forest land and every tree in the forest. The role of this authority should be to protect the forests and the tress, not to regularise encroachments and the felling of trees.

The second suggestion is that anybody cutting any tree in a forest or any tree anywhere should be penalised and not just in the form of fines. Should somebody encroach, should somebody cut a tree, immediate action has to be taken against them as per the laws and the rules. We may have to make new rules, but it has to be strict.

I now come to another recommendation. Goa is in a unique position to emulate the Japanese concept of shinrin-yoku or forest bathing and Finland's Therapy of Happiness Jokamiehenoikeus and I suggest that we blend

the sacred groves concept with that of the Japanese shinrin-yoku and Finland's Jokamiehenoikeus to give us here, in Goa, not just spiritual benefits but health benefits too.

My vision is to have 40 such small forests, green areas that will be biodiversity parks, one in each constituency of Goa. Before, we find that we have nothing left of the forests, I am of the opinion that the government must create these biodiversity pockets all over Goa. But it won't be enough to just have these biodiversity pockets, they have to be maintained and society has to play a role here. There has to also be discipline, if anybody even dirties the place, they should be penalized heavily and asked to clear the dirt.

These biodiversity parks that I am suggesting for forest bathing will not necessarily be the existing forests. The government can identify such areas for the people and maintain them for forest bathing purposes, for the wellness of the people. In these biodiversity parks the Authority must have the authority to issue fines to those breaking the rules. When a person goes for forest bathing, they should not be allowed to take any liquor or plastic or food with them. These will not be picnic places, they should go there to enjoy the forest. There have to be strict rules here and if anybody is found dirtying, polluting, strewing plastic, causing noise pollution, air pollution, water pollution, land pollution, they should be heavily fined and a person who is fined more than once should not be permitted into these forests again. The sanctity of these areas has to be maintained.

It is my belief that once such restrictions are in place in these biodiversity parks, people will fall in line. The idea is to bathe in the forests, to improve our wellness with that little time spent in a forest just walking or meditating.

Like a tree, I remain rooted in hope that we will be able to save what nature had bestowed upon us. But as I said, I want to go beyond, I want to create these spaces of trees so that our descendants will thank us for what we left them with. What I am suggesting is not just fighting to save trees, but planting a future with trees. I am convinced that Goa can do this. It is not too much to ask, all it needs is the will and application to make it.

