

## JOHN BUTTON'S RECOLLECTIONS OF THE EARLY DAYS - 26/3/17

**ARUN:** This mail is to introduce you to Ms.Lalitha Sridhar who is a Deputy Editor, in "The Hindu" a highly respected national paper of India. She is doing a piece on the greening of Arunachala.

We were wondering if you could give her a perspective on the effort as a person who has been involved right from the start and has played a supportive role over many years.

**JS:** Hi Lalitha, on reflection its more appropriate for John Button to do this piece. I was in Australia far away occasionally helping raise funds etc, he was on the ground for 7 years working with ARS. I spoke with John and he has agreed to come up with the 150 words quickly.

**JB:** John Button here, to jot out a few lines on the early work with greening Arunachala. I arrived in 1989 after a poetic letter from Apeetha Arunagiri inspired John Seed to contact me as a dirty-hands co-activist who may be interested in Arunachala. I was! So, here's those few lines:

*The scepticism of most locals for any efforts to green the rocky Arunachala, was the biggest challenge to overcome. Crazy idea, they said. We had several planting failures early on, planting in the wrong places with no chance of protecting our seedlings from goats or fire. Then we got it right, and all Apeetha and her friends' efforts to raise awareness with eco-theatre and lobbying interest began to pay off. Our seedlings grew. One day when a fire broke out, villagers from the nearest houses raced up on the mountain and beat it out; I knew then that the struggle was passing – people could see that a green mountain would benefit.*

*Connecting the planting directly with Siva by raising a huge nursery in the main temple was another big shift that accelerated the success until The Forest Way and others took up the momentum.*

**LALITHA:** Thank you for your beautiful thoughts.

I need a little help on understanding the dates and trajectory of the following two initiatives:

Arunachala Greening Society -- started when, by whom (a sense of founders and active members, naming key figures), when it ceased being active, current status, a couple of lines on what they achieved

Arunachala Reforestation Society -- same as above

Basically, a brief history of the initiatives that preceded Forest Way, with some sense of how the afforestation work transitioned to Forest Way and their current efforts...

**JB:** I'll try not to be too verbose, but nor will I restrict myself too much to give you information that you haven't specifically asked for, but which I know are important and may spark some inspiration in you as another possible angle for the article.

Arunachala Greening Society -- started in the early to mid 90s, I believe, first with Apeetha who involved different local people who's names elude me (Kasi was one, but I have no idea of his family name); physically their work involved establishment of a nursery near the Katshiva tank, working with reforesting the area near their, including the Inner Path . A little later I think she began working with Govinda, who later formed his own group that morphed into the Forest Way and all their wonderful

work; Govinda has all the details so please check with him. As far as I know, Apeetha continued working in the background lobbying bureaucrats and continuing to use her art to inspire all who she could reach.

Arunachala Reforestation Society – was undoubtedly the first visibly successful reforestation effort after the relatively low-impact efforts of the Forestry Department and an Australian ascetic named Nerikuttiswami, who lived for years on the mountain up above the main temple and who planted quite a lot of primarily eucalyptus on that slope (well intended if, misguided decision). His was a mainly a solo effort, and he was quite disillusioned with his lack of success and the resistance he encountered (not helped by his irascible character, I would say).

Apeetha inspired a number of friends around the Ashram (including Dev Gogoi, wonderful photographer, JJayaraman, librarian with Ramanasramam – both have continued ever since to make significant contributions) to become actively interested in the greening in around 1987-8, beginning with a small nursery down from the Ashram, and wonderful environmental puppet theatre shows which she took around villages and schools to try to awaken environmental consciousness.

Seeking funding and experienced activists, Apeetha wrote to the Rainforest Information Centre(RIC) in Lismore, Australia. RIC was a very active, non-violent but radically determined bunch of young idealistic activists originally formed to save the local rainforest and on the success of that campaign, to support local people around the world (New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Sarawak, Ecuador) to preserve their rainforest homes. Apeetha's beautiful letter essentially said that Arunachala was never a rainforest, and never would be, but she believed that unless places like Arunachala were forested, there was little chance of saving the existing rainforests elsewhere.

During a Deep Ecology workshop held by John Seed on my land, he remarked: "You love India, and you've surely planted a lot of trees. Have you ever thought of planting trees in India?" I responded: "Not specifically, but tell me what you have in mind?" John asked: "Have you ever heard of a mountain called Arunachala?" I declared: "Take me home."

The greening began with a dream, was taken up by people who believe in being a part of the change for a better world. The dream comes true. Anything's possible if we dare to dream it.

My work as co-ordinator of the Annamalai Reforestation Society (ARS) was based on Permaculture, simply and heartfully. It works, however deprecating some may be towards it (Claude Alvares in the past was very critical), it can work if applied with sensitivity and awareness. Arunachala proves it, and there are many other examples.

As success began to be obvious, the ARS had to transform into an officially sanctioned NGO. At various stages, the retired Indian Railways officer, SV Kannikeswaran, the lawyer Vishwanathan, the SBI officers Nawazuddin, as well as SK Chandrashekar, have all devoted their time and efforts to the continuation of the ARS.

Govinda originally was approached to take over my role with the ARS, however he was wise enough (!) to recognise that it was time for a fresh approach, and the result of that decisions led to the wonderful work that has evolved from then. The education, playground, arboretum .... And all the rest. I'm sure Govinda will fill you in on details I have no idea of. Apeetha and the ARS were surely the beginning of the success of the Greening Arunachala.

I apologise, Lalitha, for all these words, but I felt that I could only do justice (partially anyway) to answering your questions this way. Of course you can feel free to use it as you wish, or not as the case may be. I hope it helps, and again, contact me any time. It's so long since I was at Arunachala (perhaps six years), and am looking forward to being there again by the end of this year.