

Sanctuary for plastic

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The sacredness of the forest at Bhimashankar is spoilt by tons of plastic garbage.

Photo: Ashish Kothari



ON THE RIVERBED: Plastic, plastic all the way. Photo: Ashish Kothari

Have you ever seen a tree adorned with plastic bags instead of flowers? On a recent visit to the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary near Pune this is what I saw. This sanctuary was declared for the Giant squirrel (*shekru* in Marathi). There is also a Shiva temple there that is visited by many. Behind the temple, stretching for hundreds of hectares is a sacred forest, protected for centuries because it is considered to be holy.

There is a path leading from the temple through the forest, to a lovely spot on a rocky riverbed. During the rainy season there are waterfalls and in the summer pools of water. In the forest you can always hear the sound of different birds, and occasionally the rapid tuk-tuk-tuk of the *shekru*. It would be an ideal get-away. Well, almost.

Spoilt idyll

All along this idyllic path one sees plastic bags and garbage! Even at Gupt Bhima, the spot on the riverbed where the god Shankar is supposed to have disappeared and reappeared. I asked the forest guards accompanying me where all this plastic came from. Apparently the devotees carry their offerings to the temple in plastic carrybags. The temple authorities themselves throw plastic into the *mullah* behind. They are oblivious to the fact that the rains carry it downhill through the sacred forest. Many bags get stuck on branches, while others get stuck on the rocks, and yet more are carried deep down into the valley.

Can you imagine the number of *shekrus*, civet cats, and monkeys that must have choked on these bags while exploring the food left in them? How many centuries will it take for this garbage to degrade, all the time leaking poisonous elements into the water? How many years will it take to bring some wisdom to the temple authorities, who are supposed to be enlightened human beings? I do not know.

But, I do know that I will do what I can to rid Bhimashankar of plastic. I hope to join the efforts of Pune groups and the forest department that hold an annual awareness camp during Maha Shivaratri, to control the plastic dumping. I hope I can persuade them to take up such activities through the year. I hope that more and more shopkeepers will adopt a wonderful innovation by an *adivasi* — a bamboo basket that can be used instead of a plastic carrybag. And I hope, for the sake of the *shekru* and its precious forest, that we will once again revive the sacredness of the Bhimashankar forest.

What you can do

Do you know of a place of worship where plastic and other garbage is a problem? Do a survey, and try to persuade the people managing the place to reduce and recycle the waste. If they do not agree, highlight the problem in the media, or talk to government officials to take action.

If you know of a place where action has been taken, let us know!

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group