
The Indian Astrobiology Research Centre (IARC)

United Nations: International Year of Forests (IYF 2011)

“Everything you can imagine is real.” *Picasso*

When I studied and worked as a physicist and teacher, the bonds between ecology and poetry seemed somewhat ionic: there might be the occasional ‘electron’ transferred between them – and a highly energetic and mutually attractive event it could be, too – but there wasn’t, really, a thoroughgoing, core sense of sharing. Three decades on, the various attempts to combine the two disciplines seem to have become a little more covalent in nature: to some extent, their respective charges appear to be more interlinked. The results of this altered relationship (and, of course, I speak metaphorically here) do begin to appear less like the inorganic products of ionic forces (rocks, oxides, salts) and more like the organic outcomes of covalent association (proteins, chlorophyll, flesh).

As you can see, the freelance writer-educator I’ve now become knows how to tempt the (mostly lapsed) physicist in me into occasionally fanciful imagery and (it has to be admitted) a willingness to make observations that aren’t altogether scientific in their expression. There’s probably a deal of distortion, or ‘red-shift’, in what I say about poetry and ecology; but I hope, like red-shift itself, that the distortion is very precise and revealing. My experiential data is coloured intensely by my career-shift from science to poetry, which (on their surface) might seem very different fields of endeavour. Naturally, relating those two sets of experience will sometimes be a matter of experiment and risk. However, unperturbed, I’m delighted to be invited to offer a few reflections on the Indian Astrobiology Research Centre’s contribution to the United Nation’s *International Year of Forests* (IYF 2011) initiative. I have to confess, I’d no idea that there was an autonomous, virtual institute dedicated to astrophysical research based in Mumbai; but the more I found out about the IARC, the more I sensed a ‘covalent’ feel to it.

I was encouraged, too, that the IYF project makes the international aspect of forests very overt. Poetry could learn from that. Given that poetry is all about language’s deeper levels, or at the very least its plural powers of communication, I’ve always found any literary insularity and inward-lookingness (for all its occasional pragmatism) rather strange. By peering beyond our national concerns, and into space, the IARC gives itself a way to transcend any near-sighted barriers to opportunity, change and mutual enrichment. Moreover, if astrobiology is indeed “the study of the origin, evolution and distribution of life in the universe” (IARC website) then it has much in common with literature in general and poetry in particular. Poetry plays language over consciousness (much as a scientist plies with instruments upon cosmic matter) to glean what life there is to be found among, and through, words. Just as an astrobiologist might celebrate the discovery of a distant star that dims slightly and temporarily (suggesting that a life-bearing planet may be crossing its face), so the poet rejoices when a line of poetry modulates the bright sensations of language, its tiny flicker in the ear suggesting immense, complex discoveries far beyond what’s immediately observable. Straining to discover, to seek one’s kin – whether through telescopes, within forests or through a poem – is itself an imaginative act. That very enterprise of ‘wishing to know’, and to be known, creates its own realities. And so, it’s not just the scientific results of an activity that matter, but its refreshed and refreshing perspectives. In this, in some ways, we must ourselves become the ET, the extraterrestrial.

The great physicist David Bohm is not alone in having stipulated a deep unity at the base of all things, a profound concurrence behind all forms of scientific, artistic, social, natural and personal reality. Given that astrobiology is concerned with understanding “the future of life on Earth”, it has done well to join hands, here, with forests and poetry, whose shared concerns are to make contact with, and to spread, communicative life everywhere. We cannot say for sure whether any visiting ET would best understand us through a mathematical equation, a well-tended tree or a self-made poem; what is in our power, however, not least through projects such as this, is to better understand ourselves. In this most stringent and rewarding enterprise, I see no reason why we shouldn’t lift our dark eyes to poems, breathe freely from the leaves, and read deeply of the stars.