

# EFSCHUMACHER

## THE RETURN OF THE TREE

TEN YEARS or so ago I received, most unexpectedly, a letter from America, sent by Richard B. Gregg. It couldn't be the Richard Gregg, friend of Gandhi and author of a number of books which I had read with great benefit to myself? Well, it was. The letter was very simple. It said: "Gandhi used to say: 'When you cannot make constructive use of your books any more, give them to someone who can.' I am an old man and cannot do much any more. I have looked through my library and have picked out a number of books which will be more use to you than they are to me now. May they help you in your work," — or words to that effect. A few weeks later, a book parcel arrived and there they were, exceptional books, marvellous books, books which I should never have found myself. Among them was one with the title *Tree Crops — A Permanent Agriculture*, by J. Russell Smith.

I confess, I did not read this one right away. Its subject seemed to me too remote and, I admit it, too improbable. But eventually I did read it, and it made so much sense to me that I have never been the same since. *It made sense*, because it did not merely state that "civilised man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints" — a remark I had found confirmed in innumerable places throughout the world; no, it did much more than that: it showed what could be done and what should be done. Most improbably, as it seemed to me, the answer had been there all the time and was still available to us: Agriculture is for the plains, while silviculture is for the hills and mountains. When the plough invades the hills and mountains it destroys the land . . . just as efficient agriculture depends on human ingenuity and work — in finding the best methods of cultivation, in plant breeding, and so forth — so an efficient silviculture depends on just the same kind of effort. Without the effort, nothing much can happen.

J. Russell Smith's book made a tremendous impression on me. His assertion —

"Therefore, the crop-yielding tree offers the best medium for extending agriculture to hills, to steep places, to rocky places, and to the lands where rainfall is deficient. New trees yielding annual crops need to be created for use on these four types of land."

As my work took me all over the world,

everywhere I could see it, thanks to Russell Smith: Agriculture in mountainous, rocky, or dry regions is a disaster, but trees are salvation. And 'trees yielding annual crops' did not have to be created; they existed already. But care and attention, selection and plant breeding, the application of methodical science, could improve them beyond our imagination.

All my life has been a journey of discovery of *the generosity of nature*. I started out thinking that we had to do everything ourselves and, of course, we couldn't. But then I discovered that everything will be done for us, provided only that we realise our 'nothingness' and thereupon start to search for a way fitting-in with the great processes of Nature, and making the best of them, for our purposes.

Travelling through India, I came to the conclusion that there was no salvation for India except through trees. I advised my Indian friends as follows:

"The Good Lord has not disinherited any of his children and as far as India is concerned he has given her a variety of trees, unsurpassed anywhere in the world. There are trees for almost all human needs. One of the greatest teachers of India was the Buddha who included in his teaching the obligation of every good Buddhist that he should plant and see to the establishment of one tree at least every five years. As long as this was observed, the whole large area of India was covered with trees, free of dust, with plenty of water, plenty of shade, plenty of food and materials. Just imagine you could establish an ideology which made it

obligatory for every able-bodied person in India, man, woman, and child, to do that little thing — to plant and see to the establishment of *one tree a year*, five years running. This, in a five-year period, would give you 2,000 million established trees. Anyone can work it out on the back of an envelope that the economic value of such an enterprise, intelligently conducted, would be greater than anything that has ever been promised by any of India's five-year plans. It could be done without a penny of foreign aid; there is no problem of savings and investment. It would produce foodstuffs, fibres, building material, shade, water, almost anything that man really needs."

Finally, as a 'fuel economist', I should like to say this: Since fossil fuels, the mainstay of the 'modern system', have ceased to be cheap and may soon cease to be plentiful, many people are becoming interested in *solar energy*. They are looking for all sorts of wonderful contrivances to collect solar energy. I am not sure that they always appreciate the fact that a most marvellous, three-dimensional, incredibly efficient contrivance already exists, more wonderful than anything we can make — the tree. Agriculture collects solar energy two-dimensionally; but silviculture collects it three-dimensionally. This, surely, is 'the wave of the future'.

By means of trees wild life could be conserved, pollution decreased, and the beauty of many landscapes enhanced. This is the way, or at least one of the ways, to spiritual, moral, and cultural regeneration. Ω

Foreword to *Forest Farming*, see book reviews page 31.

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