

FOREST GUMPTION

Dr Nanditha Krishna is an environmentalist, historian, researcher and academician. But mostly, as **Neeti Jaychander** finds, she's a crusader for India's most precious resources

Want to help the environment? Start by leaving it alone. Dr Nanditha Krishna has spent a lifetime trying to explain what makes forests irreplaceable. You can't mow down miles of lush vegetation and try to make up by planting trees elsewhere. You also can't strip a land of its mineral wealth and pretend that it will remain as fertile. Import your coal, if you must, she says, but leave the forests alone.

I first met Dr Nanditha Krishna five years ago and we bonded over our common crusade against cruelty to animals. Hers has been raging for much longer; she credits an idyllic childhood for the causes she fights for today. "My great grandfather, Sir CP Ramaswami Aiyer (a prominent lawyer and statesman of the Independence era), and I used to go on long walks through the Nilgiris," she remembers fondly.

In the memory of those walks, in 1989, Nanditha established the Environmental Educational Centre with the country's environment and forests' ministry. The point was to ignite impressionable minds like hers had been those many years ago. It conducts programmes all over south India and speaks to schools, local communities



and women's groups.

Nanditha's contribution to the environment doesn't end with research. She has restored 52 groves over 20 years. "Environmental education is becoming a classroom subject. For me, it's about going out and loving the trees, plants and animals. Earlier, we were the only people in India restoring groves. Today, we encourage other

"Environmental education is becoming a classroom subject. For me, it's about going out and loving the trees, plants and animals."

organisations in different parts of India to do the same." Her voice is charged as she touches upon a topic close to her heart, "There are so many parts of India with dry and waste lands; we should use those. All the mining resources are in forest areas, and once you touch a forest, it's finished. When you mine, the minerals and toxins come out from the earth. So the land becomes dead; it is very difficult to rejuvenate. Import your coal if you must."

While a forest is better off without intervention, the people living in it are a different story. Nanditha works closely with tribals in places like

the Nilgiris. "They are terribly marginalised, there is heavy alcoholism and their numbers have dwindled to just a few thousands per tribe. And this is just in one area, the Nilgiris." Due to unemployment, most of the tribals were becoming guides for poachers. "I studied traditional arts and crafts of the tribes, and found that their folk arts could be used to create a livelihood. Today, their products are sold across India at handicraft emporiums and exhibitions. With alternative means of income, they have given up poaching, and the number of tigers in the Nilgiris has also gone up."

That's not all there is to Nanditha. She founded India's first school for children with learning disabilities in 1985 with the Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre for Children. She is also the author of several books on culture, mythology, folk arts and, of course, her beloved trees and animals.

With all these roles, Nanditha still believes her most important contribution is to animals and plants. "The harm we have caused to animals is unforgivable. I have tried to do my bit by restoring their habitats and reducing their suffering. I have given back to the earth what I have taken." ■