

Blackburn Shola 1986 – 2014
Enduring Ancient Heritage to Burgeoning 21st Century Expansion
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Our first visit to Blackburn Shola was in 1986. We took the path out of Prakashapuram that runs alongside the eastern flank of Blackburn marsh. The whole hillside above was one huge Wattle plantation (*Acacia mearnsii*). Our guide, local resident Janet Rushforth, took us around the Shola proper as our destination was the peak above the Shola. Only when the track crossed the stream before ascending was there any hint of the magnificent Shola that began there upstream of our crossing. Bob experienced his first ever leech bite, the first of thousands to come. The peak was also covered in Wattle.



Streamside interior of Blackburn Shola

THE OLD SHOLA

It was not until the mid 1990's we discovered the Shola proper as we jeeped around everywhere to maximize the number of Shola species in cultivation, for the germination data published in the Flora of the Palni Hills (1999). Blackburn Shola had a number of species unique or nearly so to itself.



An ancient *Isonandra perrottetiana* here modeled by Garvi of Tehri University Forestry 5.03.14



Deep interior of the Shola. Note the clear Shola floor under old trees. Very typical of old Sholas.



And again



Elaeocarpus munronii a rare tree in the Palnis. Rain forest proportions.



Arachnoides aristata one of many fern species found in the Shola.



Kunal from Tehri University providing scale



An ancient *Vaccinium leschenaultii* (Blueberry) indicating that this was once grassland perhaps many hundreds of years ago



Tanya providing scale



Kunal again



Even in death spectacular

THE NEW SHOLA

From 1986 to 2000 we never followed the path through the Wattle plantation above the marsh again. In March 2000, exactly 14 years ago, we visited Blackburn with a group of people which included Navroz Mody of the PHCC. We climbed up through the Shola to the peak we had visited (by another route) in 1986. To our surprise the Shola extended nearly all the way to the top, some 300m of elevation. We decided to come down taking a diagonal route towards Blackburn marsh through the Wattle plantation.

This was easier said than done; in June 1996 a fierce cyclone had hit Kodaikanal. It brought down millions of trees, mostly plantation species, and of them mostly Wattle. Everywhere now our way was blocked with fallen trees and we struggled to pick a way down. Struggle though it was we were totally overjoyed to see tens of thousands of Shola saplings coming up of every conceivable species. We had been aware of Shola coming up in plantations but we had never seen it in such a spectacular form.

In the 14 years since we have shown dozens of people this remarkable phenomenon. No-one has questioned the veracity of our observations here including the two young students from yesterday. Each year it gets a little harder to imagine that all this was once a Wattle plantation. Surviving Wattle trees are very rare now, and those that have fallen are rotting away. The conversion to Shola is strongest at the old Shola margin, but now extends to about 1km out towards Prakashapuram.



This is the most advanced part of the new Shola, very close to the old margin. Note the density of the vegetation compared to the old Shola. The larger trees are very often *Symplocos cochinchinensis*.

One extra point to be made is about the lack of an eco-tone. The Sholas of the Palni hills were all surrounded by plantations right up to their edge, destroying the sharp edge between Shola and grassland many years ago.



This photo and the next show a well established clump of the endangered orchid *Chrysoglossum maculatum* growing from the roots of a fallen Wattle.



And from above. We found this clump about 10 years ago



A very rare surviving old Wattle completely surrounded by young Shola.



Actinodaphne malabarica, only a few trees in Blackburn Shola and nowhere else in the Palnis. Now thousands are emerging in the new Shola like this sapling.



Hundreds of Rhododendron are scattered throughout the area indicating that grasslands prevailed here until very recently.



Chrysoglossum again nurtured by the stump of a dead Wattle. Found 5.03.14.



The dead Wattle centre probably played a role in nurturing the Eucalyptus to the left and the *Neolitsea zeylanica* to the right. A few young Eucalyptus are present in the new Shola but pose no threat.



The density of the Shola regeneration is such that most will have to give way as the new Shola matures.



Cryptocarya stocksii. Only a few trees in Tiger and Blackburn Sholas. Now thousands coming up in the new Shola.



The remains of fallen Wattle can still be seen amongst this exuberant regeneration.



A profile of the emerging new canopy. Note the *Eucalyptus grandis* on the other side of the valley.



Casearia zeylanica. Another fairly rare species emerging above a dead Wattle tree.



Typically forest ferns showing up at least 1km from the old Shola margin. We can only guess at how many hundreds of acres are covered by this new Shola



Blackburn marsh 1850m looking towards an ancient grove of *Elaeocarpus tuberculatus*.



Looking back across the marsh from the *E. tuberculatus*, note the bright green of *Daphniphyllum*. Note especially how the alien species ie Eucalyptus combine so harmoniously with the native.



Lots of *Daphniphyllum* and the odd Eucalyptus at least 1km from the old Shola margin.



The upper skyline there can still be seen some old surviving Wattle trees. They pose absolutely no threat to the regeneration below them.



And again. Ragged crowns of old Wattle still visible but not for very much longer.

We now find it very disconcerting that the few surviving Wattles there are thought by some to be a threat to the Shola and are set to “invade”.

Yesterday we saw not a single seedling of Wattle in either the old or new Shola and never have and we are totally confident we never will.

It is with even greater consternation that the clamour for the eradication of the old plantations has taken on a legal form. This legal action threatens healthy “novel eco-systems” being nurtured under Pine, Eucalyptus and *Alnus nepalensis* as well as Wattle.



Regeneration under Eucalyptus on the 12 mile round



Under Pine (1973) at the Poombarai resthouse



And under Alnus on the road to Poombarai

We know what happens when plantations are cut. They renew themselves along with tons of weeds. The process of naturalization is reversed and recovering hydrologies are again subjected to vigorous young plantation growth.

Why are people so anxious to be rid of plantations? We suspect they think the landscape will return to its original state. This is absolutely wrong. If people want to restore extirpated grassland they will have to bite on the bullet of pro-active restoration. This necessarily involves the raising of grassland species in nurseries, planting them and actively repressing the re-invasion of the plantation species that has been cut along with the other weeds that will come up. This is not easy but nor is it impossible as we have shown at Vattaparai grassland/marsh restoration since 2006. There still are plantations (far from a “mother” Shola) where the establishment and conversion to Shola is at an early stage. The option of actively re-grassing these areas is there.



VCT grassland nursery



Grasses waiting to be planted

We have not been able to plant at Vattaparai for 18 months, we have thousands of grass plants waiting to be planted. We have had excellent rain and now early in the rainy season is a good time to plant. We urge our colleagues in the FD to expedite the re-instatement of our permission to plant (and weed) at Vattaparai and plant Shola saplings (and weed) in the degraded Bombay Shola



Grass planting with the Forest department 9.9.2008. Note the young Wattle in the background making a comeback.