

They killed the last Dragonfly

By Dr. PRASANNA COORAY

I sat at my table by the window. Strangely, the thin stretch of garden up to the fence looked desolate to me. The usual shade that was so soothing to my weary eyes was missing. Instead the glare of the scorching sun frowned at them. Yet, they looked around inquisitively. The home folk had followed the instructions of the "dengue eradication team" that visited the area the previous day. What else is to be expected of them, when the powerless citizens are left with little or no choice, especially when they have to do as an all powerful Act (on prevention of mosquito breeding) says? Non compliance would mean litigation that may result in a thumping fine or imprisonment or both!

The banana bushes that provided shade to the garden and shielded blazing sun rays from my room were no more. They had been butchered. Hacked and slashed ruthlessly, they were lying lifeless where they once used to stand majestically. Their leaves were just thrown here and there. The same fate had befallen the manioc plants. They too were piled together with the felled banana trunks, till they were dry enough to be set ablaze. That was the end of the "api wawamu; rata nagamu" we embarked on, in our own way, within our humble premises.

Although it was not as bad as it had been the previous day, still the pungent smell of the previous day's chemical fogging lingers. My nose did not worry much about that. But my eyes continued to gaze around curiously and impatiently. That time of the day, like a prayer, if I came near the window there was this regular visitor who would come to greet me. It was a dragonfly. Its musical buzz and the serpentine dance always enthralled me,

so I would spend a few minutes admiring its song and dance. It was such a frequent visitor that I assumed that it was part of our family. I glanced around watchfully. But there was no dragonfly. I looked more curiously, wanting to see my little friend. But the dragonfly was not there. It had disappeared. Is it because of the loss of its habitat or due to the lethal effect of the malathion fog, or the baytex spraying, I did not know what the real cause was. But, the dragon fly was no more. That was for sure!

Some of the activities that

are carried out today in the name of dengue control have given rise to a cleansing frenzy. The dengue eradication teams that visit houses during the day give all kinds of advice supposed to be aimed at controlling the spread of dengue. However, the integrity of these teams as well as the advice provided by them is dubious. Who comprises these teams? How competent are they to advise people on what to do and what not to do? Your guess is as good as mine. As it was related to me by an employee of the National Museum, a team that visited the National Museum recently had asked the workers if they had seen the "black and white mosquito". The deadly "black and white mosquito", they had told the gullible museum workers, spread dengue and bred in banana bushes. So, they had ordered them to destroy a good plantation of bananas that had been in the museum land.

Destruction of the vegetation, environmentalists believe, could further worsen the dengue situation for number of reasons. Most of the natural predators of mosquitoes live in the scrubs. Among the natural predators of mosquitoes, the dragonfly, bat and some species of birds are notable. Due to the other insect species that live in home gardens a natural equilibrium is attained, thereby a natural control over excessive increase in the

mosquito population is put in place. Small mammalian species and various kinds of reptiles that live in the immediate home environment also prey on mosquitoes, thus, acting as buffer protecting humans from mosquito bites to some degree, while reducing the mosquito density in the environment. Destruction of vegetation and thereby the natural habitat of these species will reduce the existence of the natural predators in the immediate home environment and thereby worsen the dengue situation fear the environmentalists.



Banana plants cut down to 'prevent the spread of dengue'



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