

THE HINDU

In Karnataka, five villages protect their hillside forest

11 October 2019



Forested hillside in Mugadala Betta.

Three decades ago, the rocky hills of Pavagada taluk in Karnataka's Tumakuru district were barren and bleak. And if this perennially drought-hit region needed anything urgently, it was some green cover. Today, the hillsides are verdant with hundreds of trees: neem, tamarind, honge, jackfruit, teak, jamun, peepal, mango and banyan. And as the trees send their roots deeper into the soil, at the foothills, a small army of guardians keeps vigil.

In a heartwarming display of citizenship initiative, the people of five villages in the region formed committees to first forest the hillside and now these committees prevent anybody from cutting down even a single precious tree. They carry out their work with quiet determination: anyone caught chopping a tree down is fined anything between ₹100 and ₹5,000, depending on the weight of the wood and the extent of the 'crime'.

Of Pavagada's 39 villages, five villages — Mugadala Betta, Kariyammanapalya, Krishnagiri, K. Ramapura and Hosadurga — have taken this initiative. And

villagers say the afforestation has had a noticeable impact. “The temperature in these parts can hit 35.4o C in peak summer, but with the green cover, it is at least a few degrees cooler compared to other areas of Pavagada,” says Lingappa of Kariyammanapalya. Anecdotal evidence points to a more robust groundwater table too. “Earlier, we had to drill more than 1,200 ft deep before we found water. Now we hit water at 500-750 ft. And we get drinking water 24 hours,” says Lingappa.

‘Not even my son’

A lot of planning has gone into creating the watchdog committees. Anjaneya Swami Samiti, for instance, has nine members whose role is to guard the terrain near Mugadala Betta. From the elderly to the children, everyone is roped in. “Anyone who is caught is fined, irrespective of their status, caste, religion or political affiliation,” says one villager.

Mugadala Betta has 900 households and 1,900 residents. Here, a 65-year-old woman living in the foothills works as an informer, alerting the committee if a tree is seen being cut or transported. “I won’t spare anyone,” she says, “not even a relative or even my son.” In the early days, the Samiti had appointed two villagers to guard the saplings in Mugadala Betta, at a salary of ₹2,000 per month. Now, the saplings are strapping trees and there’s no need for paid guards.

Name and shame

“We fix fines depending on the financial condition of the offender,” says P. Hanumantharayappa, Secretary of Krishi Karmikara Sanga. The ‘name-shame-and-fine’ approach has had an impact and it serves also as a deterrent to others. M. Maaraiah, 70, sitting under a tree in Kariyammanapalya, appears a bit bewildered by the rules, but is not willing to break them. “We don’t cut trees out of fear of being humiliated in front of our people and being punished,” he says.

As with the best **conservation** efforts, many former offenders are today the Samiti’s most ardent supporters. “I was caught cutting a tree in Mugadala

Betta and was fined ₹100, after which I didn't dare cut another," says Omkar Nayaka, a volunteer. Getting people to abandon the 'old ways' is still an uphill task. Lingappa from Kariyammanapalya, an advisor to the Samiti, says the switch from firewood to LPG helped change attitudes. "Almost every house has an LPG connection and firewood is no longer needed. People take permission from the committee to collect twigs and branches from the forest floor," he says.

Only for big celebrations do the villagers still use firewood. Rajagopala M.P., a member of the Samiti, recalls the annual village fair, held in May this year, when the village deities, Kariyamma and Maramma, are worshipped. "People from 50 households cut trees in Mugadala Betta to prepare food for the hundreds of devotees who came for the fair. The Samiti took a nominal ₹100 from each house, and collected ₹5,000 in total," he says. The money thus collected goes towards development work, running the annual fair, or funding the funerals in the poorer families.



Students watering saplings. | Photo Credit: Omkar Nayaka

K. Ramapura village has a similar system. In 1983, a committee with 33 members was set up to guard Hanumana Betta, which is home to peacocks, wild boar, deer and monkeys. "Earlier, people from nearby villages would cut

trees for firewood and to make charcoal that was transported to other districts. We have put a stop to all that,” say the villagers.

Another threat

The journey here hasn't exactly been easy. Hanumantharayappa recalls how he used to face the wrath of the villagers who would tell him he had no right to tell them what to do, as the land did not belong to him. Today, the same man is invited to give lectures on conservation. And in homes and schools, the villagers are passing the message on to their children. “My mother says we should not cut trees as it is a crime and we will be fined. We plant saplings near our school and look after them,” says Lakshmi, 10, from K. Ramapura.

Now, the young forest has a new threat: forest fires. This year alone, some 24 hectares were burnt. “It's painful to watch fires claim the trees we planted and protected,” says L. Diwakar, committee member from Hosadurga. He blames the forest department for not removing dry forest litter and for not creating fire lines.

Range Forest Officer H.M Suresh denies the allegations. “We do have fire lines in place,” he says. “We have taken necessary steps to prevent forest fires.”

Although this might be a sore point between the two sides, forest officials commend the initiative of the villagers. “These five villages have set an example,” says range forest officer Shukur Siddiqui.

Environmentalist C. Yathiraju agrees: “The Pavagada model shows how important community participation is for conserving natural resources and increasing green cover.”

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/in-pavagada-karnataka-five-villages-protect-their-hillside-forest/article29655322.ece>