

Saving a forest, saving livelihoods

Published on April 12, 2019, [GURVINDER SINGH](#)



Green motto: Around 70 women from Gundalaba came together in 2001 to set up the Pir Jahania Van Surakhya Samiti - [GURVINDER SINGH](#)

Twenty years after a super cyclone ripped Odisha apart, a women's group from a village recalls how it protected crops by reviving a lost forest

Rina Swain has just returned home after offering her daily prayers at the shrine of a Muslim saint, Pir Mukdum Jahania Jahagast Worli. She wipes the sweat off her face and settles into a small wooden chair. "We lost everything to brutal winds 20 years ago," she says. "The blessings of Pir Jahania gave us the courage to face the adversity."

The Pir, along with his disciples, came to India from Baghdad in the 16th century and settled down at Gundalaba, a quiet village about 75 km from Bhubaneswar. He is revered equally by Hindus and Muslims who visit the shrine to seek his blessings.

At first glance, Gundalaba looks like any other village in the coastal state of Odisha. The villagers are mostly farmers or migrants, while the women look after homes, families and cattle. But the similarity ends there. Situated along the Astaranga beach in Puri district, at the mouth of the Debi River, the small village is a living example of communal harmony, as also a tale of bravery and success.

The way the villagers picked up the pieces of their lives after the super cyclone of 1999 is a case in point. Swain, 40, clearly remembers the date — October 29 — when the cyclone hit her village and devoured everything that came its way.

“The few hours of savagery changed our lives forever. The tin roofs of our houses were blown away while the crops, which are our lifeline, were destroyed. The super cyclone gifted a begging bowl to the village,” she says.

Apart from lives and livelihood, the most precious loss was that of a casuarina forest in the village that had served as a natural barrier from the sea and prevented salt-bearing winds from damaging crops.

About one lakh casuarina trees were believed to have been destroyed in the 65-hectare forest. “We lost 70 per cent of the forest cover in the super cyclone, which exposed our fields directly to the salty and moisture-laden winds of the sea,” says villager Majobin Nisha. The villagers learnt from forest officials that an additional 4,000 mangrove trees spread across 25 hectares were lost. The mangroves prevented soil erosion and also provided firewood for cooking and other uses.

The forest was facing yet another threat — that of deforestation. Local criminals were illegally felling trees. The wood and leaves are used as fuel and the branches as fencing in paddy fields.

With agriculture severely affected, the men migrated to other states in search of livelihood. But the women stayed back. They had a mission — to regrow the trees and protect the plantation that had saved their crops from the sea for so many years.

Around 70 women came together to set up an organisation called the Pir Jahania Van Surakhya Samiti (Pir Jahania forest protection committee) in 2001. They divided themselves into 14 groups of five villagers each.

“We started a round-the-clock vigil of the forests, patrolling twice a day on rotation. We carried bamboo sticks and lanterns at night. We have caught over 50 thieves so far and handed them over to the police,” says Renubala Barik, a member of the group, which in 2012 was given the UNDP India Biodiversity Award.

It takes 10-15 years for casuarina forests to grow fully, when the trees are cut for firewood and new saplings planted. The state forest department provided the villagers with the saplings. The casuarina plantation has re-grown in 65 hectares of the forest. The Astaranga block has the distinction of having the second largest mangrove cover in the state, says Sovakar Behera, honorary wildlife warden of Puri district. To prevent any conflict over firewood in the village and in neighbouring villages, the group has come up with a timetable for cutting trees.

The trees are back, as are the men. They till the land, and reap their crops. The women's groups are still keeping vigil. They keep an eye on their forests, and are prepared for natural calamities. The committee often conducts mock drills to ensure that the village is ready for those cruel winds.

The forests were affected — but not destroyed — by subsequent cyclones. From 1891 to 2018, Odisha was hit by 98 cyclones, severe cyclones and super cyclones, according to a state government report.

"The condition for cyclone formations exists round the year and they are very common in the Bay of Bengal area. The cyclones, after formation in the western part of the Bay of Bengal, move mostly towards the west and north-west. As a result, the coastal regions of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh frequently encounter cyclones," says Professor Sugata Hazra, director of the School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

The villagers, meanwhile, are happy with the casuarina cover. "It has contributed to an increase in agriculture productivity and farmers now get 20-22 bags of paddy, compared to 12-13 bags earlier. The women have also grown cashew trees in the forest," says Behera. "The biodiversity has also made a comeback with sparrows and other birds being spotted routinely. Deer are also spotted occasionally," he says.

"The Pir baba gave me the courage to become a part of the group and protect the forest," says Swain.

Source: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/life-after-super-cyclone-1999-how-women-in-an-odisha-village-saved-a-lost-forest/article26807125.ece>