

## The Forest Man of India in Coimbatore

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Jadav Payeng, who raised a forest on a dry sandbed in Assam, was in the city to inaugurate an afforestation initiative

Jadav Payeng doesn't speak Tamil and I don't know Assamese. I talk to him with the help of an interpreter and it is not easy. For I know there's a lot being lost in translation. But then, in the 20 minutes I spend with the man who single-handedly raised a forest in Assam's Jorhat district, I understand why every seed he plants thrives.



Standing amid bamboo shoots for a photoshoot, the Forest Man of India, when I ask him how he feels about his mammoth effort over the years, simply says, "I feel happy. What's more important is that children are taught the importance of trees right from primary school. That way, we needn't worry about our forest cover getting depleted or pollution levels going up." Jadav has been planting saplings and seeds

in the island of Majuli in Jorhat, by the banks of the Brahmaputra, since the 1970s. Today, the forest he raised stands at 550 hectares. The 60-year-old was in the city to inaugurate 'Jadhav Aaranya', a Miyawaki (method of planting various tree saplings close together) patch being developed by voluntary organisation CUBE (Centre for Urban Biodiversity Conservation and Education.) "He planted a species of *alamaram* (banyan tree)," says Joseph Reginald of CUBE. Joseph says that his team wanted "good people" such as Jadav to plant trees by the Singanallur Lake. "We have been trying to invite him for a long time," he adds. The patch Jadav inaugurated will have 2,250 saplings of 100 native species of trees spread over 6,500 sq ft. "We plan to implement this as a community conservation effort by roping in **people** in the neighbourhood," he explains. Jadav's efforts too are a result of community conservation; only, he took the onus of creating a forest and looking after it. The people of Jorhat pitch in too and, the most important among them, is wildlife photographer Jitu Kalita. It was Jitu who first wrote about Jadav in Assamese newspaper *The Dainik Janambhumi*. "After that, a lot of other publications wrote about him and he became popular," says Jitu, who was also in Coimbatore. Both of them were conferred with the 'Dr Ravi Shankaran Award for Ground Level Conservation'; named after the ornithologist who was the Director of SACON. "You should have seen the way Jadav was mobbed by students for autographs," says Joseph. The Forest Man of India interacted with school and college students when he was here. For many, it was a chance to see the man from the many viral documentary films. For me though, this interview was simply a chance to shake hands with a man who raised an entire forest. I wait for the opportunity

to do so, as I listen to him speak about how he plants three months a year and collects seeds during the rest; how he allows the monsoons to do the bulk of the work; how he will continue doing what he does for the rest of his life. Soon, it is time for him to leave for another appointment and he is rushed into a car. I forget to shake his hands.

### **A forest in a city**

- The Singanallur Lake is among the handful of waterbodies in the city that has natural vegetation, as a result of which its biodiversity is excellent
- CUBE and the Coimbatore Corporation are using the lake as a tool for Nature education. At present, they hold nature trails for the public on the first and third Sunday of every month by roping in experts from across the country.
- School children visit on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to study it
- According to a recent study by Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding, the lake is home to over 450 plant species.



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