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Buddhist monks' saffron robe gives green spin to Assam village

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Threat to a creeper that lent the robe its colour triggered the Chala Village Sanctuary movement



A creeper that once gave a monk's robe its saffron hue has made a Buddhist village in eastern Assam's Charaideo district adopt a forest.

Five years ago, the *bhikkhus* of a Buddhist monastery in the 152-year-old Chalapather Shyamgaon had bemoaned the near-extinction of *bhungloti*, a creeper that in combination with the pith of the roots of a jackfruit tree yielded a saffron dye for their robes.

The women of the village too lamented how getting vital ingredients from four indigenous plants for dyeing their *mekhela*, a traditional garment, indigo blue was getting increasingly difficult.

“The concern of the monks triggered a movement for conserving the adjoining Chala Reserve Forest, the traditional source of most of the colours in our lives. And in September 2018, the people of ten villages in the vicinity converged to do something about it,” Pyoseng Chowlu, secretary of Chala Village Sanctuary Conservation Society, told *The Hindu*.

The society was formed a month after that meeting, where the 683.173-hectare reserve forest under the Sivasagar Forest Division was declared as the Chala Village Sanctuary. A forest protection party comprising 22 members from the villages was also constituted to help the understaffed Forest Department keep loggers and poachers off.

“We have only three staff to manage Chala and only one of them is permanent. The village sanctuary initiative, albeit non-notified, has yielded some green soldiers who are helping us check tree felling,” Dhimangshu Saikia, the Forest Division’s Ranger said.

Each member of the forest protection party has been given an identity card to guard the green space that houses at least 1,000 types of trees, medicinal plants, and 67 species of orchids – down from 130 less than a decade ago – besides leopard, black panther, hog deer, and a range of birds and butterflies.

Apart from guarding, the society has been re-greening some 30 hectares denuded by timber smugglers and a few oil rigs planted by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation decades ago.

“We are maintaining more than 20,000 saplings the Forest Department gave us to plant. We have also established a 2.5-hectare biodiversity park in a part of the forest with an assortment of orchids and indigenous trees,” Prachurjya Shyam, the society’s executive member said.

Orchid altitude mystery

The Chala Reserve Forest is about 100 metres above sea level. But it houses a few orchids that are usually found in higher altitudes.

“We are documenting the plants and herbs of our village sanctuary. They include the now rare *Gnetum gnemon*, a nutrient-rich plant locals have consumed for ages,” Mr. Chowlu said.

But plant experts engaged by the society have found it intriguing that the sanctuary sustains the *Tainia penangiana*, an orchid found at altitudes beyond 500 metres.

The society has been conducting periodic awareness campaigns to underscore the need for conserving such orchids and the plants that yielded the villagers’ dyes. Their initiative has earned the sponsorship of organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature-India.

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