

FOREST GANDHIS

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They got ownership of the land in 1991. It remained a kind of short-halt spot between home and factory for some years. They didn't have the faintest idea what to do with the property until he was gifted 60 saplings on his 60th birthday. That's when Sukesh and Sudha Gandhi decided that they would grow their own forest. What was once acres of rock-strewn land covered with invasive weeds has now grown into a dense two-hectare forest with over 10,000 trees — all thanks to the couple who believed that forests could grow in cities too.

The biome, single-handedly nurtured by the Gandhis, now in their 60s, since nearly eight years now, is home to over 50 tree species, medicinal plants, hundreds of birds and all kinds of biodiversity. Located in Wakeshwar village around 20 kilometres from Nagpur zero mile, the land now comes under the metro region. "When I purchased the land 30 years back, it was a scrub and rocky land with hardly any trees. We had always wanted a lush farm but, back then, we were too involved with work," Sukesh, who was in the pharmaceutical field, tells TOI trekking through the vast expanse of multi-shaded green.

For a few years, all that the couple had in the barren land was a small tent where they would occasionally have tea and snacks. When eight years ago they sold off their respective businesses, the Gandhis, bothered about the depleting green cover due to urbanization, decided to do their green bit.

Sudha proudly points to a cluster of trees. "In 2012, when Sukesh got the sapling gift, we decided to plant it here as we did not have enough space at our city home. Then began our journey of creating a forest," says the 67-year-old.

Soon after the state government announced the massive 33 crore plantation target, the couple got around 1,200 saplings from the forest department and planted them at the property. "Hardly 20-25 survived. It was frustrating, depressing. We had failed to protect the trees from grazing and there was water shortage too," recalls Sukesh, as he instructs a staffer to remove the overgrown weeds. We are now deep in the Gandhi forest.

Planting trees became an uphill task for them. It took the couple immense research, consultation with experts and repeated

experimentation to finally get it right. Sukesh says, “The first thing we did was to fence the area to protect the plantations from grazing and wild animals.”

A small nursery on our route comes as a surprise. Sudha, who has always been a plant lover, says, “We realized that if we plant saplings directly, the survival rate tends to be low. So I started getting saplings from a nursery in Vijayawada and would first grow the plants till 8-10 feet in our nursery here before planting them in the pits. This method started giving us good survival rate.”

The next thing that stumbles upon our way is a water body. “When we started expanding our plantations, it was becoming very difficult to ensure regular and adequate watering. To overcome this, we got into an agreement with the irrigation department which has permitted us to draw water from a nearby lake for the next 18 years. We have installed drip irrigation system all across the property to ensure that the trees survive. And then there is this pond too,” says Sukesh.

The couple has been carrying out the afforestation activity under NGO Chip, Nagpur. Their property is surrounded by a zudpi jungle coming under Butibori range forest.

A few years back, the story of their mini-forest spread like wildfire and a curious forest officer came by. Impressed by their high survival rate, the officer offered them a tripartite agreement with the forest department, under which the couple would be provided 15 hectares of land for plantations. “The agreement is in process and we intend to plant around 25,000 trees in the adjoining forest land,” says Sukesh.

“We realized that we lie between two bigger forests. Consequently, we had the potential of becoming a bridge between these two areas. A protected plantation would restore the wild habitat for the animals and the birds and also recreate a corridor that had probably got destroyed because of expanding human civilization,” he adds.

The couple’s efforts have also led to an increase in the groundwater table of the area and massive reduction in the cases of forest fires.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that their man-made forest is greener, healthier and chirpier (with over a 100 bird species) than its neighbouring natural forests.

After walking a full circle in their green abode, we are greeted by a bunch of attractive bonsai plants. "These are as old as my kids. My daughters know these plants are like my babies and they would often tease me that I love them more," says Sudha.

We catch our breath in front of a century-old banyan tree. The Gandhis, parents of two daughters and grandparents of four, don't know what the future holds for them. What they do know is that they will keep bringing in more and more life in their urban jungle, till their last breath. "If we live through our 70s, we hope to have planted 50,000 trees," Sudha and Sukesh say.