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In tying a sacred thread, Indian villagers restore their forests

During the annual Vriksha Raksha Bandhan festival, villagers celebrate their connection to nature, pledging to keep away loggers and only use the forest sustainably.



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The dense forests near a small village in eastern India reverberated with chanting and the

beating of drums as hundreds of villagers gathered to tie decorated threads around the trees.

In an annual ritual that has been performed in Lukaiya for the past 20 years, people consecrated the trees with floral garlands and smears of vermilion and turmeric paste as they pledged to protect the forest from the axe and the saw.



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Held in villages across Jharkhand state, the Vriksha Raksha Bandhan festival - “vriksha” is Sanskrit for “tree” - stems from an ancient Hindu celebration of Raksha Bandhan, when sisters tie embellished bracelets called rakhi around their brothers’ wrists to symbolise love and protection.

“Each of these trees has been a member of our family for many years. We dare anyone to cut down any of them,” Shakuntala Kisku, who leads an all-women brigade dedicated to protecting the forest near

Lukaiya said in an interview.

From India to Kenya and [the Colombian Amazon](#), communities are channelling age-old beliefs and traditions into conservation, using their cultural connection to nature to save carbon-absorbing forests and build livelihoods that rely on keeping trees alive.

The festival in Lukaiya, in Dhanbad district, started in 2005, when then-divisional forest officer Sanjeev Kumar brought together about 35 villages to revive what was at the time a stretch of barren land dotted with sparse bushes and tree stumps.

“I was shocked by the indiscriminate felling of trees by the local communities,” said Kumar, who is now a chief forest conservator for Jharkhand state.

Threats of fines and other punitive measures were no deterrent to people cutting down trees to sell, he said.

The idea behind the festival was to create a sense of ownership and belonging towards the forests, and to convert erstwhile tree fellers into tree protectors.

Sanjeev Kumar, chief forest conservator, Jharkhand

Kumar had heard about other villages using rituals to protect trees, including school

teacher Mahadeb Mahato who, 10 years earlier, had started a similar effort in Dudhmatia as a way to revive the local forest and stop wild animals wandering into the village to look for food.

By creating Vriksha Raksha Bandhan, Kumar hoped to similarly encourage the people of Lukaiya to take conservation into their own hands.

Today the once-bare stretch of land is covered in 100 hectares (247 acres) of native trees, mainly sal and mahua, also known as honey tree.

The festival has spread to more than 1,000 villages across the state, Kumar said, and he has heard from environmentalists in other Indian states and places as far off as Singapore, England and Sierra Leone who are all starting their own version.

“Once a tree is ritualised, its protection is our responsibility,” said Sitamani Mahato, who is part of the forest protection team in Arani, a village in Jharkhand’s Simdega district.

Villagers take turns keeping watch in the forest during the day, looking out for outsiders who try to cut any of the trees. At night, forest rangers take over protection duties.

If villagers spot any loggers, they surround the encroachers, seize their tools and take them to the village head to face a penalty, usually a ban on using the water in local streams or grazing their cattle in village pastures.

The village head might offer to lift the ban if the logger devotes some time to protecting the forest.

“The idea behind the festival was to create a sense of ownership and belonging towards the forests, and to convert erstwhile tree fellers into tree protectors,” Kumar said.

Benefiting farmers

According to India’s latest [Forest Survey](#), just over 21 per cent of the country is forested, a slight rise from 2019 partly due to a nationwide tree-planting campaign that aims to have [a third of the country](#) covered in carbon-absorbing trees by 2030.

Kumar said the tree protection festival helped boost forest cover across Jharkhand state by 85,000 hectares between 2005 and 2020.

Farmer Sukhdeo Prasad, whose village of Banpura in Dhanbad district celebrates the festival every year, said revitalising the local forest has led to the return of various plants and wildlife and helped feed nutrients back into the soil.

Farmers can grow multiple crops throughout the year - including maize, rice, vegetables

and wheat - when a few years ago the degraded soil could only handle one crop at a time per season, he said.

Prasad and other farmers in the area say they are earning up to 50 per cent more from their crops than they were two decades ago.

Crucially, for him, younger generations can now see a future in farming.

“Forests have improved productivity in our fields. The youth are motivated to stay and work in their own village, rather than migrate out in search of work,” he said.

Bringing together tree conservation and cultural traditions can be an effective way to revive forests [anywhere in the world](#), said Baldeo Prasad Sharma, an environmentalist working with the Indian Red Cross Society.

“Initiatives like these connect trees to man (as well as) linking ecology with the local economy,” he said.

Economic connection

In Lukaiya, Kumar says the [economic connection](#) between forests and local populations is just as vital to the success of the Vriksha Raksha Bandhan festival as the emotional connection.

“Our ultimate strategy was to link the forests with the livelihoods of the villagers,” he said.

The sal and mahua trees, for instance, produce fruit and seeds that can be cooked into cakes and used to make oil, butter or homemade liquor, while mahua bark - always collected from the forest floor, never pulled off the tree - is used in medicine.

Mahato in Arani village says produce from the local forest earns more than 3,000 people an annual income of about 30,000 Indian rupees (\$367) each.

The income boost was motivation enough to change for one former tree feller, who asked that his name not be used.

Every week or so he used to join a small group who entered the forest at night to chop down trees to sell for timber, until he was caught by the villagers, he said.

Today his ability to earn a living selling forest produce depends on keeping the trees standing and he regularly joins other villagers and forest rangers in Lukaiya to nurture newly planted saplings and protect them from being eaten by cattle.

“We realised the forests are our lifeline and who better than us to protect them?” he said.