



Meet the people who are regreening India, one DIY forest at a time

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It's a beautiful spring day with wild grass swaying in the wind and red flowers hanging onto giant sal trees. The lucky ones can even spot the odd blue-collared kingfisher gliding by in this 32-acre patch of land that is India's first private biosphere.

And to think all this land sandwiched between the Raghathi riverbed and the Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand was brown and barren only a couple of years ago. Today, Rajaji Raghathi biosphere has over 4,000 saplings of around 80 different tree species.

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The turnaround is because of the efforts of Delhi-based environmentalist Jai Dhar Gupta and rewilding specialist Vijay Dhasmana. Like them, several other green crusaders and citizens' collectives from across the country are restoring degraded habitats and bringing flora and fauna back from the brink.

Gupta, who led a citizen-driven movement called My Right to Breathe against Delhi's worsening AQI levels some years ago, went on to launch an air purifier company, and then decided to dream bigger. He bought a large swathe of land that was a three-hour drive from Delhi in 2022. "When I first met the local pradhans, they could not understand why someone would buy land and not turn it into an orchard or plantation for commercial benefit. They called me the mad man from the city," Gupta shared.

It was indeed mad to hope for a miracle. For years of growing trees not native to the area and incessant cattle grazing had degraded the soil and groundwater reserves beyond measure. That's when he turned to rewilder and eco-restorer Vijay Dhasmana, who had successfully led the rewilding efforts at the Aravalli Biodiversity Park in Delhi with native species.

"We took help from 32 forest guards, four naturalists and a junior ecologist. We divided the foothills into patches and walked hundreds of kilometres to find out which trees were dwindling and why," says Gupta. It took a good amount of research to finally zero in on the trees that would heal the land and sustain an ecosystem there — Sal (*shorea robusta*), Saj (*terminalia alata*), Axlewood (*anogeissus latifolia*), and Haldu (*adina cordifolia*). Saplings were duly planted and most of the trees are expected to grow to size in four to five years.

Through rewilding efforts, the once-flat land is now furrowed and full of wild grass to help soak up rainwater and channel it into the river. Gupta now plans to invite ecologists to help introduce butterflies, bees and fungi into the forest. Only electric vehicles are allowed there to keep fossil fuel emissions at bay.

Teaching farmers to rewild

About 150km from Pune, in the lap of the Sahyadri mountains, is the Koyna Valley — full of 'malki forests', the local parlance for jungles on private land. And retired forest officer Jayant Kulkarni has helped rewild 600 acres of these private patches of green since 2015. Kulkarni is executive director of Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (WRCS), a non-profit with dedicated teams that worked closely with farmers for three consecutive years to teach them how to plant trees that are ecologically suited to the region. Some have commercial value as an incentive for farmers. "The land we came across had been used mostly for shifting cultivation, timber extraction and cattle grazing and had been degrading. As there was immense potential for reforestation, we created an assisted model as local farmers were not even aware of reforestation, leave alone the benefits. In the best models of conservation, people should not be alienated from their rights. Instead, land practices should become more sustainable," says Kulkarni. Most states, he points out, only focus on government forests which are limited in area. But private forests hold tremendous potential for conservation.

One of the earliest DIY forests was in Karnataka. Bengaluru-based entrepreneur Suresh Kumar bought a 21-acre piece of barren land in the Sagar region over a decade ago. It is now a dense forest named Usha Kiran, which environmentalist Akhilesh Chipli has helped create. Karnataka also has the country's first private wildlife sanctuary in Kodagu, which was started by the late Anil Kumar Malhotra and his wife Pamela Gale in 1991. It is today home to 105 species of birds, 50 species of snakes, 102 species of butterflies and 46 varieties of native trees.

Miracle outside Mumbai

A dense forest just 95 km from the busy metropolis of Mumbai? It might sound incredible but Vanvadi is the work of over two dozen nature lovers who came together to develop it in 1994.

Today, it's a successful model for low-cost and community-driven conservation of private forests. Most of the land had been clear-felled (all trees cut down) just a year or two before it was bought. It now has over 80,000 trees, which is 90% tree cover.

"When we had bought the land, groundwater had severely depleted despite the region receiving among the highest rainfall in the Western Ghats. We had to put up check dams and structures for rainwater harvesting to improve levels," explains Bharat Mansata, a key member of the collective. Over the years, active members have come and gone but one rule hasn't changed: no member can buy or sell land for speculative gain. The collective conducts an annual forest festival in October each year to attract visitors, and has built a community house where they hold workshops, camps and treks for a fee.

"As climate change looms large, with ever increasing air pollution and water crisis in urban jungles, more and more people are getting drawn to the forests. We have realised that there's only a small window left to pass on the knowledge of sustainability and its inherited resources to future generations," Mansata says.

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