

Punjab: 19,000 van mitras to make sure 73 lakh saplings survive

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To mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev, 73 lakh plants were planted across over 13,000 villages of the state. (Representational)

At a time when the coronavirus-induced lockdown has restricted the movement of people, close to 19,000 persons in Punjab have been assigned an unique job — they have to protect nearly 73 lakh saplings, which were planted less than a year ago.

These plant protectors have been appointed as ‘van mitras’ (forest friends) in all the villages of Punjab where 550 saplings each were planted last year to mark the 550th birth anniversary of first Sikh master Guru Nanak Dev.

The van mitras have been appointed under MGNREGA by the Punjab Rural Development and Panchayat Department. Punjab, which has a poor rate (around 20 to 25 per cent) of survival of the newly planted saplings, had appointed them at the onset of the summer season when plants need special attention such as proper watering, protection from fire, pruning, and safety from animals.

Punjab government had celebrated the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev in November 2019 at Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala district, the place where the Guru had attained enlightenment. To mark this, 73 lakh plants were planted across over 13,000 villages of the state.

“Every village will be having two van mitras and they will be engaged for three years till the time the plants can to survive on their own,” said joint director, Rural Development and Panchyat Department, Avtar Singh Bhullar, adding that he had recently visited some villages in Kapurthala district where the ‘van mitras’ have already started their work.

He said that this project has been initiated by the Rural Development Minister Tript Rajinder Singh Bajwa, "The the main purpose of plating the saplings will be met only if they survive completely," he added.

"I am feeling a sense of attachment with these plants to an extent that I feel these are like my children. How can I tolerate any damage to them," said Rajwant Kaur, a van mitra from village Amanipur.

Salinder Kaur, another van mitra from the same village, said that she has been examining all the plants daily.

"All kinds of plants, including fruit bearing and ornamental, were planted last year. Now, with the appointment of van mitras, we can replace the saplings that got damaged with new saplings so that our target of saving all of them could be met," said Block Development Officer, Sultanpur Lodhi, Gurpratap Singh Gill.

Experts said that in Punjab at least 15 to 19 area area is required under forest and tree cover as against the current around 7 per cent.

As per India State of Forest Report 2019, Punjab has 8.00 sq km under very dense forest (VDF), 800.97 sq km under moderately dense forest (MDF), and 1,039.66 sq km under open forest (OF).

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