



Purulia Villages Turn Barren Mountain Into Lush Forest in 20 Years, Solve Water Woes

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Up until 1997, a small hillock in Jharbagda village in West Bengal's Purulia district had a single tree next to a small temple, which priests and a handful of locals would visit occasionally. The village, located about a 100 km from Jamshedpur, was surrounded by about 50 km of barren land and faced extreme weather conditions.

Owing to hot and humid winds blowing through the summer, harsh heat waves made human habitation difficult for 300 families residing in the foothills of the mountain.

However, 22 years later, in 2020, the hill and its surrounding 387-acre land is covered with dense forest and is home to a variety of wildlife. Farmers can cultivate two crops per year to increase their income. This transformation in the landscape is credited to years of hard work and efforts the villagers in this area have undertaken.

From one tree to 4.5 lakh trees

The villagers started planting trees with the help of Tagore Society for Rural Development (TSRD), an NGO, and with years of persistent efforts, the hamlet now has cooler air, increased groundwater levels, and a prosperous future.



How the hill transformed from a barren patch in 1997 to green zone in 2006.

“Bohot, bohot jyada garmi tha (It used to be very, very hot),” says 50-year-old Sujit Mohanty, a farmer who owns 3.5 acres of land. He adds that rocks used to emit heatwaves in the scorching summer heat, and the effects of this lasted till late at night, making it difficult to seek respite even after dusk.

“We never thought something could grow in this shallow land. About 60% of rainwater would run off the surface, and groundwater would never be replenished,” he recalls. Farmers in the area say unfavourable conditions limited their ability to grow cereals, pulses or paddy once a year.

In 1997, a team from TSRD visited the site and decided to start planting trees in the area. “We learned that the area had a forest a few decades before. But the zamindari system (a permanent settlement act introduced to collect tax from peasants) destroyed the environment,” says Badal Maharana, the NGO’s team leader.

Badal says that after multiple visits to analyse the soil, geographic conditions and the nearest availability of water, four categories of plants were identified that fit the geographic characteristics. “The decision was made to plant varieties that would bear fruits, and provide fuel, food and timber essential for the livelihood of the villagers,” he adds.

He says work began in 1998, with the NGO intending to plant 36,000 trees over the next five years in three blocks drawn in the vicinity. “We spent four years maintaining the trees and protecting it from external threats. The work of tree plantation continued over the years, and we planted 4.5 lakh trees of 72 different species. About 3.2 lakh survived. It was difficult to find water and provide enough of it at all times,” Badal says.

The trees were guarded by people to prevent the threat of damage or vandalism.

Wildlife finds a welcoming home



“We had only three villagers to help us plant the saplings during the initial days. They would often say that nothing could grow here, and that even if the plant survives, it won’t bear fruits and the plantation will soon be dry,” Badal says.

But as more trees started bearing fruits and flourished, more people joined the effort.

Source: <https://www.thebetterindia.com/245781/new-purulia-villages-transform-barren-mountain-lush-forest-inspiring-west-bengal-him16/>