

The call of the Forest Man

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Earth hero Payeng was honoured by Royal Bank of Scotland - usha rai

Tribal Jadav Payeng from Assam has made afforestation his mission

“If each man plants a tree we will have enough oxygen to arrest climate change,” says Jadav Molai Payeng, popularly known as the Forest Man. Over 38 years, he has afforested 1,360 hectares of a sandbar of the Brahmaputra near Kokilamukh, Jorhat, Assam. The forest is now named Molai after him.

Yet climate change was not a major concern of environmentalists in 1979 when, as a teenager, this Mishing tribal began his greening mission. Floods had ravaged many islands of the Brahmaputra, leaving behind endless stretches of white sand and dead snakes killed by the rising heat due to the loss of trees. What could he do to stop the snakes from dying? Back in his village, the Devi community gave him 25 bamboo saplings to plant and assured him that the snakes would return if the bamboos took root. Every day, for 30 years, he arrived at the sandbar to plant saplings and nurture the trees that took root.

Watering the plants over such a large area was a challenge. He built a bamboo platform above each sapling and placed on it an earthen pot of water with small holes in it. The slowly dripping water provided sustenance for a week. As green fingered Jadav’s story spread, the social forestry department of Golaghat division sought his help in greening 200 hectares of Aruna Chapori, 5 km from Kokilamukh.

A jumbo task

The desire to bring back migratory birds and wildlife kept him going. To bring elephants he planted more bamboo and banana trees. Even the shimul silk cotton tree provided nourishment for the jumbos, which feed on its leaves and even the bark.

Molai forest and the adjoining islands are now home to tigers, rhinos, herds of deer, rabbits, monkeys and a variety of birds, including a large number of vultures. The 300 hectares of bamboo attract 100 elephants every year and they stay for six months.

Such is Payeng's passion that when he came to Delhi recently to be honoured by the Royal Bank of Scotland as an Earth Hero, he trotted off to plant a red chandan (sandalwood) and white chandan tree in a park close to Jawaharlal Nehru University. This was his second award from the Bank. In 2013 he received the Green Warrior award. A recipient of the Padma Shri, he also received an award from former President Abdul Kalam in 2012. Payeng recalls with pride that a film on the forests he has grown was shown at the Rio Olympics in 2016 and this inspired many sportspersons to plant trees.

Mature vision

Today he visits schools, colleges and motivates students to grow at least two trees each. He has been planting white and red sandalwood trees on the boundaries of schools and colleges. It is better to plant small, sturdy trees that will not topple over in a storm, rather than big trees like the banyan that require more space. Both varieties of the sandalwood he propagates are commercially valuable, with a kilo of white sandalwood priced at ₹7,200 and red at ₹20,000. Birds too come for their pods, he says.

Jadav also likes to plant vegetables and fruit trees like mango and jackfruit. His source of living comes from the sale of milk from the 50 cows and 50 buffaloes he owns. Though tigers have killed many of his cows and buffaloes, he bears no grudge, saying "they are Gods who need to eat".

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