

# LIFEGATE

## Tree goddess Tulasi Gowda, the barefoot Indian activist protecting the forest

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Tulasi Gowda, walking barefoot through plantations, can discern the state of budding plants by just touching them lightly. She's never been to school, but knows perfectly how to interpret tamarind, eucalyptus and dozens of other plants. Now retired, Gowda has lost count of the hundreds of thousands of plants she's returned to Karnataka Forest in southern India by protecting and reviving native species. She is a recipient of the 2020 Padma Shri Awards – India's fourth-highest civilian honour – for her invaluable environmental contribution. While delighted about the prestigious accolade, Gowda maintains that it is plants that have brought the most joy to her life.



### The tree goddess

Wrapped in a traditional sari, with jewellery around her neck and wrists and her hair tied in a bun, Gowda looks proudly at the plants around her. Environmentalists call her a human “encyclopedia of the forest”, but to her tribe, the Halakki Vokkaliga, she is known as the “tree goddess”. Even her name, Tulasi, is linked with nature, deriving from tulsi or Holy Basil (*ocimum sanctum*), the manifestation of the goddess Lakshmi and a plant with numerous beneficial properties.

Tulasi Gowda lost her father when she was only three and became a child bride at twelve. She started working at a very young age as a day labourer for the Karnataka Forestry Department. Her main duty was to take care of the seeds in the Agasur seedbed. Over the years, Gowda achieved extraordinary results, also thanks to her deeply-rooted cultural heritage, as in her matriarchal tribe

women have been in charge of protecting, looking after and cultivating the land for hundreds of years.

## **Finding the mother tree**

Environmentalist and researcher Yellappa Reddy recognises Gowda's extraordinary skills, especially relating to the regeneration of native plants. "After years of study – he explains – it emerged that 90 per cent of indigenous trees struggle to regenerate in India despite extensive research in this field. Gowda is able to identify the mother tree of each species in any location within the forest. Plant regeneration is more successful when seeds come from the mother tree. Gowda knows when these trees bloom and germinate, and she is able to choose the best moment to collect seeds. She can't explain how, but she knows this because she speaks the language of the forest. Seeing her work is an incredible experience".

## **Tulasi Gowda, protecting her people**

Gowda and singer Sukri Bomma Gowda, another Halakki woman and recipient of the Padma Shri Award, have been fighting to defend a member of their tribe who was threatened at gunpoint and almost ran over by a landowner for having picked fruit from a tree. "No Halakki person has felt the need to start a battle, but we'll protest fiercely if the perpetrator of this crime isn't punished," the two women said at a press conference for local news outlets.

## **Teaching children to look after seeds**

Although Gowda has retired and only returns to the forestry department to bring the best seeds she finds, this strong Halakki woman hasn't stopped raising awareness about plants, flowers and herbs' vital role. "I always explain to children that the forest must be protected and nurtured," she says. "We all have to pitch in. Let children plant seeds and look after the plants as they grow".

## **125,000 plants for the city of Mangaluru**

The forestry department has prepared 125,000 young plants that are to be distributed as part of an urban redevelopment project in Mangaluru, a city on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The plan involves the creation of large green areas as well as supporting growers. The first 10,000 plants, belonging to 35 different varieties, are destined for the Mangaluru Smart City project in support of the coastal city's sustainable development.

The remaining ones, including teak, sandalwood and 49 other species, are made available to schools, volunteering organisations, religious bodies, landowners and even individuals who receive them for free or in exchange for modest contributions.

Source: <https://www.lifegate.com/tulasi-gowda-forests-india>