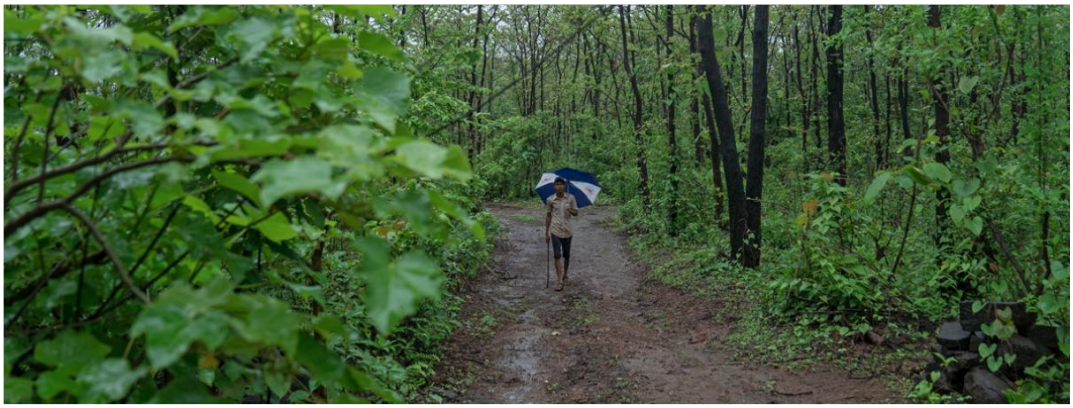
MONGABAY
NEWS & INSPIRATION FROM NATURE'S FRONTLINE

A forest to my name

19 July 2019



When Taimur Ali Khan, the son of Bollywood celebrities and Indian paparazzi's favourite muse, was gifted a mini forest on his first birthday, it made headlines. Ordering a full-fledged forest is a more expensive, Instagram-friendly rehash of the ancient Indian tradition of planting a tree to mark an occasion. Taimur's 1,000 square feet forest of around 100 trees was projected as a haven for birds, bees and butterflies, underscoring the need to have such green isles in the urban sea of concrete, glass and metal. There's nothing exclusive about Taimur's forest, however. Several families, corporates and non-profit organisations now have such oases in today's increasingly hot and dusty, world both for their own relief and to support nature.

Can these private forests — groves spanning hundreds of hectares and startup-driven mini greens — be our answer to deforestation, wildlife loss and environmental pollution? What kind of social complexities and sustainability aspects do these spaces bring along?

India has lost over 1.6 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2018, according to an analysis by non-profit World Resources Institute using datasets collated by the University of Maryland, Google, U.S. Geological Survey and NASA, besides satellite images.

This is in contrast to the report of the Forest Survey of India (FSI) which claims an increase of 2,152 square kilometres in forest and tree cover between 2005 and 2017. The FSI data, however, also counts transient commercial plantations as forests.

India has pledged to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030 under the Paris Agreement on climate change, but the country's flagship afforestation program, the Green India Mission, remains grossly underfunded.

In this scenario, buying land for conservation or turning one's backyard into a forest are trends worth taking note of and analysed threadbare.

"Interventions in the name of the environment are bound to attract praise, but we need to ask if the aim is conservation or if there are profit motives behind such initiatives. For

instance, ecotourism is often labelled as green and good for the environment, but these are mostly elite spaces with little connection or benefit for local people," says Nitin Rai, a fellow at Bengaluru-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). "On the other hand, a corporate might be looking for carbon credits or trying to green its image of being a polluter by claiming to conserve forest."

Bigger the land, bigger the issues

India has had a tradition of people's forests, including sacred ancient groves and recent initiatives like Sadhana forest nurtured by the community of Auroville. Private forests, on the other hand, were mostly spaces owned by erstwhile royal families. After independence, they were taken over by the Indian government and converted into national parks, sanctuaries or reserved forests. The new era private forests started cropping up in the mid-1990s when accelerated development started taking its toll on nature.

Vanvadi, a large private forest in the Sahyadri foothills, which is around 90-km from Mumbai, is spread over 65 acres. The land was clear-felled about 26-27 years ago, the forest regenerated after that. In 1994, a group of 24 nature lovers contributed and bought this land for ecological conservation and regeneration. "We were a couple of friends whose initial plan was to do natural farming of fruit and vegetables on a small piece of land. During our search, we came across this place which was already showing promises of regeneration within just a year or two of clear-felling," says Bharat Mansata, an active founder-member of Vanvadi. "We then gathered more like-minded people and jointly bought this land and let it grow into a forest."

In 1994, a group of 24 nature lovers contributed and bought land in the outskirts of Mumbai for ecological conservation and regeneration. Vanvadi now organises occasional forest food walks and other nature-based events. Photo by Kartik Chadramouli/Mongabay

Today, in that space there are over 50,000 trees, and rich biodiversity of plants, including 52 edible plant species, over 30 medicinal species, and around 20 timber species. Water harvesting has helped recharge the groundwater here benefiting the neighbouring downstream villages. Vanvadi organises occasional weekend workshops, nature walks and an annual vanutsav or forest festival. The

vanutsav is a multi-generational gathering that celebrates nature and community and on such occasions sometimes local tribal villagers share with city residents their traditional knowledge of the forest and their way of life.

Various problems also come with owning such a large piece of land. Over the last 12 to 15 years, the area around Vanvadi has undergone massive changes, especially after a new road was constructed nearby. Several real estate projects, including vacation homes and resorts, have now sprung up in the area, shooting up land prices. The region has undergone concretisation after the land was flattened using. Clear-felling of trees has resulted in massive soil erosion. There have also been attempts at fraudulently selling Vanvadi land, but timely legal interventions prevented that. “The land is big and requires constant monitoring. We are looking to have new members from the younger generation who can bring in new energy to the place,” Mansata says. “Maybe a few people can stay here in small huts with kitchen gardens. The area has the potential to evolve into a forest eco-village.”

Its nearly 4-km boundary remains unguarded and Vanvadi bears the pressure of being the only thickly forested area in the vicinity. Cattle often stray into the land and local villagers still collect firewood and forest food from it. The excessive pressure is damaging the forest. “Animals damage the saplings we plant, hence we are now planting only in a smaller protected area,” says Mansata.

Forest in the fast lane

Kirti Karmarkar Anand and her husband, Anand Sundaram, have converted a little over half an acre (0.68 acres) of their 11-acre farm on the outskirts of Secunderabad (Telangana) into a dense forest of native trees using the Miyawaki method.

Conceived by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, this method involves planting around 300 native trees in a 1,000 sq ft area to make a dense, self-sustaining grove. Before planting, the local agro-climatic conditions, including soil quality, are studied. Three layers of greens – shrubs and undergrowth, medium-height trees and taller canopies – are integral components of the Miyawaki forests. Mulching, natural water retention and perforation material like rice husk and use of organic compost support their growth.

A Japanese awakening

Engineer-turned entrepreneur Shubhendu Sharma has been popularising the Miyawaki method in India through his startup, Afforestt. Sharma’s journey in forestry started when he assisted Akira Miyawaki in planting a forest at the Toyota plant where he was working in 2008. Impressed by the results, he grew a forest in the backyard of his own house in Uttarakhand and went on to set up Afforestt in 2011.

Beginning with city backyards, corporates and institutes, Afforestt has now spread out into community projects, planting 138 such forests with over 450,000 (4.50 lakh) trees in 37 acres.

The Anands were one of Afforestt’s first clients with a big land parcel, but it was a difficult proposition. “The land was barren, had a hard rock surface with very low groundwater reserves,” Kirti Anand says. “It took a lot of time as we had to dig one meter deep to plant the saplings and buy tanker water for three years to irrigate the land. But now it has grown

into a self-sustaining forest of 8,000 trees, and our rainwater harvesting pond is also now fully functional."

Kriti Anand in her three-year-old forest in outskirts of Secunderabad (Telangana) that was grown using the Miyawaki method. Photo from Kirti Anand.

The forest is abuzz with insects, reptiles and more than 50 species of birds. The family wants to promote the farm as an educational spot for students to learn about wildlife, trees and ecological architecture through a house they are building using mud blocks.

Afforestt is also training other organiations willing to undertake similar work, and the Miyawaki method has caught up with several startups and non-profit organisations.

Mumbai-based non-profit Enviro Creators Foundation has taken the forest movement to abandoned mines and dump yards, greening 18 hectares of land in eight states across India in the process.

Afforestt charges Rs 5,000 per square meter for planting a forest along with sitting space and walkway. "The cost of growing a forest is nothing compared to its benefits," asserts Dipen Jain, co-founder of Enviro Creators.

Hidden costs of conservation

More trees are always a good message. Combined with the benefits of carbon sequestration and wildlife conservation, it is projected as a win-win situation. But is it always good for everyone?

"We need to understand in what context the change in the nature of using land is brought about," said Rai. "We need to ask what was on the land before the closed canopy forest was created. Maybe there was a scrub forest or a grove of medicinal plants there earlier that the local people were using. So, the outcomes vary from case to case and should be judged accordingly."

These private forests are also not supported by some law or policy framework. "What if the inheritors of these properties decide to turn these private forests into commercial plantations, housing plots or tourism lodges," asks Rai.

Last year, the Karnataka government came up with draft rules allowing individuals or consortium of people owning a minimum of 100 acres land around protected areas to form 'Wildlife Private Conservancy'. The rules also allowed the use of 5 percent of this area for construction of buildings for eco-tourism and related activities. Conservationists, however, opposed the rules calling them an attempt to legalise encroachments and allow commercial activities in buffer zones where none was permitted. They also raised concerns that owners might harass wild animals entering such private areas in the absence of government monitoring.

Though the government cited the need to reduce fragmentation of forests and reduce human-animal interaction, experts said none of the small farmers would benefit from such rules since the minimum land required was 100 acres.

Maharashtra, on the other hand, had come up with guidelines for community nature conservancy in 2015 that stressed the involvement of local villagers in the formation of such private/cooperative forests.

A forest trail. Photo by Kartik Chandramouli/Mongabay.

Debi Goenka, the executive trustee of Mumbai-based non-profit Conservation Action Trust, feels that the idea is good in principle, but it has to be ensured that this land does not get converted into a wildlife resort or become a commercial plantation. "The government should insist on some kind of undertaking that the land will be kept open in perpetuity. In Maharashtra, the effort has been to ensure that the rights and livelihoods of the local people are not only protected, but also enhanced," he says. "Unfortunately, there are cases where such lands have become wildlife tourism resorts or other similar commercial establishments."

These private forests may not go the way of pre-independence game reserves, but they will have to deal with new-age paradigms like ethical conservation, sustainability and equity.

Source: https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/a-forest-to-my-name/