

Sreelatha Menon: The green necklace

The tribals of Nagwa village in Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh have planted a forest along the Kanhar river in a bid to create a carbon sink

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The tribals of Sonbhadra district's Nagwa village are no ordinary people.

As one walks towards this village in Dudhi taluk on the border of Uttar Pradesh, touching Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and an entry point for Naxalites, it looks as if the Kanhar river is wearing a necklace of wild *jamun* and *mahua* trees interspersed with other varieties.

It is not a natural forest. Nor is it a plantation under the forest department.

Inhaling the camphor-like smell of *mahua*, one learns that it is a forest that has been planted by the tribals themselves, protected from both the villagers and the forest department.

As one walks to the village *chaupal*, the full moon is hanging low and seems to be almost touching the bamboo clumps under which one sits, with occasional bird droppings interrupting the movement of the pen on the reporter's notepad.

A group of six-seven villagers is present there while another sits around coal fire baking *littis* (wheat balls). Soon, more people join and the number of cots and chairs in the courtyard increases.

They are daily-wagers who work in the neighbouring coal fields and peasants. Their leader, Harikishan, the secretary of the newly-formed village forest rights committee under the Forest Rights Act narrates the story of the "green necklace."

In 1980, the forest department decided that the 500 acres of land the villagers had been cultivating for generations was arid and useless and fit to be declared a forest area.

The tribals were taken by surprise. The land was proposed to be notified under Section 20 of the Forest Act. There was no inspection or notices, said Harikishan. As he speaks, the crowd gets thicker and the moon drops lower, as if to make up for lack of electricity in the village, though the country gets a large part of its power from thermal plants just a few kilometres away.

When eviction dawned upon them, the tribals took on the forest department with their bows and arrows. The administration lodged cases against them under the Forest Act. The then newly-elected MLA, Vijay Singh, a Gond tribal himself, led the villagers to the state forest minister, who realised there was a mistake. The land cultivated by the villagers had not been included in revenue records, which led to the move by the forest department. The department also neglected to inspect the land. The cases were withdrawn.

In the midst of this struggle, some villagers decided to do their bit for environment after being inspired by some local NGOs. They persuaded the people to grow trees along the river to control the pollution level.

The area was full of wild *jamun* plants which were cut for firewood and never grew to their full length. Today, they have grown into gigantic trees and stand along with several other varieties planted by the villagers. The village has formed four committees which police different stretches of the strip. The village has also prevented formation of a joint forest management committee of the forest department. "That would leave us just partial owners of the forest. We want full rights," said Harkishan.

Meanwhile, the Nagwaites are waiting for the titles for the 500 acres of farm land that they snatched from the teeth of forest officials several years ago.

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