

30-year journey from tribal boy to Forest Man

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In 1979, when the Brahmaputra was in spate during the monsoon, logs of wood and hundreds of snakes came floating on the sandbar in Jorhat, Assam. When the water receded, the reptiles died on the sand due to excessive heat.

A 15-year-old tribal boy watched the phenomenon sadly and thought: "The snakes perished because there are no trees on this barren sandbar. Today, it is snakes; tomorrow it could be human beings." He approached tribal elders and asked about growing trees in the region. Those men, who had seen such maladies year after year, told him that nothing could be grown there except bamboos and gave him about 20 bamboo seedlings.

"It was very hard to cultivate them but I didn't give up. I also started collecting and planting silk cotton and other plants," recalls Jadav Molai Payeng. The sandbar has now grown into a dense forest over 1,360 acres. Single-handedly raised by him over three decades, the 'Molai forest' is home to thousands of trees and variegated birds, four Bengal tigers, several rhinoceroses, hundreds of rabbits, deer and apes.

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