

Adivasis in the Bastar conflict zone are spearheading a massive conservation effort

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Residents are collecting seeds of native

species to grow in nurseries. Lakhs of these saplings are then transported for reforestation drives in other states. Even a couple of decades ago, Bastar attracted anthropologists, botanists, linguists, and people who wanted to get far away from so-called happening places. Undivided Bastar was the largest of districts, equal in size to Kerala, with a scant population, rich with all kinds of natural resources, and some of the most dignified human cultures. However, Bastar is a region in the news today for all the wrong reasons. Ridden with conflict that seems to have no end in sight – it definitely must be good for somebody's business – the Adivasi peoples of the entire central Indian region have been pushed by both the Maoists as well as the security forces into taking sides, whether they like it or not. Green fingers Yet, unknown to most people in the country, a small group of adivasi people from some of the forested villages in central Bastar have been busy doing work conservationists would be proud of. People from Sandh Karmari, Kakalgur, Kangoli and several nearby villages have been gathering the seeds of native plant species and raising them in their nurseries in fairly large numbers. There is much expertise among these adivasi people about the seeding times of various plants, seed drying and storing methods, germination techniques, soil-mixing, and root pruning – all necessary ingredients for running a good nursery. Over the last four years these nurseries have contributed to afforestation programmes in the Araku Valley in Andhra Pradesh, the number of plants transported being over 2 lakh of more than 40 species. And this year too, a selection of 50,000 plants was sent off to northern Telengana as part of a larger plan to reforest the degraded patches there. The species had been carefully chosen to suit the dry terrain, raised in nursery beds and transferred to plastic bags and transported across the district by mid April. They will acclimatise in Telengana conditions for some weeks before being planted when the monsoon makes its appearance. Conservation in the time of conflict Travelling through undivided Bastar, from Jagdalpur to Konta, may be described as real or surreal, depending on how much one gets used to such situations – as one adapts, surreal becomes increasing real. In this less than a 200-km stretch of road and rut, there are about 30 camps of CRPF paramilitary battalions, usually occupying strategic places along the road, often conspicuous by their patrolling in groups along the road, as well as in the nearby forests. Their movements in the forests are noticeable by the trail of plastic and aluminium foil litter they leave behind in their wake – they too must be given packed lunches and breakfasts when they go on their rounds. In this two-decade-old reality, many of the earlier preoccupations that brought outsiders here – research and a different aspiration than that afflicts modern India – has become anachronistic. One doesn't talk about aesthetics and research when there is an imminent and all-consuming violence looming over a people, whether or not the media or the State reports it. More so with all the activities that go into forest conservation. This is why the work of the tribals is all the more remarkable. For instance, seed collection, apart from having to be done at a precise time, also entails that small groups of boys and girls wander in the forests, often far away from their homes. This simple activity has now become fraught with fear and apprehension with the possibility of encountering armed men in uniform – I can assure you that it's quite unsettling to have the barrel of a few AK-47's pointed at one's stomach. Similar fears threaten all other activities that Adivasi people undertake to protect their forests – from fire, from intruders who come for timber, and so on. These latter observations are especially crucial as in many of the interior areas – indeed even in the outskirts – as the forest department has abandoned its posts, citing the now convenient Maoist threat. High survival rate That tribals can carry out successful conservation work in such an atmosphere is extraordinary. And successful it is. The forest department in Telangana were rightly surprised that the mortality rate of plants after such a large transaction – planting, transplanting and transporting – was almost nil. The authorities have asked whether the adivasi people from Bastar can come and teach the department staff about nursery techniques in the coming months. Apart from nursery work these villages, all coming together as the Legal Environmental Action Foundation, or LEAF, have also been working over the past decade to protect their sacred groves, prevent forest fires, and patrol their forests to dissuade illegal felling of timber. LEAF is an Adivasi group working at the village level that was established to preserve their culture of using and simultaneously protecting their forest. At a time when strife has become synonymous with the region it is heartening to learn that the Adivasi people of the region have continued to care not only for their own forests but are helping other states improve and enrich their resources. When, finally, hoping against hope, the conflict ends, we will all need the forests just as much as we need them now. 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