

# Villagers help prevent spread of forest fire

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*In action: Villagers spot a fire and others join in to douse it.*

At a time when incidences of fire have reduced invaluable forest wealth to ashes across Odisha due to soaring temperature since March this year, forests around villages in Mayurbhanj and Kandhamal districts have surprisingly remained unaffected so far.

One thing is common about these villages is that they have been granted community forest resource (CFR) rights under the Forest Rights Act and their residents have taken up the task to check spread of fire in their surrounding forests.

Since March 1, as many as 2,121 forest fire spots have been detected by satellites across the State. In the past 18 days, 954 fires have affected different forest stretches.

A random assessment indicated that fire in forests around villages -- Bilapaka, Kolha, Routala, Bareipani, Makabadi and Kandabil inside Similipal forest – did not spread due to timely intervention by the villagers.

In Kandhamal district, there was hardly any fire noticed around Madikhol, Sapangi, Nedipaju and Sunamai villages under Jamjhari gram panchayats.

“Forest houses our living deities. They are found in forms of plants, rocks and animals. If forests catch fire, it is us who will be the biggest losers. Moreover, forest is the biggest source of our livelihood and food. We always wish that forests remain intact,” said Maheswar Naik, president of Conservation and Management Committee formed under the CFR, Balipaka village in Mayurbhanj district.

The residents of Balipaka village inside Similipal National Park have constituted two teams to keep a tab on forest fire. “As soon as anyone notices smoke in a forest, other villagers are immediately alerted. The squad rushes to the spot. Subsequently, a fire line is drawn between the affected and unaffected area to prevent its spread,” Mr. Naik said.

All villagers participate equally in fire-fighting during the summer. They also record their act of preventing fires.

Officials in the forest department often accuse forest dwellers of torching forests intentionally, which is right away dismissed by Jalandhar Kanhar, Secretary of Jangal Surkshya Parichalana Committee of Madikhol village of Kandhamal.

“There may be some unscrupulous elements in other parts of the State. But there is no reason why we will set forests on fire. The fire will destroy food, peacocks and other wild animals. Rather, we will be benefited if forest does not catch fire,” said Mr. Kanhar.

Hemant Kumar Sahu, a Bhubaneswar-based researcher on people’s contribution to forest conservation, said: “After getting the CFR rights, villagers have started to assert their ownership on forests. They have realised that conservation of forest would ensure their livelihood security and future existence.”

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