

## LIVE TV

[Opinion](#) [Blogs](#) [Auto](#) [Polls](#) [Speak Out](#) [Science](#) [Environment](#) [Education](#) **Sunday TOI** [Headlines](#) [Specials](#) [Crest](#) [2-Minute TOI](#) [ePaper](#) [Archives](#)  
[Special Report](#) [All That Matters](#) [Signs of Times](#)
You are here: [Home](#) > [Collections](#)

## The man who made a forest

Manimugdha S Sharma, TNN Apr 1, 2012, 07.06AM IST

14

621

[Tweet](#)
[Recommend](#)

**Tags:** [trees](#) | [Jean Giono](#) | [Jadav Payeng](#) | [French author](#) | [Assam](#)

Way back in 1953, French author Jean Giono wrote the epic tale The Man Who Planted Trees. It seemed so real that readers thought the central character, Elzeard Bouffier, was a living individual until the author clarified he had created the person only to make his readers fall in love with trees. Assam's Jadav Payeng has never heard of Giono's book. But he could be Bouffier. He has single-handedly grown a sprawling forest on a 550-hectare sandbar in the middle of the Brahmaputra. It now has many endangered animals, including at least five tigers, one of which bore two cubs recently.

The place lies in Jorhat, some 350 km from Guwahati by road, and it wasn't easy for Sunday Times to access him. At one point on the stretch, a smaller road has to be taken for some 30 km to reach the riverbank. There, if one is lucky, boatmen will ferry you across to the north bank. A trek of another 7 km will then land you near Payeng's door. Locals call the place 'Molai Kathoni' (Molai's woods) after Payeng's pet name, Molai.

It all started way back in 1979 when floods washed a large number of snakes ashore on the sandbar. One day, after the waters had receded, Payeng, only 16 then, found the place dotted with the dead reptiles. That was the turning point of his life.

"The snakes died in the heat, without any tree cover. I sat down and wept over their lifeless forms. It was carnage. I alerted the forest department and asked them if they could grow trees there. They said nothing would grow there. Instead, they asked me to try growing bamboo. It was painful, but I did it. There was nobody to help me. Nobody was interested," says Payeng, now 47.

Leaving his education and home, he started living on the sandbar. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, Payeng willingly accepted a life of isolation. And no, he had no Man Friday. He watered the plants morning and evening and pruned them. After a few years, the sandbar was transformed into a bamboo thicket. "I then decided to grow proper trees. I collected and planted them. I also transported red ants from my village, and was stung many times. Red ants change the soil's properties. That was an experience," Payeng says, laughing.

Soon, there were a variety of flora and fauna which burst in the sandbar, including endangered animals like the one-horned rhino and Royal Bengal tiger. "After 12 years, we've seen vultures. Migratory birds, too, have started flocking here. Deer and cattle have attracted predators," claims Payeng. He says locals recently killed a rhino which was seen in his forest at another forest in Sibsagar district.

Payeng talks like a trained conservationist. "Nature has made a food chain; why can't we stick to it? Who would protect these animals if we, as superior beings, start hunting them?"

The Assam state forest department learnt about Payeng's forest only in 2008 when a herd of some 100 wild elephants strayed into it after a marauding spree in villages nearby. They also destroyed Payeng's hutment. It was then that assistant conservator of forests Gunin Saikia met Payeng for the first time.

"We were surprised to find such a dense forest on the sandbar. Locals, whose homes had been destroyed by the pachyderms, wanted to cut down the forest, but Payeng dared them to kill him instead. He treats the trees and animals like his own children. Seeing this, we, too, decided to pitch in," says Saikia. "We're amazed at Payeng. He has been at it for 30 years. Had he been

### RELATED ARTICLES

[No VIP barrier to the call of the jungle](#)  
December 21, 2003

[Train runs down Royal Bengal tiger](#)  
June 19, 2007

[Royal Bengal tigers grow in strength](#)  
October 4, 2001

in any other country, he would have been made a hero."

Help from the government wasn't forthcoming, though. It was only last year that the social forestry division took up plantation work on a 200-hectare plot.

Meanwhile, Congress MP from Jorhat, Bijoy Krishna Handique, took interest and said he would moot a proposal to the Centre to declare the area a conservation reserve under provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Payeng would be happy.

## FEATURED ARTICLES



Sari gets a sexy avatar



How to lose weight without dieting



Sexy and lacy wedding lingerie is here!

### More:

Kangna, the 'Ottoman' queen in JJ Valaya's 'empire'

Samsung launches 3 dual-SIM smartphones in India

Mystic claims that Mary appeared at Batim apparition

Apple cuts iPad 2 price in India

17 tips for healthy hair and skin

Apply online, get your voter ID in a month

## Readers' opinions (21)

Sort by: **Newest** | Oldest

### Indian (Bharat)

04 Apr, 2012 10:02 AM

Most conservationists & environmentalists around the world just talk - our Molai actually did it ! way to go, hope more of us would get the courage to dedicate our lives to worth cause like Payeng's

### Girish (Mumbai)

03 Apr, 2012 11:33 PM

May God and Mother Earth bless him and may this be an inspiration to the rest of us.

### Surekha (Bangalore)

03 Apr, 2012 11:27 PM

Excellent Work.similar approach should be adopted to conserve Earth.

### ananta ku dash (odisha bolangir)

03 Apr, 2012 07:44 PM

great job payeng keep it going nd the assam govt should award people like him who single handedly create such vast jungle instead of writing boring article on politicians bollywood stars anna team the times should encourage more such people to be highlighted any it is a good move by the reporter

### vidyadhar sahasrabuddhe (mumbai)

03 Apr, 2012 03:54 PM

Jadav Payeng's relentless efforts give us hope that the dwindling forest cover in India could be revived.He is the real hero of our times.He should be suitably rewarded by the State and Central Governments.

[» READ ALL COMMENTS](#)