



'The Molai Forest'

By Maulika Pandey, Junior Runner-up aged 13 from India

It was undoubtedly going to be frosty tonight. As the rain poured heavy, I snuggled my grandchildren into their mother's old bed. They longed to hear a story, but I couldn't think of one I hadn't told them yet. I gazed out the window to see the trees bending and swaying with the wind but still standing tall. I had planted those trees when I was a teenager, and they had always been with me ever since then. Memories flooded my mind. Just then, I know the perfect story to tell them.

"Grandma! Are you still thinking?" Samaira, my eldest granddaughter, asked impatiently.

"Ah yes! I want to tell you the story of Jadav Payeng...a man who believed in himself...my biggest inspiration when I was your age. You see, that was the time of manual labour...time when Earth choked due to deforestation...We didn't have robot machines that planted trees at a massive rate then like how we do now. Trees had to be manually planted and it wasn't easy. But this man not just planted trees, but built an entire forest – The Molai forest!"



"Wow! Grandma how was that possible!" Akshay said, surprised.

I smiled.

"Jadav Payeng comes from a tribe in Assam. You see, when he was sixteen, he witnessed massive number of dead snakes...their lifeless bodies entangled and curled up on the hot sand bars. All due to the excessive heat after floods washed them onto a sandbar. The mere thought of the pain these snakes went through disturbed him. He decided to do something for them....to plant bamboo seedlings on the sandbar."

"Bamboo seedlings? All by himself?"



"Yes! He did it all by himself, with his own hands. Later, in 1979, the forestry division of Golaghat district launched a scheme of tree plantation on 200 hectares land. Jadav was among the labourer involved in this project. When the project completed after five years, he was the only one to stay behind and tender the plants. While doing so, he planted more plants in an attempt to turn the area into a forest. Slowly this jungle became house to many species of animals like the Bengal tigers, Indian rhinoceros and many vultures too! Many elephants visited the forest and even gave birth to calves during their stay. There are a thousand different varieties of trees and you both would be surprised to know that bamboo covers three hundred hectares of the forest!"

"Three hundred hectares! That's about three hundred football fields!", Samaira added.

"Oh My! Three hundred hectares is so much! How did he manage to plant so many trees on such a large scale?" Akshay curiously asked.

"That's the interesting thing about his story. He went to the forest every day to plant trees for decades! Almost for forty years and after all the efforts, he managed to plant forty million trees! Everyone at that time called him 'The Forest Man of India' and the forest which he created is around five hundred and fifty hectares!"



His efforts only came into notice in the year 2008 when some forest department officials went into the forest in search of a hundred elephants that had retreated in there. They didn't expect the forest to be so dense and large."

"I'm glad his efforts came into notice. Oh...now I remember...he's the same person my teachers told us about. Once poachers came to hunt for the rhinos in his forest. Mr Jadav timely alerted the forest department and the officials caught them.", Samaira said.

"Yes! It's great that your school teaches you about people like him. He's an inspiration to the young generation. Jadav had also spread his forest to another sand bar inside of Brahmaputra. He has been multiply honoured like the Padma Shri award in 2015 and Commonwealth Points of Light Award in 2020!"





"Woah! That's the fourth highest civilian award in India!" Akshay excitedly said.

"So children, now you tell me what you have learnt?"

"Consistency is the key to success. He went there every day to plant. That's how he was able to plant forty million trees!" Samaira was quick to answer.

"And we should always try to do the right thing for everyone even if no one asked for it. I would also try my best to always do what is right." Akshay willingly added.

"I hope you do so. So, now that you both have been inspired, how about we plant trees tomorrow morning?"

"Of course grandma!" they both happily exclaimed.

