



LAY OF THE LAND

Reports from near and far

The Forest Man

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OUR INTENTIONS are modest as we traverse the Brahmaputra on a small boat to visit the wetlands of Majuli Island. The island was formed in the eighteenth century by the Brahmaputra River and its anabranches. Considered the largest river island in the world, Majuli is home to more than thirty Vaishnava Hindu monasteries, where celibates perform *bhaona* plays wearing character masks, such as Krishna, Sita, or even a bird. But we will not be visiting any monasteries today. We are eager to meet a grassroots environmental activist known as The Forest Man. Since 1979, he has planted seeds to combat yearly floods and erosion on the island. His name is Jadav Payeng, and the thirteen-hundred-acre forest he has created is larger than New York's Central Park.

It takes twenty minutes to cross the colossal Brahmaputra on a tiny boat with a single engine and to land on the island's isolated sandy beach. Emaciated cows graze the embankment, and birds fly in and out of *bogori* trees and tall clusters of grass. We wait under a straw shed held by bamboo poles and soon a red tractor

noisily approaches us on bumpy irregular tracks. The trailer bed is cushioned with hay and covered with a tarpaulin, and we get in. Settling down, we acknowledge the driver, "Hello, there. Mr. Payeng has sent you to pick us up, right?" He nods and smiles.

The tractor ride is jerky and jumpy, and we hold on tight to the sides, passing Indigenous Mising villages, their thatch-and-bamboo huts on stilts and partly shaded by groves of bamboo. Pigs and chickens loiter underneath. Women work on their looms or pump water for bathing and cooking. Children run out to see us pass. They giggle and laugh. Some houses have brimming vegetable patches and flower gardens: cauliflowers, cabbages, spinach and other greens, gourds, bougainvilleas, and marigolds. A schoolhouse stands on the periphery.

Soon we reach the edge of bamboo groves, tall trees, vines, and branches laden with ripe bogori. From there we see a pavilion in a clearing by a forest. Payeng steps out to greet us. He is unassuming and ordinary in his *lungi* and *chappals*, yet muscled from his daily commune with the land. Water is boiling in a pot over a wood fire. It's almost nine in the morning, and our host offers us tea.

We ask, "Where do you sleep, Mr. Payeng?"

He says, "Right here." The camp has

nothing but bamboo beds raised on bamboo stilts.

"But there are no walls."

"Don't need them," he says. "We sleep in our open camp without barriers."

After tea, he collects our teacups, puts them away, and we follow him to his forest, where we are soothed by the sounds of chattering birds and rustling leaves. Towering trees, some graced by red flowers, are interspersed with grasslands and thickets of bamboo. Payeng demonstrates how he plants saplings in the sandbars, gesturing seed dispersal with his hand. He says, "I started by planting bamboo groves. Slowly I added *ximolu*, *segun*, *arjun*, and others."

Payeng also produces vegetables and lentils in a garden patch near his camp. He raises goats and cows. He sells milk. "We get elephants, even rhinos, tigers, and leopards visit us from time to time," he says. "We live side by side." It's not easy to raise cattle and be warm toward predators. But Payeng does not discriminate. He believes in animal conservation and recognizes these species' importance to the forest. He says, "If we humans don't take care, who will?"

When it's time to leave, Payeng rides back with us on the tractor. Jute lentil pillows, made for the *Bihu* harvest festival market, cushion our backs. Seeing his goats without the goatherd, Payeng abruptly jumps out of the tractor. He yells

back, "See you there!" and points to the river. When we reach the bank, the swift naturalist is already sitting inside the narrow motorboat.

After crossing the river, we anchor on the bank in Kokilamukh and match our strides to Payeng's hasty gait as we walk to his house, which is built in Mising style—on stilts, but instead made of concrete. We find a few chairs and a table inside the main room; through a doorway we see a large kitchen with a hearth in the middle. Our host opens a glass cabinet that displays medals and awards. "I hear a Padma Shri is coming," he says. He shows us newspaper clippings and predicts he will soon receive India's fourth highest civilian award. But he also admits that all the honors and recognitions are getting in the way of his work. He is happiest in his own patch of forest. Most of his life, Payeng has done the work he believes in—seeding, planting, propagating into posterity—without seeking validation.

"*Namaskar*," we finally say to Payeng as we stand up; he walks us to his

three-tier bamboo gate.

Driving back to Jorhat, thirty minutes away, we pass villages surrounded by harvested paddy fields. The bald fields are dotted with thatch huts. Some, which the village youth construct for Bihu feasts, are shaped as replicas of local landmarks. After dining inside them, community members set them ablaze and enjoy a bonfire at night. Glimpsing the rectangular village *namghars*, Vaishnava houses of worship, I recall the time when I watched my first bhaona play. I was six and rode a bullock cart to a Majuli Island monastery. After the play I had an audience with the *satradhikar*. The island was lush and intact. Severe flooding and erosion came years later, and Payeng rose to his calling. Today, I rode a tractor to meet an ordinary man, and my soul swells with gratitude.

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