

# Green Thumbs Up



Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Foundation has been awarded the Indira Gandhi Pariyavaran Puraskar for its sustained environmental conservation campaign in Tamil Nadu through its Project Green Hands (PHG). Sadhguru spoke to MONA MEHTA and RANJENI A SINGH in New Delhi

**Do you feel good about getting an award for your green initiative?**

■ The award is for those who made the campaign successful. It is a 100 per cent rural people's movement. The award is being given in recognition of their vision, enthusiasm and commitment. It is significant also because they live close to nature and depend on it for their livelihood. They are not aware of global warming and climate change. We did talk to them about these issues, of how it was when they were children and how it might be for their children and their children's children. They were spurred into action. They've done much to restore green cover while I would say most of the damage has been inflicted by those who consider themselves to be elite.

**Green Hands revives degraded forests or creates new ones?**

■ We did not really think in terms of forests. We mostly talked in terms of green cover. The definition of forest in India is an easy one; any land which is about one hectare in area and at least 10 per cent of which is covered by tree canopy, is considered a forest. So in that sense, we are creating new forests. Officially, the Tamil Nadu government has declared that the green cover in the state has gone up by 4.2 per cent. Probably it is the only place in Asia in the last 30 years where the green cover has actually gone up. And it is spread over the entire state.

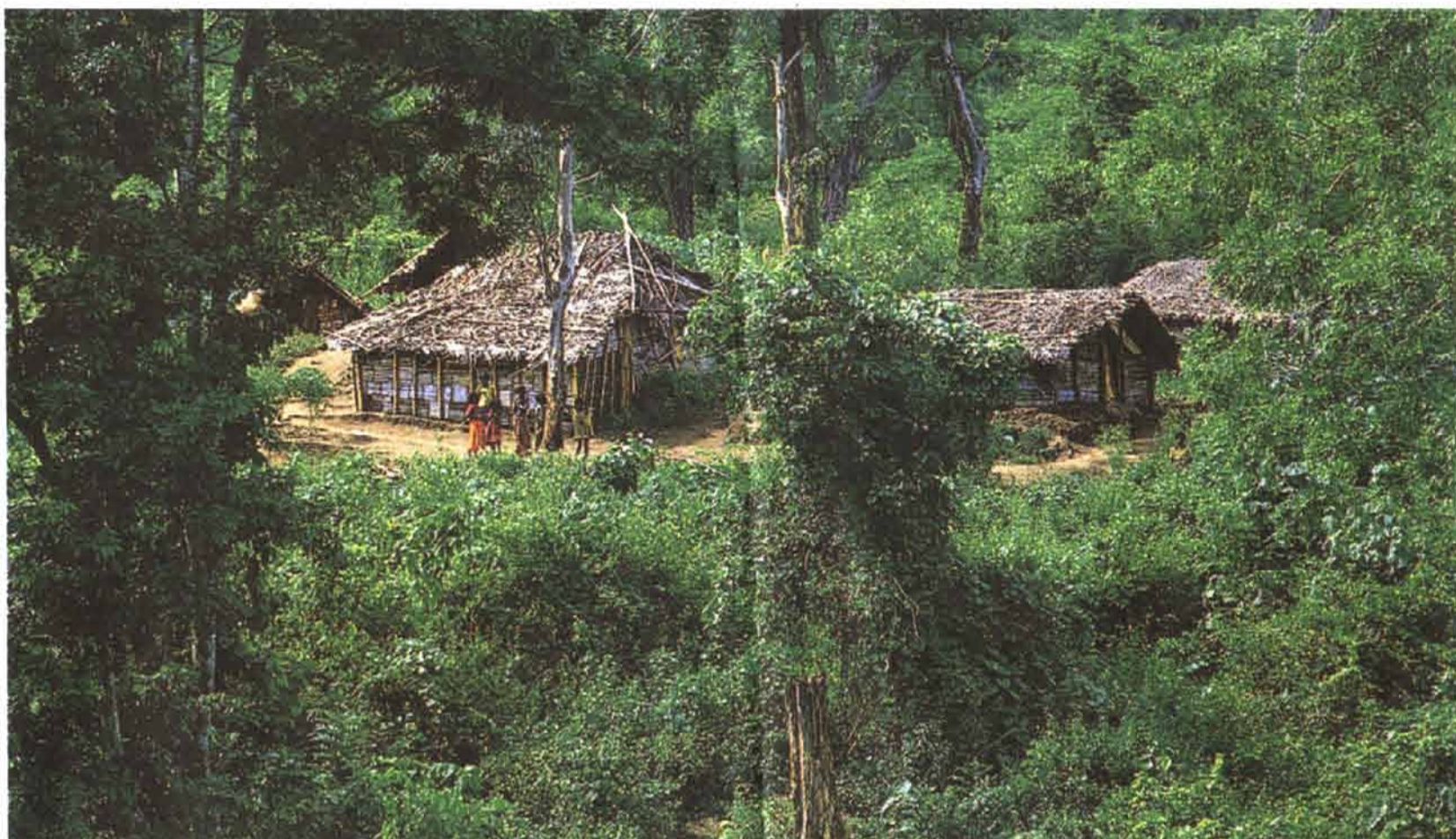
**Did you add new species of plants? What about mangroves?**

■ It is easier to plant fast-growing plants. But we took care not to bring in outside species; we chose from 108 indigenous saplings. The ecology will bounce back only if we plant indigenous varieties.

We have not worked in mangroves as these are protected areas and difficult to enter. Our work is significant mainly because most of the tree planting was happening on private land. We convinced the farming community that they must set aside 10 per cent of the land they are tilling for trees. So the idea is to have more food coming from trees than crops which vary every six months or so. Farmers do realise that trees are good for them and that they need to nurture them.

**How did Isha get started on greening Tamil Nadu?**

■ The Isha Ashram in Tamil Nadu is located at the edge of a large forest. There is a hill behind our ashram; it used to turn brown during summer and exude heat. This is because someone started an illegal furniture business and denuded the area, felling all



FOREST COVER, WESTERN GHATS, TAMIL NADU

the trees. I knew we had to change all that. In 1998-99 we bought this land from the businessman, even though it cost us three times the normal price. We gathered 3,000-4,000 volunteers, some of whom would use metal cones to dig the ground where others would plant seeds that we had collected from the forest earlier, and cover it with sand. Almost all seeds sprouted and 80 per cent of these plants thrived. Today, the hill is green through the year, and the temperature is three degrees lower at the ashram than it used to be, although there is not a single tree there which more than 20 years old.

It took us 20-25 days to do this. We spent money only on organising food. And we went about making the area green, joyfully, trekking up the mountain, singing, planting seeds. It was just one week of actual work. That's all it takes to bring about a change that makes a difference. Ecological work is not one person's work; it is every body's work because all of us breathe, all of us eat and every one of us takes something from the planet. If we can inspire this kind of commitment, we can indeed repair the environment.

**Are you focusing also on protecting biodiversity?**

■ Regenerating biodiversity would take longer. Once the green cover spreads, you don't have to worry about biodiversity; nature will take care of that. But we do have plans to revive some perennial rivers in Tamil Nadu which have gone dry over the past few years. Increasing green cover will help in this effort.

**CONVERSATIONS**

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**Would your green project include the urban population?**

■ Yes, we have so far initiated PGH project in 20 towns of Tamil Nadu. My intention is to extend this project to the whole world. However, intention alone is not enough. We need adequate support for action. For now, we plan to plant one lakh saplings in Delhi when the rains start. We are doing the same in Mumbai and some other parts of Maharashtra. Planting trees is not the sole objective. Awareness has to spread, for without peoples' participation and support, trees cannot survive. We need to look at trees not as a product to be exploited but as a life form you live with,

transformation has to happen. Trees are our closest relatives. You cannot do without them. We breathe in what they exhale and they inhale what we breathe out. It is important to understand that we are intimately connected.

**Should forest dwellers be resettled elsewhere to protect forests?**

People living in the forest are not the problem. It's the commercial exploitation which is the problem and we need to address that. A tribal cutting one branch to make firewood for his family is not going to take away the forest. It is also about putting back what we take out. We blame the poor tribal all the time. If we take him out of the forest, where are we going to put him? If you put him in the city, he will not survive.

Normally people are under the impression that if economic growth happens, there is no need to take care of ecology. That is not true. Only if people are economically empowered, you can tell them to protect the environment. When they are fighting for their survival, you can't say to them "don't cut this, don't cut that."

**How much carbon sink has your programme created?**

■ We have not measured that as we have not gone in for carbon trading because this is mostly a people's movement. It is common knowledge that trees planted in the tropical region offset the carbon level to the maximum than elsewhere in the planet. In India within 30 degrees of latitude is always the best place to plant a tree. So it is imperative

that we plant trees in these areas.

**How would you describe sustainable development?**

■ For something to be sustainable there is a need to cap the population. Today we are a 120 crore strong nation. In the last 60 years, we have grown four times over, and the land is incapable of supporting such large numbers.

So it does not matter how many trees you plant or green technologies you bring in, without limiting population growth all this will come to naught.

A consumerist economy that seeks more of everything might be important for us to get out of the rut. I am not against it. But economies are no longer limited within national boundaries, they have become globalised. We need to talk on a larger scale. The only way anything can be sustained is we put a cap on something, because it is a limited planet with limited resources. We need to put a cap on human population.

**Would you say global warming is our collective karma?**

■ Definitely, producing too much carbon dioxide is our collective karma isn't it? We all inhale and exhale, this is our karma, and it is our doing. The spiritual process is not about looking up, down or around; it is about looking inward. When you do that, you realise that your existence is not separate from the existence around. For me it is about inner ecology. Someone asked me at Davos, are you the amazing tree planter? I told him no, I make people blossom. ■