

TULASI GOWDA - A BAREFOOTED INCARNATION OF VANADEVI

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Abstract

In all eras, women have excelled in almost every field equally to men. However, due to the lack of recognition and value of their contributions from the public, there has been a decline in considering them worthy. Amongst these unsung legends, the worst affected are marginalized communities and downtrodden sections of societies across the world. However, in India, people regard as gods or goddesses those who work for the benefit of society and the environment. This paper aims to shed light on the dedication of a woman from the tribal group who, with her immense traditional knowledge of plant physiology and ecosystem, transformed the environment of a section of a hilly region of Karnataka. Recently, her efforts have been appreciated by the Government of India, paying tribute to her for the conservation of forests and afforestation. The traditional tribal methods of forest conservation were used to restore the ecosystem, and to do so, a few selected species of trees were planted. This led to the massive growth of 30,000 forest trees around the location of Masti Katta village, which are endemic to the Western Ghats. As a result, the true spirit of relentless free service of a tribal woman came into existence and has shown a path of development of ecology.

Keywords: Tribal woman, Masti Katta, ecology, endemic forest trees, Western Ghats.

INTRODUCTION

Karnataka State in India has over 25 wildlife sanctuaries, 5 national parks, and forest cover that covers one-third of the state's area. There are 14 tribal groups live in these forests, and out of these, an indigenous tribe called Halakki Vokkaligas predominantly occupies the forests of Uttara Kannada district. This tribe has a matriarchal system of society, which is connected to nature and cares for the land.

From this tribe, a woman named Tulasi Gowda was born in 1938 in Honnali village of Ankola Taluka into an impoverished family. Despite having no formal education and losing her father at an early age, she had to work alongside her mother at the Agasur village nursery. When she grew up, she started working on a daily wage basis for many years in the nursery of the Karnataka Forest Department, and her job profile was to protect the seeds meant for harvesting and grow them into trees. At the age of 35, she was offered a permanent position in recognition of her work towards conservation and her knowledge of botany. She worked at the nursery in this position before retiring at the age of seventy. During her time at the nursery, she contributed to and worked directly on the afforestation efforts of the forest department by using traditional knowledge of the land. As well as planting saplings, she worked to prevent poachers and forest fires from destroying wildlife. She is 75 years old now and still continues to plant trees and share her vast knowledge with younger generations to promote the importance of environmental conservation without any expectations. Until today, she had walked barefoot in the forest and fostered more than 40,000 trees like her own offspring, helping grow into a matured tree. The plants she grew are endemic, ecologically important, and difficult to grow, but she still managed to turn them into trees. She planted more than one lakh saplings and 300 medicinal plants, and worked around more than 5 wildlife conservation parks. For her contributions to environmental protection in the hilly regions of Masti Katta ranges in Karnataka (Western Ghats), she was conferred the 'Karnataka Rajyotsava Award' by the Government of Karnataka in 1999 and the Padma Shri Award in 2021 by the Government of India.

RECOGNITIONS

● Tulasi Gowda is known by environmentalists as the "Encyclopedia of the forest" and by her tribe as the "tree goddess - Vanadevi." She is renowned for her ability to identify the mother tree of every species of tree in the forest, no matter where it is.

- She is called "Ajji" (grandmother) lovingly by the villagers due to her unparalleled knowledge of silviculture, which includes everything involved in the growing and cultivation of trees, their ecological and economic value, and their utility, etc.

NATURE OF WORK

- The mother trees in the forest are identified by Tulasi Gowda. They are significant due to their age and size, which make them the most connected nodes in the forest. These underground nodes are used to connect mother trees with saplings and seedlings as they exchange nitrogen and nutrients.
- She is also an expert in seed collection, germination techniques, and can determine the exact time. The extraction of seeds from maternal trees to regenerate and regrow entire plant species is a difficult process, as the seeds must be collected at the peak of germination from the mother tree, as it ensures the survival of the seedlings.
- The methods of growing the plants vary from species to species. Generally, the seeds are collected and dried before being planted. They are then put in a container with water and left there for four days. Then they scrub them until they turn white and finally plant them. After about 20-25 days, they start to sprout. Then they are nurtured in the forest. Some seeds of trees, such as "matti", fall off by themselves, which are directly used for planting, and it is typically done in April or May. The seeds of honne, nandi, tamarind, and gooseberry are all sown directly. It is only in April or May that the seeds of bamboo are found.
- The major issue related to afforestation is the failure of planted trees or the requirement of special care for planted saplings. Utilizing the indigenous knowledge and management skills of tribal peoples protection of biodiversity and combating climate change would be easy. For doing this, first of all, gene preservation is essential, and so is forest conservation. If forests thrive, the earth will be well. There will be an abundance of water availability, agricultural development, and a decrease in atmospheric temperature.

METHOD

The data collected from the articles published on websites and the YouTube videos.

RESULT

The references regarding the plants used for afforestation were studied and correlated with the success of plant survival and their significance. The plants, including eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), teak (*Tectona grandis*), Sheesham (*Dalbergia latifolia*), honne (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), matti (*Terminalia elliptica*), mangoes (*Mangifera indica*), jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa*), and bogi mara (*Hopea parviflora*), were grown.

ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SELECTED TREES

1. *Terminalia tomentosa* - (Kirimatti - Kannada):

It is ecologically significant because it stores water in its stem, which is tapped by forest dwellers in the summer and used as a source of potable water.

2. *Pterocarpus marsupium* (Honne in Kannada):

It is medically important as an anti-diabetic agent, helping to lower blood sugar levels by enhancing insulin sensitivity, inhibiting glucose absorption, and supporting pancreatic function.

3. *Terminalia elliptica*:

The bark ash of this tree is used in betel leaves and is chewed. The fruit is used as antiseptic, antioxidant, dye for tanning leather, in cosmetics, as a photographic developer, and as an absorbent for oxygen in gas analysis.

4. *Eucalyptus spp* - Eucalypts:

It is ecologically significant in controlling desertification, afforesting denuded sites, and providing land use for saline and alkaline soils with a pH of 8.5. It also helps to preserve biodiversity by meeting fuel wood needs that would otherwise come from natural forests.

5. *Dalbergia latifolia* - sheesham:

It is important in agroforestry systems as a shade tree. It is used to prevent soil erosion, as a nitrogen-fixing agent, and provides benefits for mulch. The foliage can be used as fodder.

6. *Lagerstroemia microcarpa* - Nandi:

It is ecologically important as suitable for land restoration and honeybee nests. Since the honey bees are excellent pollinators.

ANALYSIS

The above plants are either ecologically or economically important. Furthermore, their main feature is that they are all endemic to the Indian subcontinent. These characteristics of the plant help in maintaining biodiversity and forest health for a long period.

CONCLUSION

The indigenous knowledge of the tribal people has always been positively useful in maintaining the forest ecology for generations. Since they live in the forest and have respect and affection towards every aspect of it. They have gathered enormous information through experience and the traditional knowledge system. The modern methods of forest conservation need to incorporate local forestry science and document the procedures.

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