



**JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man of India**

# **AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION**

**JADAV "MOLAI" PAYENG (Born 1963) is an environmental activist and forestry worker from Majuli, popularly known as the Forest Man of India. Over the course of several decades, he has planted and tended trees on a sandbar of the river Brahmaputra turning it into a forest reserve. The forest, called Molai forest after him, is located near Kokilamukh of Jorhat, Assam, India and encompasses an area of about 1,360 acres/550 hectares. In 2015, he was honoured with Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India. He was born in the indigenous Mising tribe of Assam.**

# **JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man**

Jadav Payeng was born in 1963. At the age of sixteen he began planting trees on a deserted island, and over the next few decades, an entire forest grew out of his efforts. He devoted his youth and most of his life to this mission-reducing erosion by planting trees and tending to the land. His forest became known as the Molai forest, after Jadav's nickname. Over the last few years, he has been given a number of awards and been made the subject of documentaries and books about environmental conservation. In 2015, this humble tribesman from Assam was honoured with the PADMA SHRI AWARD for his contributions.



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In 1979, during the monsoon, sixteen year old Jadav saw a pile of snakes washed up on a sandbar after the Brahmaputra river flooded. They were scorched to death in the heat that came after the rains and dried the water up. The sight filled him with horror, and drove him to wonder what would happens to humans, whether they, too, would die the same way without shade and tree cover in the heat. He asked the nearby villagers for help, because he could see that the land around them was being eroded and damaged at a great rate. Their advice was to plant trees, as many as possible, especially trees like bamboo which would be able to survive difficult whether. Jadhav took their advice to heart, and never looked back. Driven by his mission, he stopped going to school, focusing only on the task at hand- to plant more trees every day.

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The Brahmaputra river is home to the world's largest river island-Majuli. This island is almost 1000 hectares in area, but is constantly threatened by submersion due to the widespread soil erosion that takes place. Majuli island was shrinking, and fast. To stop this, the Forestry Division of Golaghat district launched a plan in 1980 to plant trees across 200 hectares. Jadav was one of the local labourers to help with this effort. When the plan was abandoned in 1983, Jadav continued as if it had never stopped. He chose to stay back even after the others left, and not only did he take care of the trees already planted, but he went on to plant hundreds and thousands more trees, transforming the barren sandbars and islands in the Brahmaputra into a dense, green forest.

Assam's Majuli becomes  
**INDIA'S FIRST**  
**RIVER ISLAND DISTRICT**

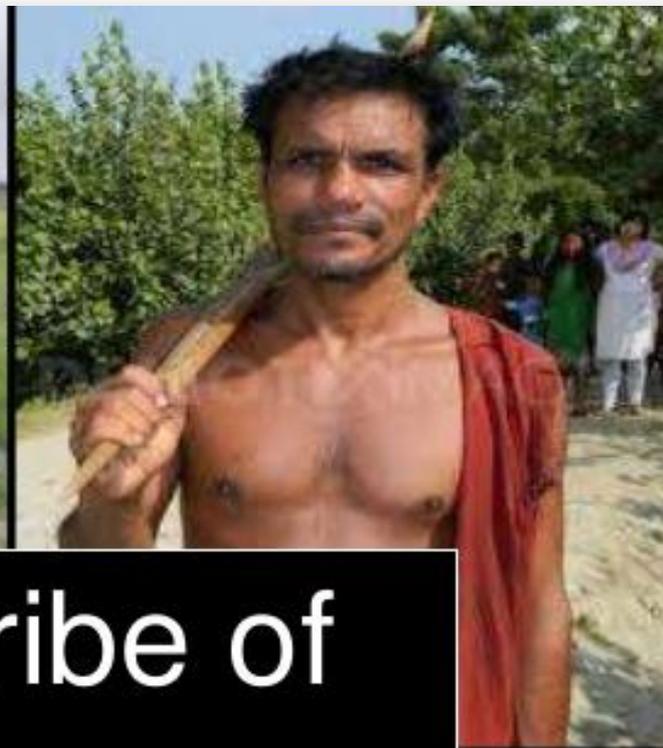
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This forest was named 'Molai' Forest after him, and became a home to elephants, rhinoceros. Bengal tigers and number of different kinds of deer and birds. The trees themselves are incredibly diverse as Jadav planted as many seeds as he could get his hands on, not just sticking to bamboo-though bamboo is the most common tree in the forest. Today, People travel from all over the world to visit the Molai forest to get a glimpse of not just the various wildlife but also the wonder of a forest this single man managed to create.

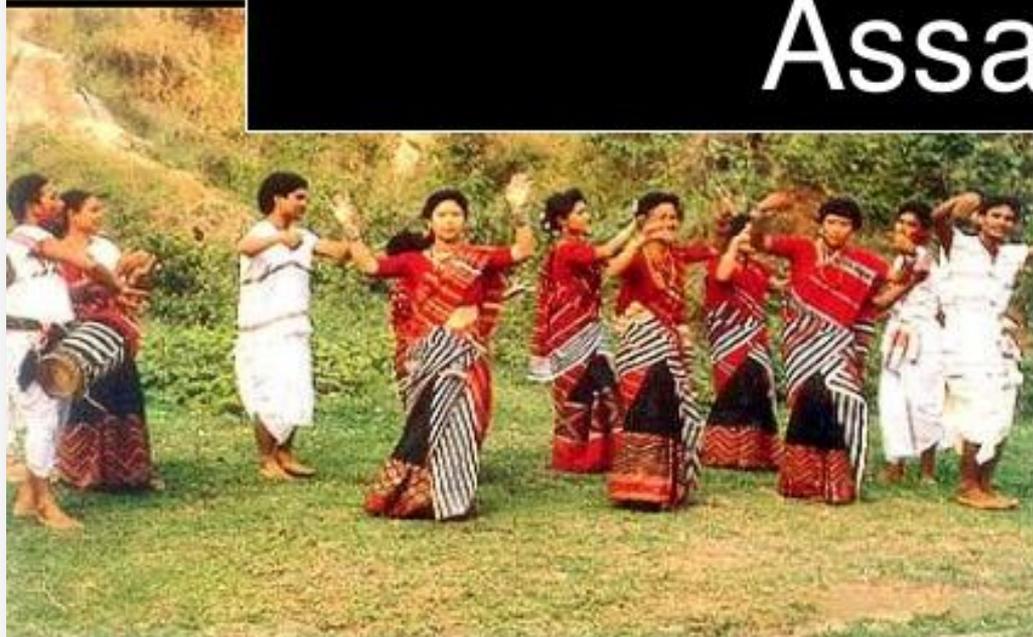


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For the longest time, nearly thirty years, Jadav worked on his forest alone, waking up before sunrise every day, rowing his boat across the river to the island, and working all day in the forest planting new trees, taking care of sapling and younger tree and plants, making sure all was right in his contained ecosystem. No one really knew about his work, besides the nearby villagers and the Mishing tribe to which Jadav belonged. Jadav did not ask for help, nor did he seek permission from any government authorities; he believed his work was necessary and also a part of the Mishing traditions of respecting and giving back to nature.



# The Mishing Tribe of Assam



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In 2008, a herd of elephants accidentally entered Jadav's forest after running wild through nearby villages, damaging fields and houses. When officials from the forest department came looking for the elephants, they were amazed to discover this dense forest covering so much space. They were further surprised when they learned that it was the work of one man alone. The locals wanted to cut down part of the forest in order to hunt the elephants that had destroyed their homes, but Jadav was almost literally standing in their way. When asked about the incident Jadav remembers, 'But I said: Kill me first, before killing these animals'. The same villagers now acknowledge the importance of the woods as it has become a source of livelihood for them.

# **JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man**

The state forest department did not officially extend any help with Jadav's continuing efforts. However, the local officials who had discovered the forest were so impressed that they began to visit regularly, and would sometimes bring saplings and seeds so Jadav could go on planting and growing his forest. Then, a few years later, when poachers began to invade the forest, trying to catch rhinos and the other animals living in the forest, Jadav immediately warned the forest department. They were quick to respond, and not only did they prevent the poachers from succeeding by taking away their equipment and supplies, but officials from the forest department also camped in the Molai forest for a few months to confront and catch poachers.

# JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man

Jadav lives with his wife and three children in a small hut near the forest and while his priority and mission in life is to continue planting trees and tending to his forest he makes his living by selling milk from his cows and buffalos. He has a small farm where he raises these animals and also grows vegetables. The cattle often graze in the forest which can be dangerous, since there are tigers that roam those areas. Jadav has admitted to losing a number cattle to tigers in the forest, but he doesn't resent them or get angry about it: "Nature has made food chain; why can't we stick to it? Who would protect these animals if we, superior human beings, start hunting them?" He never feels that he is in danger from the wild animals; rather he says man is biggest danger to the forest. Between poachers, locals looking to protect their villages from the wild animals and other out to cut down trees to get wood-even Jadav agrees that the numerous cotton and bamboo trees in his forest are excellent wood-the forest faces far more threats than it causes.

# **JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man**

Though the forest was almost a secret for thirty years, once it was discovered. Jadav Payeng's efforts became the stuff of legends. A number of documentaries have been made about his work in the past few years. In 2012, the Molai forest a locally made documentary, was produced and screened at Jawaharlal Nehru University. The next year film documentary *Foresting Life*, directed by the Indian documentary filmmaker Arti Shrivastav, celebrates the life and work of Jadav Payeng in the Molai forest. In 2014 these are also the focus of William Douglas McMaster's film documentary *Forest Man*. The film was brought to completion and taken to a number of film festivals. It was awarded the Best Documentary Prize at the Emerging Filmmaker Showcase in the American Pavilion at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival. Payeng is also the subject of the children's book *Jadav and the Tree-Place* written.

# ARTI SRIVASTAVA-THE FILMMAKER



# **JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man**

Jadav Payeng was honoured at a public function arranged by the school of environmental sciences, JNU on 22 April 2012 for his achievement. In the month of October 2013, he was honoured at the Indian Institute of Forest Management during their annual event Coalescence. In 2015, he was honoured with Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India. He received honorary doctorate degree from Assam Agricultural University and Kaziranga University for his contributions.

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It has been forty years since Jadav began planting trees. He has not grown tired of his work, nor does he intend to stop any time soon. He still does most of it alone, going through the forest to water and check on new saplings and trees, to collect medicinal herbs to make sure the soil is ready for new seeds his work never ends. He believes children are the future, and the key to saving the environment: “Planting of trees should be part of the school curriculum. Each child should plant two trees and look after them till they leave school. This way, they will generate the oxygen they need and also pass on the legacy to newcomers.”

# **JADAV PAYENG: The Forest Man**

Jadav Payeng's work has had a noticeable impact on the world. His contributions to the environment are amazing, especially when one considers that for forty years no one knew what he was doing. The Molai forest is the result of one man's dedicated service to nature, and proof that even one person can make a difference.