

Oxygen parks, protected grasslands: A small Maharashtra village's efforts in environmental conservation

 downtoearth.org.in/environment/oxygen-parks-protected-grasslands-a-small-maharashtra-village-s-efforts-in-environmental-conservation-79150

Rushikesh Gawade

September 22, 2021

We need your support to continue doing what we do best. **SUPPORT US**



Water conservation structures created in the grassland surrounding the village. Photo: Rushikesh Gawade

Published on:

Kadbanwadi, a small village in Maharashtra's Pune district, is surrounded by greenery but receives very little rainfall. Its residents have battled water scarcity for decades and have turned to community conservation of the region's environmental resources to circumvent the problem and leave behind a healthy habitat for posterity.

Kadbanwadi means 'a place surrounded by forest'. A 500-hectare patch of grassland skirts the village, with Neem, Babul and Ber trees dotting it. It is also home to many other important species of flora and fauna like the Indian wolf and the Indian gazelle (Chinkara).

The grassland around the village was creatively utilised to create water conservation structures and parts of it were declared prohibited for open grazing.

Structures for providing water for the wildlife during summers were also created. This approach has resulted in significant improvement in the state of biodiversity and water availability here.

Oxygen park

A 20-acre abandoned forest land located within the village was converted into an 'oxygen park' by the residents. The story of how the village came together to make this possible without government funding can inspire conservation efforts across the country to circumvent environmental crises and impacts of climate change.

The idea of creating this park was first articulated by Bhajandas Pawar, a retired science teacher and a former sarpanch of this village. The land located away from the surrounding grassland was largely neglected by the forest department. The idea was to plant trees of the varieties that are not very frequently found in the grassland.

A 500-hectare grassland surrounds the village and is dotted with Neem, Babul and Ber trees.

Photo: Rushikesh Gawade

With help from environmentalists from Pune city, the villagers planted around 700 saplings of Peepal, Tamarind, Jamun, Bahawa, Banyan, among other trees.

The money needed for this work was contributed by the people involved in this initiative. A farmer supplies water from his farm for the trees and villagers visit the park every evening to look after them.

All the saplings planted in the park have survived and are rapidly flourishing. The state's forest minister visited the park on its first anniversary.

Taking inspiration from the success of this initiative, similar initiatives are being taken up in some other villages in the area.

A common goal

The residents involved in the initiative are joined by a common motivation: Hope for a better future.

Bhajandas Pawar, who has been the driving force of these efforts, was also at the forefront of the water conservation drive in the village. He survived the notorious drought of 1972 in his youth and understands the importance of water.

Kadbanwadi has only recently overcome the problem of water scarcity. Bhajandas and his fellow villagers fear that climate change will once again lead to extreme environmental events that, in turn, can affect the availability of water in this region.

Mukund Mavlankar, a retired engineer and an environmental activist from Pune city, dreams of handing over the planet to his grandchildren in the same form he had received from the earlier generations. He and his friends from Pune have contributed in the form of monetary support and

technical expertise for the Oxygen Park and are planning to provide help for other similar initiatives.

Satish Gawade, the farmer who contributes water from his farm, teaches in a primary school. He too understands the need for environmental conservation and believes such initiatives will help the villagers to come together and make them aware of their rights.

Far from development

Many villages like Kadbanwadi are contributing significantly to the cause of keeping our environment bearable. These places function like 'green centres', balancing the excessive harmful effects originating from various 'development centres' (like big cities or industrial complexes) on the environment.

But their net contributions to our environment are never really measured or even recognised. On the other hand, these places are largely kept away from the benefits of development.

Kadbanwadi still doesn't have an all-weather road connecting it with other places. No opportunities for employment are available here except for those in agriculture. Almost no industrial activity is present.

Students have to commute daily to a nearby village for secondary education. The village is largely neglected by government-run schemes of development.

Most of the villagers in Kadbanwadi have been enthusiastically supporting the initiatives for environmental conservation. But some of them also fear that the villagers might ultimately lose control over their resources, either to the government or to the people from 'outside', if they continue on that path.

Such fears need to be addressed by the government by reassuring the rights of the locals over their resources. Institutions like Joint Forest Management Committees need to be empowered and encouraged to participate in the decision-making process.

Contributions from small villages like Kadbanwadi in keeping our environment cleaner might not be very significant in scale but matter when there is a widespread hesitancy 'to act' for environmental conservation.

Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth.