

The green guerrillas

They bought land that was broken and barren. Today, their densely green forest-farms yield pumpkin and basil, and even the pug marks of a leopard

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Guerrilla gardening — the charming if batty movement to avenge the crawl of urbanisation by greening spaces without asking for the owner's permission — never really took off in India after its debut in Bangalore. In many western countries, however, green-thumbed warriors frequently operate by moonlight, planting saplings in open potholes and growing vegetables on sidewalks.

In India, green guerrilla warfare has taken a different, more challenging form: it seeks to thwart the builders' grasping reach by buying plots of land before they can, in order to preserve green spaces that are still not swamped with concrete. Nature and nurture work in tandem here.

While actor Atul Kulkarni, who has received two national awards for his performance in *Chandni Bar* and *Hey Ram* and shot to fame with his role in *Rang De Basanti*, teamed up with four cousins to build a forest on 24 acres of barren land in Kusawade near Satara, the Kolkata-based couple Bharat and Vinita Mansata pooled in funds with two dozen friends to restore a 64-acre forest farm near Vara village in Raigarh district. Meanwhile, another couple, Hemant and Sangita Chhabra, have slogged hard to create a forest farm in Jhadpoli village near Thane from barren land.

While the Chabbras and Mansatas greened their land through the techniques of ahimsa farming (no plucking, pruning or harvesting), the Kulkarnis hired a professional ecological management consultancy called Oikos to help them. "The best way to preserve a forest is to own it," says Kulkarni. Six years ago, when the actor and his cousins bought the land nestled in the Western Ghats, it was an impoverished piece of

grazed grassland with its soil eroded. "But the land is quite close to the Koyna backwaters and wildlife sanctuary, so you can imagine what a biodiversity hotspot it must have been," says Manasi Karandikar of Oikos, who along with her colleague Ketaki Ghate, has been working on soil-erosion control with stone lines and gully plugging and on moisture and vegetation conservation by building stream bunds, seasonal ponds and planting native species.

son, they all imagined a tiger! But this is a lifetime project, even for trees to grow over our heads, it will take decades and maybe my great-grandchildren might be able to spot a rabbit here." The land consumes Rs 2.5 lakh in maintenance costs every year, but despite the money and the effort involved, the idea seems to have struck root. Recently, the director of *Rang de Basanti* and *Delhi-6*, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, said he would like to replicate the farming

shunned and biodiversity aided through integration of various edible and locally useful species," says Vinita Mansata, a publisher from Kolkata.

She says that the most visible change is in the gushing pumps. Until a decade ago, the hand pumps in downstream villages like Vara would run dry at the height of summer, but now the regenerated land acts like a massive sponge that soaks in the rain water. "This has been supplemented by earthworks like rock-and-earth check dams, small contour bunds and gully plugs. As a result, the hand pumps yield water all round the year," she says.

In Thane, the transformation over 22 long years of the Chabbras' Hideout, near Thappar pada in Jhadpoli village, has borne rich fruit. By the time they took possession of the land, even the few trees they had seen when striking the deal had disappeared. For 12 years, the couple did ahimsa farming, planted mixed fruiting trees and didn't use any chemicals or pesticides. "I'm not a farmer, I burnt and learnt," says Hemant. "The most I knew about growing was putting a seed in a cotton swab, there was no Google, no courses and nobody who could help then. But I figured that if I didn't need medicines, the plants didn't either."

Now his farm produces mangoes, 23 species of bananas, apples, cherries, chikooos, celery, basil and other herbs. "We knew the soil was stabilising because first there were white ants, and then rats, snakes, red ants, butterflies and spiders followed. Last year, we had centipedes too," he says. The couple use a simple technique of layering biomass to build the soil.

Both couples, the Chabbras and the Mansatas, have decided to spread the joy among nature-starved city folk. While the Hideout is let out to anyone — especially those with children — interested in growing their own produce in a rustic getaway, Varvadi hosts an annual forest festival called Van Utsav where roughly 30 people tread up to the forest for a peaceful night's sleep on a *chattai* and participate in *shram daan* (physical labour) such as gardening, building water tanks and cooking. Last year, they even held a workshop on urban rooftop gardening, preparing natural dyes, teaching basic bamboo work and forest food preparation.

Before Hideout, Chhabra ran a leather goods business. "But children would say, 'You're a bad man, you kill animals' because I used to make leather goods," he says. "Kids can have a strange effect on your conscience." ■



TOUGH WOOD: Actor Atul Kulkarni teamed up with four cousins six years ago to build a forest on 24 acres of infertile land in Kusawade near Satara. It recently yielded a crop of bottle gourd

Already, the land boasts a greater habitat diversity and soil fertility has improved. "A leopard paw mark was recorded and a few gray hares and snakes have also made this their home," says Karandikar.

The land also houses a small rustic room made of bamboo and stone, and a small kitchen garden that recently yielded a crop of *dudhi* (bottle gourd). "We want the villagers to copy our techniques," says Kulkarni, adding that the wait to see a marked change can test one's patience. "When I told my family that we were trying to build a forest, for some rea-

methods on his plot.

At the Mansatas' Varvadi (which they like to describe as "more forest than farm") that was bought more than 15 years ago with money pooled in from 24 others, there are now seasonal streams flowing from June to October, roughly 80 per cent of the area has dense tree cover, and most importantly, there is no electricity or mobile network. "The idea was to live close to the land in an ethical and sustainable manner with at least half the land remaining under tree cover, agro-chemicals prohibited, water usage conservative, mono-culture