

Fed up of city life, this 51-year-old is building an eco-village from scratch

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A staunch believer in all things pure, organic, and untreated, Rajeev Pal is celebrating the system of permaculture through his vision of building a sustainable eco-village.

Differentiating between life in a city and that in a village in the most amusing way, Rajeev Pal says, "There's an obvious distinction — city dwellers are constantly consuming resources only to produce pollution in return, while villages, though considered dated in many ways, are capable of generating resources in a sustainable manner."

Rajeev clarifies that he doesn't mean to degrade life in cities, for he, too, has spent a fair share of his existence working there, but that it was his seven-year-long extensive travel through rural India that got him falling in love with the wonders of the gifted countryside.

This love has today propelled a desire in Rajeev and he has embarked on a journey to create a prototype of an abundant village, which he calls 'Thulasi Eco Village', demonstrating how any community in a region can organise itself to be socially cohesive and completely self-reliant in an ecologically sustainable manner. With this, he has set himself a huge task in a day and age where consumption levels are at their peak.

[What sparked the interest](#)

The 51-year-old grew up in Haryana, secured a BTech, and worked for a number of private firms. Over the years, the corporate culture got to him. He grew sick and tired of the monotonous routine, finally deciding to quit.

"This decision gave me the opportunity to explore the country I called mine but never knew much about. I travelled for more than seven years across rural India. There was a huge disparity between the unsustainable city life and what I witnessed. We have consumed more than half of our natural resources in the past 60 years of rapid industrialisation. I understood that living close to nature in harmony with flora and fauna was the only solution."

In August of 2016, Rajeev began living in a remote village called Atale, Mandangad Taluka, a high-rainfall area of Maharashtra located in the Western Ghats. With no more than 200 families and a population of hardly 1,000, Atale was packed with biodiversity and Rajeev knew that this was where he belonged.

"Life in Atale was almost ignorant. Nobody realised that they lived in a place that only offered goodness. Farmers had left for big cities like Mumbai and Pune in search of employment. Not just this, even for food, energy, or medicines, villagers were looking to cities."

Approaching a few friends, Rajeev expressed his desire to create a fully sustainable system in the form of a food forest — an eco-village built by the villagers, for the villagers. An optimistic response led to his friends and him purchasing 20 acres of land to make the dream a reality.

An ambitious vision

That same year Rajeev and his team of 10 began planting mango, cashew, coconut, areca nut, and a host of other indigenous trees on the land as these required the least amount of care and were best suited to the climate.

However, the intent with the 20 acres of land, says Rajeev, is to create a three-layered food forest — a nine-metre top layer of fruit trees; a three–six-metre middle layer that will consist of tubers, climbers, ferns; and the final ground layer of mushrooms, herbs, grass, and cover crops he claims will complete this model and restore ecology. The team has also managed to build a small mud house to accommodate volunteers. The only challenge thus far has been both wild and domestic animals like cows, buffaloes, wild boars, monkeys, and leopards destroying trees and crops.

Their biggest success has come in the form of curious, interested villagers assessing the positive developments. "Many villagers have stepped forward to contribute to the creation of the local and green economy. This will encourage them to stay in the village." Rajeev wants to harness their already existing skills so that they can enhance their own livelihood instead of working for someone else in cities.

Distant-but-real dream

Today, the 20 acres of land, slowly taking shape, is surrounded by over 200 fruit trees, with Rajeev, his core team, and the steadily increasing number of village volunteers continually planting more to set up the food forest.

Rajeev has also implemented entrepreneur and farmer Bhaskar Save's Suryamandal model, demonstrating natural farming by setting up a model farm of three acres. The aim with this model is to show how one can grow papaya, banana, coconut, and vegetable crops even in a very small area in their homes.

"I want to introduce this model across every home in Atale so each family knows that they can have access to their own vegetables and fruits."

The next step is to create swales and small ponds on the model farm to help harvest rainwater and arrest soil erosion, but the only setback has been a shortage of funds. To overcome the hurdle, Rajeev and his team have taken to crowdfunding, launching the 'Help Thulasi Eco Village' campaign. "The plan without funds is very slow moving. Funds will help speed things up and after a year or two we will begin generating money from our trees and other activities."

Aiming not only at restoring ecology but also building a harmonious society in the process, the funds raised will help support the rainwater harvesting ponds and many other prerequisites. "The earthworks will enhance the water-holding capacity of the land and allow intensely productive biodiversity to thrive. These ponds will then be used to grow azolla and fish. We are also integrating the farm with native poultry breed and freshwater pearl culture," says Rajeev.

"The funds will also be used to set up these ponds and construct a fence around the food forest for the first year or so to prevent animals from destroying the trees and crops before they have fully grown. It will later be removed for animals to move in and out freely. We will also renovate the existing mud house and build many more to accommodate volunteers," he adds.

From here on, the team has no intention of turning complacent. While the eco-village project will come to life in four-five years, they plan on integrating new aspects to increase sustainability, like arranging market tie-ups with other villages and also cities to sell fruits and vegetables and introducing handwoven clothes, pottery, and herbal soaps. In the longer run, they also want to source their own energy with the help of wind turbines, set up dispensaries and schools that advocate self-sustainability, and most importantly, work on replicating their eco-village model in other villages.

While the pomp and show of urban life rob villages of their youth, turning the self-reliant providers into helpless consumers, this model village ensures a community that, in the long run, will feel no need to look elsewhere for resources.

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