20. Whose Forests?

Daughter of the jungle

Look at the picture. Where do you think these children are off to, with little bundles on their sticks? When you find out you too would want to go with them!

The children are going to the forest. There they jump, run, climb trees and sing songs in their language called Kuduk. They pick the fallen flowers and leaves, to weave them into necklaces. They enjoy the wild fruits. They look for birds, whose calls they imitate. Joining them in all this fun is their favourite *didi* – Suryamani.



Nitin Upadhaye

Every Sunday Suryamani takes the children to the forest. As they move around, she shows them how to recognise the trees, the plants, and animals. Children enjoy this special class in a forest! Suryamani always says, "To learn to read the forest is as important as reading books." She says,"We are forest people (adivasis). Our lives are linked to the forests. If the forests are not there, we too will not remain."

Suryamani's story is a true story. Suryamani is a 'Girl Star'. 'Girl Stars' is a project which tells extraordinary tales of ordinary girls, who have changed their lives by going to school.

Teacher's Note : Encourage children to share their experiences and imagination about forests. Planting thousands of trees does not make a forest. It is important to discuss the web of relationships between plants, trees and animals in a forest, to see how they depend on each other for food, security and habitat.

Discuss

- What do you think is a forest?
- If someone grew lots of trees close to each other, would this become a forest?

Find out and write

- Other than trees what all is there in a forest?
- Do all forests have similar types of trees? How many trees can you identify?
- Suryamani says, "If the forests are not there, we too will not remain." Why so?



Nitin Upadhaye



Growing Up

Suryamani loves the forest since she was a child. She would not take the direct road to school, but would choose the path through the forest. Suryamani's father had a small field. Her family used to collect leaves and herbs from the forest and sell these in the bazaar. Her mother would weave baskets from bamboo or make leaf plates out of the fallen leaves. But now no one can pick up a single leaf from the forest.

That is since Shambhu the contractor came there. The people of Suryamani's village were afraid of the contractor. Everyone except Budhiyamai. She would say, "We the people of this forest have a right over it. We look after our forests, we don't cut trees like these contractors do. The forest is like our 'collective bank' – not yours or mine alone. We take from it only as much as we need. We don't use up all our wealth."

Teacher's Note : It would be useful to begin this lesson with a discussion about the lives of forest-dwellers and their relationship with the forest. Also about who a contractor is and what is a contract. This lesson draws upon the true story of Suryamani, whose organisation works on these issues. Discussions can also include similar organisations or people working to save forests and forest people in your area.

Suryanani's father could no longer support the family on the small land. He moved to the town in search of work. But things did not improve. Sometimes there would be no food in the house. At times Maniya Chacha (uncle) would send some grain from his small shop to Suryamani's house.

Chacha tried hard and got admission for Suryamani in the school in Bishanpur. Here they would not have to pay for the fees, uniforms and books. Suryamani would have to stay there and study. Suryamani didn't want to leave her village and forest. But Maniya Chacha was firm. "If you do not study, what will you do? Go hungry?" Suryamani would argue, "Why should I go hungry? The jungle is there to help!" Chacha tried to explain, "But we are being moved away from our forests. Even the forests are disappearing – in their place mines are being dug, dams are being built. Believe me, it is important for you to study, to understand about the laws. Maybe then you can help to save our forests". Young Suryamani listened, and tried to understand some of what he said.



Think and write

- Do you know anyone who loves the forest?
- The contractor did not allow Suryamani's people to go into the forest. Why?
- Is there any place around your area which you feel should be open to everyone, but where people are not allowed to go?



Discuss

- Who do you think the forest belongs to?
- Bhudhiyamai said –"Forest is our 'collective bank' – not yours or mine alone." Are there other things which are our collective wealth? So if someone uses more, everyone would suffer?

Suryamani's journey


Nitin Upadhaya

Suryamani was filled with joy on seeing the school at Bishanpur. The school was near a thick forest. Suryamani studied hard and passed her B.A. after getting a scholarship. She was the first girl in the village to do this. While she was in college she met Vasavi *didi*, a journalist. Suryamani soon joined her to work for the *Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan* (Movement to Save the Forests of Jharkhand). This work took Suryamani to far off towns and cities. Her father did not like this. But Suryamani continued her work. Not only that, she also started to fight for the rights of the village people. Her childhood friend Bijoy helped her in this work.

Suryamani had another friend 'Mirchi', who stayed with her day and night. Suryamani would share all her thoughts and dreams with Mirchi. Mirchi would listen and say "Keee Keee."

Suryamani had a dream. for her Kuduk community. She wanted all her people to feel proud of being adivasis.

Think and write

- Do you have a friend with whom you can share everything?
- Some people have moved so far away from the forest, that they can't understand the lives of forest people. Some even call them 'jungli'. Why is it not correct to say this?
- What do you know about how adivasis live? Write and draw a picture.
- Do you have an adivasi friend? What have you learnt about the forest from her.

Teacher's Note : There should be a debate on the need and also the problems associated with the building of big dams, roads, mining projects, etc. It is important for students to discuss and understand that all of these – drawing out water, petrol or digging for minerals from under the ground, or commercial fishing from the seas – are examples of using our 'common resourses'. All these are important issues today.

Suryamani's Torang



Nitin Upadhaya

Suryamani was 21 when she opened a centre, with the help of Vasavi *didi* and others. She called it 'Torang', which means jungle in the Kuduk language. Suryamani wanted that on festivals people should sing their own songs. They should not forget their music and should enjoy wearing their traditional clothes. Children should also learn about herbs, medicines, and the art of making things from bamboo. Children should learn the language of school but must link it with their own language. All this happens in the 'Torang' centre. Many special books about the Kuduk community and other adivasis have been collected. Flutes and different types of drums are also kept there.





Whenever something is unfair, or if someone is afraid that his land and livelihood would be taken away, they turn to Suryamani. Suryamani fights for everyone's rights.

Suryamani and Bijoy have got married and work together. Today their work is praised by many people. She is invited, even to other countries, to share her experiences. People of her area are also raising their voice for a new forest law.

Right to Forest Act 2007

People who have been living in the forests for at least 25 years, have a right over the forest land and what is grown on it. They should not be removed from the forest. The work of protecting the forest should be done by their Gram Sabha.



Think

- Do you know of any one who works to save forests?
- What is your dream? What will you do to make your dream come true?
- Collect reports about forests from newspapers. Did you find any news about how the cutting down of forests affects the weather? How?
- In 'Torang' Suryamani does a lot to keep the Kuduk music, dance and traditions alive. Would you like to do something like this for your community? What would you like to keep alive?

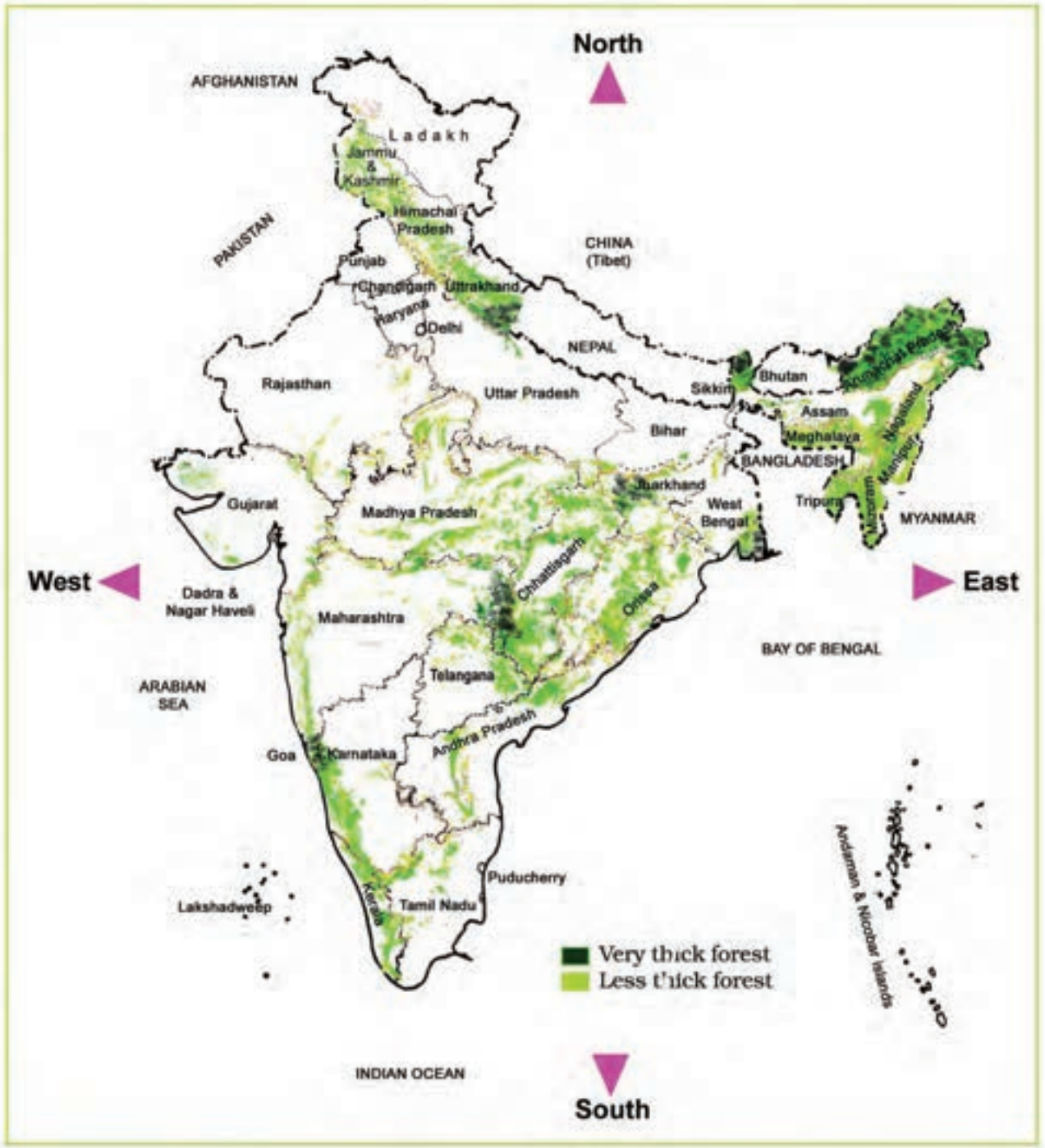


Read and tell

- Sikhya, a Class X girl in Odisha, wrote a letter to the Chief Minister. Read a part of the letter.

A forest is everything for us adivasis. We can't live away from the forests even for a day. Government has started many projects in the name of development – dams and factories are being built. Forests, which are ours are being taken away from us. Because of these projects, we need to think where the forest people will go and what will happen to their livelihood? Where will the lakhs of animals living in the forests go? If there are no forests, and we dig out our lands for minerals like aluminium, what will be left? Only polluted air, water, and miles and miles of barren land...

- Is there any factory or some construction work going on in and around your area? What type of work?
- Due to the factory is there any effect on the trees and land? Have the people in that area raised this issue?



Look at the map and write

- What all is shown in the map?

- You have read Sikhya's letter. Look for Orissa in the map.
- Is there a sea close to Orissa? How did you find out?
- Which are the states which have the sea on one side?
- Where is Suryamani's state Jharkhand on the map?
- Where are forests on the map? How will you find these?
- How can you find out which states have very thick forests and which have less thick forests?
- For someone in Madhya Pradesh, in which direction would the country's thickest forests be? Name those states.



Daman Singh

Lottery for farming in Mizoram

You read about the forests of Jharkhand in Suryamani's story. Now read about forests on the hills of Mizoram. See how people live there, and how farming is done.

Ding, Ding, Ding.... As soon as the school bell rang Lawmte-aa, Dingi, Dingima picked their bags and hurried home. On the way they stopped to drink water from a stream in a cup made of bamboo which was kept there. Today not only the children, even 'Saima Sir' was in a hurry to get back. Today there would be a special meeting of the Village Council (Panchayat). At the meeting there would be a lottery to decide which family will get how much land for farming. The land belongs to the whole village, not to separate people. So they take turns to do farming on different parts of the land.

A beautiful pot made of bamboo was shaken well. One chit was taken out. Saima Sir's family got the first chance. He said, "I am happy that my family gets to choose first. But, this year we cannot take more land. Last year I had taken more and was not able to farm it well. After my sister Jhiri got married and went away it is difficult to manage farming alone."

Saima Sir asked for 'three tin' of land. Little Mathini asked, " What is three tin of land? Chamui explained, "The land on which we grow one tin of seeds is called one tin of land." One by one, the village families got their piece of land for farming.



Find out

- Which are the states around Mizoram?
- Chamui said they measure land using tin. Which are the other ways of measuring land?



- Returning from school, children drank water in a bamboo cup. Who do you think would have made this cup and kept it in the forest? Why?
- What could be done to save forests?



Jhoom farming

Jhoom farming is very interesting. After cutting one crop, the land is left as it is for some years. Nothing is grown there. The bamboo or weeds which grow on that land are not pulled out. They are cut and burnt. The ash makes the land fertile. While burning, care is taken so that the fire does not spread to the other parts of the forest. When the land is ready for farming it is lightly dug up, not ploughed. Seeds are dropped on it. In one farm different types of crops like maize, vegetables, chillies, rice can be grown.

Weeds and other unwanted plants are also not pulled out, they are just cut. So that they get mixed with the soil. This also helps in making the soil fertile. If some family is not able to do farming on time, others help them and are given food.

Teacher's Note : There can be some discussion about the hilly terrain of the North East, and the state of Mizoram, and also the unique system of jhoom farming followed there.

The main crop here is rice. After it is cut, it is difficult to take it home. There are no roads, only hilly paths. People have to carry the crop on their backs. This takes many weeks.



Daman Singh

When the work is over the entire village celebrates. People get together to cook and eat, sing and dance. They do their special 'cheraw' dance. In this dance people sit in pairs in front of each other, holding bamboo sticks on the ground. As the drum beats, the bamboos are beaten to the ground. Dancers step in and out of the bamboo sticks, and dance to the beat.



Daman Singh

- Find out more about the 'cheraw' dance. Do it in your class. But be careful and don't hurt yourself.

About three-fourth people in Mizoram are linked to the forests. Life is difficult but almost all children go to school. You can see some of them here, playfully blowing their leaf whistles! You too have made many such whistles, haven't you!



What we have learnt

- What is similar and what is different between jhoom farming and Bhaskerbhai's way of farming?
- Explain in your own words why forests are important for the people living in forests?
- Did you find something interesting in jhoom farming? What is it?