

Case Report of Bero Block



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Opinion

When Droughts led to the looting of government food stores in Jharkhand every year, some villagers were thanking an illiterate catholic tribal chieftain for helping them avoid the crisis.

For the past 50 years, 78 Year old Simon Oraon, popularly known as “Baba” (father), has taught 51 villages in the Bero area to protect their environment using various means.

When this year’s drought turned much of Jharkhand into a waste land, the Bero area in the State’s Ranchi District was an exception.

“Baba’s 2000 acres (809 hectares) of farmland stood in stark contrast”. Vidya Bhushan Kumar, a local government Block Development Officer, told UCA News. Elsewhere the drought forced many to commit suicide, but the Bero People enjoyed a “Golden Harvest”. He said – Oraon has no formal education or technical training but used his “Great Native Intelligence” to tame rivers and streams and use water during the monsoon reason.

Vidya Bhushan Kumar said – every year, the tribal chieftain plants more than 1000 trees, a mission he began in 1960 on his 4000 square meters of ancestral land. As time went on, neighbors saw how his methods had helped conserve rainwater and allowed him to plant trees on their lands.

“Baba has built three dams, five ponds and three canals that converted vast stretches of barren land into cultivable farm land.” Kumar said father Augustine Kerketta, a Bero native and a Ranchi archdiocesan priest, is another admirer of Oraon.

“Baba works selflessly to encourage people to live in harmony with nature”. The priest told UCA News.

Oraon’s knowledge of nature as well as his leadership skills has won him the respect of Hindus, Muslims and various tribal groups in the state says father Kerketta – Oraon also Simon Oraon has been elected Parha Raja (tribal Chieftain) without interruption since 1964.

He is also the only Christian tribal chieftain in the state. Father Kerketta says, and his popularity has indirectly helped evangelization and earned good will for Christians.

Visitors to Oraon’s house are first struck by the sight of a prominent crucifix. Pictures of Jesus, Mary, the Holy Family and Blessed Teresa of Kolkata also adorn his house along with certificates of honors he has received over the years. Oraon says he inherited his environmental skills from his parents and elders. “Big people come to see my work. They call me ‘Engineer’, but I am not an Engineer, I am an illiterate man.” He said.

He had launched a people’s money to fight deforestation as head of Khaski Toli Village due to experiences in his childhood. “As a small boy I had seen trees in our forests cut and carted away in trucks. Later, I understood the importance of forests in our lives.”

He said by 1960, vast areas of forest had disappeared and he decided to call a meeting in his village. He spread his movement to other villages after he became chieftain in the Bero area. “With great struggle we managed to stop deforestation and launched the re-forestation movement.” Oraon said.

With three dams, five ponds and thousands of trees, Simon Oraon has changed lives in six villages of Chotanagpur without any help of the state government, Oraon led his fellow tribesmen to build two Dams at Deshbali & Jharia and five ponds.

Growing up in Bero, a tiny village 30 km from Ranchi, Simon Oraon realized that irrigation water was what his native Chotanagpur region needed the most. As a tribe, he also believed that survival of the jungle was necessary for the survival of life on earth.

So, the Septuagenarian spent most of his life mobilizing villagers to build dams and ponds on their own. He also planted thousands of trees to regain forest cover.

Oraon’s family owned eight acres of fallow land. He grew up seeing his relatives grow a monocrop of paddy for want of water. The forest cover was lost to felling of trees by the timbe mafia. In the post monsoon period, most villagers migrated to distant areas in search of jobs, leaving behind the old and infirm to feed for them and when sometimes the monsoon failed, drought caused hunger and even death.

Soon after leaving school as a class IV drop out in 1961. Oraon convinced himself to set things right. “I felt compelled

to find a solution to deforestation and water problem, says the farmer, now 73.

During the rains, Oraon walked miles in the opposite direction of the streams flow to trace their origin. Once there, he mapped the contour of the rainwater falling from top of the hills near Bero. "In the undulating terrain, water gushed out creating ravines. I thought if a dam is built somewhere near the foothills, that water can be blocked and used for irrigation with the use of canals on the plains", said Oraon.

Soon, with the help of fellow villagers, he constructed the first earthen dam near Gaighat in 1961. The dam however, caned in next monsoon. Under erred he constructed the dam. This time too it failed to withstand the strong current of water. The third time the state water resource department intervened and broadened its height and width. "This worked so much so that the dam has not developed any crack till date." Said Oraon.

Later, without any help of the state government, Oraon led his fellow tribesmen to build two more dams at Deshbali and Jharia and five ponds in the six villages of Hariharpur, Jamtoli, Kaxitoli, Baitoli and Bhasnanda villages – all linked to the dams. The dams and ponds trapped rainwater at the start of monsoon by diverting streams. That water was channeled through canals to the fields.

To ensure that soil erosion did not affect the water bodies, Oraon planted more than 3000 trees of Sal, Jackfruit, Jamun and Mango.

"People scoffed when I first presented the idea," said Oraon. "Officials were apathetic and villagers were not ready to part

with an inch of land that was to be submerged in water of the dam. I won them over by using my own land and by ploughing the barren land of others for those who lost the land in dams."

Thanks to him, 1500 families reap three crops of vegetables besides paddy, every year from nearly 2000 acres of land now. Migration has become a thing of the past. In addition, Bero also had a mandi from where 15000 tons of vegetables worth 15 lakh were transported to Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Kolkata and Bhubaneshwar every month.

"Due to his sixt years of work, we are leading a comfortable life and our children are going to school." Said Richard lakra, a farmer.

His more than 60 years of work has been acknowledged in the form of a dissertation by Sarah Jewitt for her PhD Degree at Department of Geography, Newnham College, University of Cambridge and also by the Xavier Institute of Social Service, Ranchi. The state government recently awarded him a citation and Rs. One lakh."His name was recommended for the award of the Padmashree."said the then Secretary, Rural Development, Santosh Kumar Satpathy and finally Simon Oraon was awarded with padmashree recently.

Sadly, none of the villagers are connected by all weather roads and electricity remains elusive. Oraon, however, said: "As long as I have the energy, I will tell everybody that green revolution can be ushered everywhere in Jharkhand by harvesting rainwater".

"He planted trees in 400 acres land.



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