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Leafy Tales

Yamini Porte



CENTRAL ACADEMY FOR STATE FOREST SERVICE
COIMBATORE

2025



someone asks her why she risks so much, she simply smiles and says,
“Because the forest is family too.”

Deputy Ranger Pratima stands as a living inspiration — a woman who balances home and duty, compassion and command, strength and sacrifice. In every flame she has fought and every tree she has planted, her spirit continues to burn bright — just like the eternal fire of Katghora's forest.

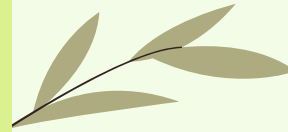
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FOREWORD

In every phase of life, there are moments that quietly shape who we become—moments of learning, observation, and growth that often go unnoticed in the rush of routine. *'Leafy Tales'* is a heartfelt collection that captures such moments from the author's four-month journey of on-the-job training. Through these stories, the author beautifully transforms everyday experiences into thoughtful reflections on life, work, and human connection.

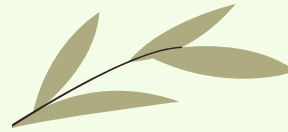
What makes *'Leafy Tales'* special is its authenticity. Each story carries the freshness of real encounters - the laughter shared among colleagues, the challenges that tested patience, and the small victories that brought a sense of fulfilment. The author's ability to see meaning in the ordinary and to express it with honesty allows readers to relate, remember, and reflect upon their own journeys.

This book is not just a chronicle of professional training; it is a testament to personal growth, resilience, and the quiet wisdom gained from experience. As readers turn these pages, they will find themselves walking alongside the author—learning, feeling, and growing with every tale.

Leafy Tales reminds us that every leaf in the tree of our journey has a story to tell, if only we pause long enough to listen.

V. Thirunavukarasu, IFS
APCCF & Principal,
CASFOS, Coimbatore.





PREFACE

The following collection of stories is born out of my four-month journey during on-the-job training - a period filled with learning, challenges, discoveries, and unforgettable experiences. Each story captures a moment, a lesson, or a realization that shaped my understanding of the professional world and of myself.

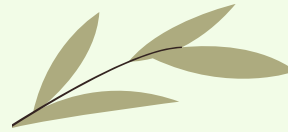
These narratives are not just recollections of events but reflections on the people I met, the tasks I undertook, and the emotions I experienced along the way. Through them, I aim to share the reality of stepping into a new environment—where theory meets practice, expectations meet experience, and growth happens in unexpected ways.

This compilation is both a record of my professional beginnings and a tribute to everyone who guided, encouraged, and inspired me during this time. I hope these stories resonate with readers who have walked similar paths or are about to embark on their own journey into the working world.

Yamini Porte

SFS 2023-25 Officer Trainee,
CASFOS Coimbatore





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I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the following individuals whose unwavering support and invaluable contributions have made this book a reality:

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- ◆ All Range officers and whole staff of Raigarh Division.

Their dedication, expertise, support, mentoring and passion for forest have been instrumental in shaping the content of this book.

I am truly grateful for their guidance and support throughout this journey.

Yamini Port





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1. The Evergreen Sentinel: A Story from Kharsiya Range

In the quiet heart of Chhattisgarh's Kharsiya Range, nestled within the vast Raigarh Forest Division, stands a humble plantation site that breathes with life — rows of *Sal*, *Teak*, and *Mahua* swaying gently in the wind.

Here, amid the rustling leaves and whispered winds, lives the legacy of one man, Mr Prahalad Sahu, the forest sentinel. Born in a nearby village, Mr Prahalad Sahu was just a boy when he first wandered into the forest, barefoot and wide-eyed.

His father, a daily-wage labourer, had once worked on an afforestation drive in the 1960s, and Mr Prahalad Sahu would follow him, enchanted by the world of trees and wildlife.

When he turned 18, he was recruited as a casual labourer by the Forest Department — a modest beginning to what would become a lifelong devotion.

For over five decades, Mr Prahalad Sahu served silently but steadfastly — guarding plantation sites, nurturing *saplings* in the temporary nursery, and protecting the green cover from encroachments and forest fires.

He had no uniform, no formal education in forestry, and no high title — only his deep love for the forest and a spirit that refused to age.

His days began before dawn — watering *saplings*, cleaning the nursery beds, checking tree guards, and sometimes, walking miles to report a fallen tree or spot illegal activity.





Mr. Prahalad Sahu

In the monsoon, he became a one-man army during the planting season. In summer, he stood as the first line of defence during fire alerts.

He worked not for pay, which was meagre, but for a purpose. Under his watch, thousands of trees flourished, barren patches turned green, and the nursery he tended became the lifeline of many afforestation projects across Kharsiya Range.

Forest officers, rangers, and even conservators came and went — but Mr Prahalad Sahu Singh remained, becoming a legend among the green corridors of Raigarh.

Now, at the age of 70, his bones ache, and his eyes tire more quickly.

He submitted a handwritten letter requesting retirement — not out of disillusionment, but in hope of some rest. But when the Forest Officer read it, there was a long silence.

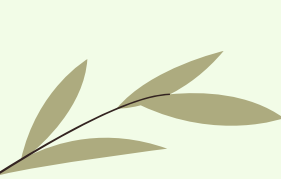
The officer looked up and said gently, “Sahu ji, we can approve your retirement on paper — but your service can never retire. You are the roots of this forest. If you go, a part of this forest will go silent.”

Mr Prahalad Sahu Singh smiled, tears welling up in his eyes.

He didn't need applause or awards. The real reward lay in the green canopy overhead, in the chirping of birds returning to roost, in children who now played where once there was only scrubland.

Though his official retirement was eventually accepted, the department insisted on honouring him with a “Living Sentinel of Kharsiya” plaque, a small pension from departmental funds, and an open invitation to guide and inspire the new forest guards and nursery workers.

To this day, Mr Prahalad Sahu Singh visits the plantation, walking slowly with a stick carved from a fallen sal branch — not as a worker, but as a guardian spirit of the forest, whose dedication continues to echo through every leaf that dances in the Kharsiya breeze.



2. Sarita of Achanakmar: *The Voice of the Jungle*

Deep within the core zone of Achanakmar Tiger Reserve (ATR), where the forest grows wild and whispers the ancient secrets of nature, lies a small tribal village — nameless to many, but sacred to those who call it home.

Among them lives Sarita, a woman of resilience, born of the forest, shaped by hardship, and destined to become one of its fiercest voices.

Sarita's life began in the shadows of tall *salt* trees and under the watchful eyes of leopards, bison, and the elusive tiger. Her village, tucked inside the core of ATR, has long struggled with isolation — no electricity for years, limited access to healthcare, and very few opportunities for livelihood.

Yet, what they lacked in material comfort, they made up for in knowledge — especially Sarita, who as a young girl would accompany her grandfather into the forest, learning the trails, the calls of birds, and the language of trees.

As she grew, Sarita saw her village shrink under pressures — relocation threats, shrinking farming opportunities, and the difficult choice between survival and tradition.

But Sarita chose a different path. When eco-tourism slowly began to sprout within Achanakmar, she stepped forward — not as a laborer, but as a nature guide.

She trained herself, learning not only from forest staff and NGO workshops but from her daily experiences in the jungle.

Today, she can identify every trail, watering hole, and animal track in ATR. Tourists are often stunned by her sharp instincts — she can pause, listen to the wind, and tell you if a herd of gaur is nearby.

She can mimic bird calls, spot a sloth bear long before a camera lens does, and explain the interdependence of species with the clarity of a scholar.

But what makes Sarita special isn't just her knowledge — it's her spirit. In a male-dominated profession, she walks alone into the forest, guides strangers through tiger territory, and educates urban visitors about the fragile balance of ATR.

She doesn't wear fancy uniforms. She doesn't own a smart phone. But she carries something far more powerful — a lifetime of lived experience in one of India's most pristine tiger habitats.

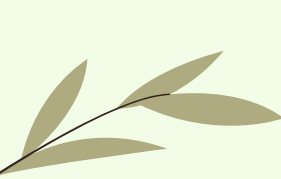
Life is not easy for Sarita. Her family still struggles for basic needs. On days when there are no tourists, she returns to the village fields or collects forest produce to sell.

But she never complains. “Jungle meragharhai. Bagho kesaath jeena seekhli yahai. Darnanahi, samajhnapadtahai,” she says — *“The forest is my home. I've learned to live with tigers — not in fear, but with understanding.”*

Forest officers, fellow guides, and even senior tourists now respect her deeply.

She's become an icon of responsible eco-tourism — a living bridge between conservation and community. Though she earns modestly, she dreams of starting a small eco-learning center for village children — so they too can stay rooted in the forest while building futures.

Sarita doesn't ask for fame or funds. All she asks is for people to listen — to the forest, to its rhythms, to the struggles of those who live within it. Because the forest cannot speak for itself — but through Sarita, it surely does.



3. Colors of the Forest: The Story of Ragini Dhruv

In the small fringe village of Shivtarai, near the dense Sal and Bamboo forests of Achanakmar Tiger Reserve (ATR), Chhattisgarh lives a girl who paints not just with colors — but with the soul of her land.

Ragini Dhruv, a young tribal girl from the Gond community, has transformed her quiet passion for painting into a national identity, bringing pride not only to her village, but to the entire region of Chhattisgarh.

Ragini's journey began in the humblest of settings. With no access to art supplies or formal training, she would use natural colors, coal dust, and even mud to draw tribal motifs on the mud walls of her home.

Her fingers, guided by tradition and imagination, told stories of forests, animals, folk gods, and tribal life. Her art was her world — and she didn't know then, that one day, the world would notice.

It was RFO Mr. Ajay Kumar Sharma, posted in Achanakmar at the time, who first noticed her sketches during a village-level forest awareness program.

He saw something rare in her style — the authenticity of Gond tribal art fused with a fresh, intuitive creativity.

Moved by her work, he collected her paintings and submitted them for the National-Level Painting Competition organized by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).

Months passed. Then the letter arrived.

Ragini had won. Among hundreds of entries from across India, a young tribal girl from a forest-fringe village had painted her way to the top.

Her artwork, rooted in the ecology and culture of Achanakmar, was celebrated at the national level — not just for its beauty, but for the voice it carried: the voice of indigenous art, biodiversity, and the girl who dared to dream.

When news of her achievement reached the forest department, Ragini didn't just receive applause — she received support. Under the guidance of RFO Sharma and other officers, arrangements were made to help her continue her art.

Painting kits, sketch books, brushes, tribal art books, and regular encouragement started flowing her way.

A small room in the eco-education center was set up as her studio. Visitors, tourists, even school groups began to visit — not just for safaris, but to see Ragini paint.

Today, Ragini is more than a painter. She's a cultural ambassador — showcasing the rich tradition of Gond tribal art and connecting it with themes of wildlife conservation, forest rights, and heritage.

Her work has been featured in national exhibitions, and she has been invited to conduct live painting sessions during wildlife week celebrations and eco-tourism festivals.

What began as a hobby born in silence is now a recognized voice at the national level. Ragini's art speaks of balance between people and nature, of tribal resilience, and of the beauty hidden in remote corners of India.

Her story is a reminder that talent knows no geography — only opportunity and support can set it free.



Ragini's Creation

Thanks to the vision of officers like RFO Mr. Ajay Kumar Sharma and the continued backing of the Forest Department, Ragini now inspires many other children from forest villages — proving that dreams, no matter how small they begin, can one day color the whole canvas of the nation.



The winner painting

4. Badhela Ban: The Green Legacy of Damodar Kashyap

In the heart of Sandhkarmari, a quiet tribal village near Jagdalpur, lives an 85-year-old man whose footsteps are light but whose legacy is deep-rooted — like the mighty trees he helped bring back to life.

His name is Damodar Kashyap, a farmer, a former Sarpanch, and the man behind one of the most inspiring forest revival stories in modern India.

Nearly four decades ago, tragedy struck Sandhkarmari. The forest department, citing internal decisions, began cutting down the village's forest without consulting the local people.

This arrogant disregard enraged the villagers. In protest, and driven by wounded pride, they did the unthinkable — they cleared the rest of the forest themselves.

What followed was silence. No leaves rustled, no birds sang, only dry earth and regret remained.

It was a painful void, but no one felt it deeper than Damodar Kashyap, then the Sarpanch of the village. He could not bear to see their jungle — once their provider and protector — vanish into stumps and dust.

But instead of giving up, he made a decision: *"If we could destroy a forest with our own hands, we can create one too."*

Damodar began planting trees alone — here and there, quietly, patiently. At first, people laughed. They mocked his efforts, called it

foolish. But he planted anyway. And slowly, something changed. A few began to help, then more. His determination was infectious.

The Birth of "Thengapali"

To protect the growing greenery, Kashyap came up with a unique idea — a tradition he called "Thengapali."

He decorated a Tendu stick like a sacred staff, calling it a Devvrat, and made a rule: Every family in the village would take turns guarding the forest — from 8 AM to 6 PM. Whoever's turn it was would carry the Thengapali, a symbol of their duty, and patrol the forest.

This was not enforced by law or fear, but by honour and pride. And for the last 35 years, not a single day has been missed.

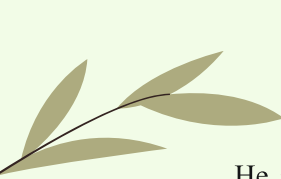
The Thengapali continues to move from one home to another — like a silent promise passed hand-to-hand.

The Forest Returns

Through collective effort and without a single rupee of government help, the villagers of Sandhkarmari restored 300 acres of desolated land. They called it "Badhela Ban" — meaning *the Extended Forest* — a name that reflects not just land, but love. But Kashyap didn't stop there.



Damodar Kashyap in his restored land



He also convinced the villagers to clear encroachments on forest land — a difficult task, but one that was done through dialogue, not force.

The cleared land was revived with new trees, and a new forest grew on 100 acres. They named it “Mawali Kot”. Today, 400 acres of lush forest stand where once axes rang and silence loomed. Birds chirp, animals roam, and children play under canopies of green.

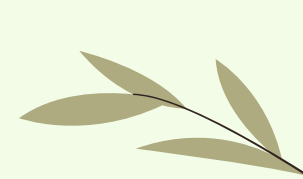
The villagers no longer say “*This is just land.*” Now, they proudly say: “A jungle hi hamarpehchaanaae.”

Even at 85, Damodar Kashyap walks through the forest with pride in his eyes and a stick in his hand — not to lean on, but to point at the saplings, the roots, the trees that are now taller than houses.

His message is simple, yet profound: “Jungle la bachawa, jungle hi human la bachahi.” (*Save the forest — only the forest will save us*).

Damodar Kashyap has shown the world that passion knows no age. With a stick, a seed, and a stubborn heart, he rebuilt what was lost.

And in doing so, he transformed not just the land, but the soul of Sandhkarmari. Where once stood a barren scar, now stands a living, breathing legacy of green — all thanks to one man's refusal to give up on nature.



5. The Guardians of the Green: Rani, Prerana and Monika

The morning sun rose slowly over the dense forests of Raigarh, painting the Sal and teak leaves with golden light. The forest seemed alive—chirping birds, rustling leaves, and the distant call of a langur announcing the start of another day. Amid this rhythm of nature, three women walked side by side, their boots crunching softly on the forest trail—Rani, Prerana, and Monika—the trio that everyone in the Raigarh Forest Division knew and respected.

Rani: The Strength of Responsibility

Rani, the youngest among them, carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, yet her smile never faded. A mother of three, she balanced her duties at home and in the forest with a grace that left everyone in awe.

Her mornings began before sunrise—preparing breakfast, sending her children to school, and then setting out on her patrol. Even after long days in the forest, she found time to help her children with their studies, listen to their stories, and still prepare for the next day's work.

Her colleagues often wondered how she managed it all. When asked, she would simply smile and say, “*The forest teaches balance. You give it care, and it gives you strength.*”

Rani's sense of responsibility extended beyond her family, to every sapling she planted and every animal she protected. She was the quiet force that held her world together.

Prerana: The Spirit of Adventure

If Rani was the heart of the team, Prerana was its laughter. Posted in one of the most challenging areas of Raigarh—an elephant-prone zone, she faced danger every day, yet her enthusiasm was infectious.

Whether it was monitoring elephant movement late at night or trekking through dense bamboo thickets, Prerana faced every challenge with a grin and a spark in her eyes. “Why fear?” she would say. “We are guests in their home. Let's respect and enjoy the privilege.”

What made her even more remarkable was her passion outside work—she was a professional weightlifter, representing the strength of women in every sense. Her colleagues often teased her, calling her “The Iron Lady of the Forest,” and she would laugh, flexing her arm and saying, “These muscles aren't just for lifting weights—they lift spirits too!”

Her energy and optimism were unshakable, lighting up even the darkest and most dangerous nights in the forest.

Monika: The Calm in the Storm

Then there was Monika, the eldest of the three—a woman of quiet strength and steady composure. Years of experience had made her both wise and patient. She approached every task with a calm mind and an unflinching focus.

Monika was known across the district for her impeccable shooting skills—a state-level shooter who treated her weapon not as a symbol of power, but of responsibility. Her aim was precise, her judgment sharper. But beyond her skill, what inspired everyone was her ability to balance work and life seamlessly.

She would often say, “*Peace is not found in silence, but in balance.*” And indeed, she lived by it—dedicated to her duty, yet

never neglecting her family, hobbies, or the friendships she cherished deeply.

The Bond That Inspires

Together, these three women formed a bond as strong as the roots of the forest they protected. Each was different—Rani's resilience, Prerana's joy, Monika's composure—but they complemented one another like the elements of nature.

Their laughter echoed through the Sal trees, their footprints marked countless trails, and their courage became a story whispered by the wind across Raigarh's green expanse.

To me, they are not just colleagues—they are living examples of strength, grace, and commitment. Watching them work, I have learned that being a woman in the forest department is not merely about fulfilling duty—it's about nurturing life, balancing chaos, and standing tall like the trees we protect.

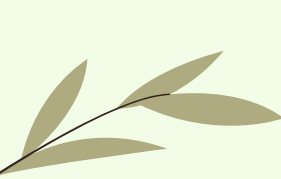
And whenever I walk under the canopy of Raigarh's forests, I remember them -

**Rani, the strength of responsibility;
Prerana, the joy of courage;
Monika, the calm of wisdom.**

Together, they are the guardians of the green—and my everlasting inspiration.



The inspiration with me



7. Pratima: The Flame of Katghora Forest

In the heart of Chhattisgarh, where the forests of Katghora Division stretch endlessly like waves of green, there works a woman whose name has become synonymous with strength and dedication — Deputy Ranger Mr. Pratima.

Every morning, before the first light touches the forest canopy, Pratima begins her day in silence, carefully balancing two worlds. At home, she is a mother, daughter, and caretaker to a large family that depends solely on her. At work, she is a commanding leader — the voice of authority and compassion in the wild.

Pratima rides her motorcycle fearlessly through narrow forest trails, her khaki uniform dusted with red soil and the scent of the jungle. The roar of her bike often announces her arrival long before her team sees her. Whether it is a routine patrol or a late-night call from the range, she never hesitates to step out, no matter how dense the forest or how dark the night.

She keeps her subordinates — men and women alike — under strict discipline. No one dares take their duty lightly when Pratima is around. Her instructions are clear, her tone steady, her words firm but always fair. “The forest gives us everything,” she often says in her powerful, motivational voice, “and in return, it asks only one thing — our loyalty.”

Her speeches during meetings are often so inspiring that her colleagues and villagers' joke, “*Madam, you should enter politics. You'd make a great leader!*”

To which she always smiles and replies, “*My forest is my public, and their welfare is my politics.*”

One summer afternoon, the wind turned fierce and hot. News came that a forest fire had broken out deep within one of the plantations where Pratima had personally planted hundreds of saplings years ago. Without a moment's hesitation, she kicked her bike to life and raced toward the smoke that was rising like a warning from the horizon.

The fire had already spread rapidly, devouring dry leaves and young shoots. The heat was unbearable, the air thick with smoke. Yet, without waiting for her team, Pratima rushed straight into the blaze with only a wet cloth tied around her face and a branch in her hand to beat down the flames.

She moved from tree to tree, trying to save the plantation she had nurtured with her own hands. Sparks leapt toward her, flames licked at her uniform, and soon her skin burned painfully — but she did not stop. Her heart pounded with fear, love, and determination all at once. By the time her subordinates reached the site, she was already exhausted, her face blackened with soot, her arms marked with burns.

Together, they fought until the last flame was extinguished. When it was over, Pratima sat quietly on the scorched earth, watching the smoke curl upward like a prayer. Her plantation was wounded, but not lost. She had saved what she could — and that was enough for her.

Her burns took weeks to heal, but the fire only strengthened her resolve. Even today, she rides the same forest trails with renewed energy, her scars serving as silent medals of bravery. To the people of Katghora, she is more than a Deputy Ranger — she is a protector, a leader, and a symbol of what true dedication looks like.

Her story travels from village to village, told in hushed admiration by those who witnessed her courage. And whenever