



Kerala

A mini forest of one's own: How a Kerala man grew 400 trees in 3 cents of land

MR Hari had tried many other methods before finally using the Miyawaki method to raise a forest of 400 plants in 18 months, in a plot in Puliyarakonam, Thiruvananthapuram.



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MR Hari hops into the little restaurant just outside his plot in Puliyarakonam, a wee bit off the city of Thiruvananthapuram. He is obviously at home here, asking the 'chechi' running the restaurant for a breakfast of dosa and kadala (gram) curry, and telling her to allow him to

be a complete vegetarian, without pampering him with an early morning offering of her chicken curry.

The plot next to it is two acres in all, part of it now converted into a forest, using the Miyawaki method. Miyawaki is a technique pioneered by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, that involves growing self-sustaining mini forests in urban areas. The method helps the plants grow 10 times faster and 30 times denser than in normal conditions.

“Nothing was working. I had bought this land 12 years ago, after selling off my property in Kottayam, where I am from. But every year when the summer came, all the plants I planted would just die,” Hari says, as he climbs up the plot, which is divided into several layers. He expertly identifies every little plant on the way, suggesting the medicinal remedies that the leaves or fruits of some could give.

“The padathali is good for getting rid of grey hair, the thamravalli with the copper-coloured leaves is used by tribal people to treat cancer without causing wounds, the kareelanchi was once used to treat itching in children, the kayyonni for hair growth and a way to rebuild your failed lungs, the naaku with the green leaves is used by tribal people for tonsillitis and the changalamparanda is often powdered into chutney for the bones,” he says, often using pronouns for the plants, addressing them like children.



Hari runs a company called Invis Multimedia in Thiruvananthapuram with three partners, but his real interest has always been farming, he says. "I am a farmer, I want to be a farmer," he says sitting on top of a rock, fondly looking at the forest he has raised in three cents of land.

"I grew up among trees, in a small town in Kottayam. I loved to plant them. When I grew up, I sold off my property in Kottayam and bought this dry land which had a pond. But it dried up when I got it cleaned – turns out all the water was because of the mud that was stuck in the holes. When we cleaned it, the water drained out through the holes." He tried to raise a forest every year, planting 500 trees. Fifty of those would bloom but die with no groundwater. He did his best not to drill a borewell, since that would harm the environment. But when everything else failed, he tried that as well. That too, didn't work.

Disheartened, Hari waited for another way out. "That's when I heard of the Japanese Miyawaki method. I got help from a scientist friend of mine, Dr Mathew Dan. I took one-and-a-half years to research and experiment. Eighteen months ago, I planted these 400 trees on three cents, and they

have shot up in search of sunlight so very soon," he says, pointing at his mini forest of trees, shrubs, creepers and so on.

Hari elaborates about the plants he has raised – 70 species of natural vegetation and 200 more added. Among the natural ones he names are Ada pathiyan (*Holostemma Ada-Kodien*), Uzhinja (*Cardiospermum helicacabum*), Kayyonni (*Eclipta prostrata*), Nilappana (*Curculigo orchiodes*), etc. And among those planted are Ashokam (*Saraca asoca*), Arayaal (*Ficus religiosa*), Karingali (*Acacia catechu*), Thanni (*Terminalia bellirica*) and so on.



"There would be one type of insects feeding on a specific plant. Normally what happens is, people raise just one kind of plant over a plot of land and this particular insect that feeds on it will attack it. Whereas in a forest, different species of plants will be attacked by different types of insects. And some of these insects will prey on the others, and that way the plants are protected. It is always ideal to grow multiple species of plants."

Hari describes his method. On top of the soil, you make a bed with tender coconut shell, and put a coating mixture over it using lime shell. The coating mixture includes rice hull, coir pith and cowdung. Hari rattles off the use of each component: to hold water, to make the plants strong, to prepare the soil. "The plants are so close to each other that they need to grow fast to get the sunlight, competing with each other," he speaks fondly of them. Hari gets upset when he spots some slaked lime sprinkled around a few plants. He calls up a worker on the phone and asks why. "It appears some agriculture officer had suggested it. But their methods are different," Hari says after the call.

He then shows a Facebook post – a photo of mushrooms sprouting around his plants. "I was going to post this photo of mushrooms on October 27, when Facebook brought me a reminder from a year ago. It seems the same day last year, mushrooms had sprouted in the forest. That means the organic nature of the soil is just perfect. It means I am doing something right," he says cheerfully, and adds, "In my opinion, this is the only way, we as humans, can do something to put an end to climate change and global warming."

Hari gets up from the rock and walks into his forest with a long stick. "I will stay here for a while," he says, his voice drowning in the sounds of the forest already.

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