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Miyawaki forest: The cool spot in the concrete jungle

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Mention Sooryakanthi ground in Thiruvananthapuram and what generally comes to mind is a busy space, buzzing with people. But soon, the popular fair ground will also remind you of banyan trees, lemon grass, kanjiram and elanji trees forming a canopy over your head. At a time when our cool green cover is slowly giving way to scorching summer's heat waves, a bunch of nature lovers, with Kerala Tourism department has launched an urban afforestation initiative. Named after the Japanese ecologist Akira Miyawaki, the project is all about planting trees and shrubs in small patches to promote natural vegetation. The Miyawaki forest project is helmed by a Thiruvananthapuram-based NGO, in association with Kerala Tourism and its IT solution provider, and they have set aside five cents of land at Sooryakanthi ground to create the capital's little man-made forest.

Now, the ground is home to about 800 plants, consisting of 70 species of trees, shrubs and more. And while it was envisioned by veterans, about 30 young volunteers nurtured the plants, officials say. Content writer Bhadra S, one of the volunteers, says, "Coming in contact with mud, water and shovels in itself is a matter of joy. While planting of trees is an advice often given to the youth, giving us a chance to do something like this is quite fulfilling. I felt happy that we could nurture new lives and we didn't even check our phones or take photos while we did it."

Hari M R, Manager Director of Kerala Tourism's IT solutions provider, says the project aims to bring down the temperature by at least three degrees, by 2030. "Once the tourism department allotted land for this project, we nurtured the saplings for the space at our Kowdiar office's premises for three months. Meanwhile, we took steps to ensure the required fertility at Sooryakanthi ground. In the first week of March, they were planted in the ground." Interestingly, the Miyawaki method promotes quick growth of plants. "So, a three-year-old plant will have the growth of a 10-year-old tree, and will release more oxygen," he explains.

Here's how the team prepared the rocky terrain of Sooryakanthi to create a forest. Hari explains, "The land was barren. We layered it with 16 loads of cow dung, dry leaves, rice husks, hay and coconut coir powder to half a foot. Later, we added a layer of soil and started with the planting. Such a layering results in high density plant growth and water retention. We aim to help the plants attain a height of 15 feet by June 2020."

Malaveppu elanji (West Indian Medlar), medicinal shrubs like castor beans, sweet flag and more are poking their heads out of the ground and watching them close, one might wonder why they have just about one square metre distance from each other. Won't it deny them enough space to grow? Apparently, it's a deliberate move, according to Hari. "It's done to get the trees compete for sunlight! It promotes the survival of the fittest. Think about real forests. How do big trees survive beside each other?"

Sooryakanthi ground was chosen to house the Miyawaki forest as it's a popular spot, Hari says. "The initiative also aims to create public awareness and it's possible that the city residents can get inspired to try it in their own lands, watching the forest grow. Even 100 sqm of well-nurtured land is enough to create your mini forest, which can serve as your mini cooler in the hot summers," he explains.

Environment engineer V K Damodaran, who heads the NGO, says alongside afforestation, the Miyawaki covers aim to safeguard the ecosystem. He says the area also will create bio-diversity in the urban space. "No forest will survive without the support of insect life and other micro-macro organisms. This method will create a sustainable environment, as it will also host insects and other living things."

Damodaran says that the State Tourism Minister Kadakampally Surendran had shown the interest to start it in other districts too, during the inauguration. "Creating one small forest in every district, in association with panchayats and local bodies can make it a big success," says Damodaran.