

SAVING THE Green

Climate change poses a challenge for the Earth, but hope exists in the form of Kerala forest warriors who have made it their mission to protect the green cover of India

by **Arundhati Ravindran**

EXPLORE

MARIMUTHU YOGANATHAN, Tamil Nadu

At the age of 12, Marimuthu Yoganathan found himself fighting the timber mafia in the Nilgiris.

"My parents used to work in a tea estate in the Nilgiris where the timber mafia was involved in activities such as the illegal felling of trees. One day, I decided to protest by lying on the ground. But I got beaten up by the guards. I would write letters to the collector, and paste handwritten posters on public walls in Kotagiri to create awareness. Some nights I would sleep in the forest trying to catch people felling trees. But when I saw that I was no match for the mafia, I decided to counter them by planting more trees," said the 55-year-old bus conductor on one of the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSRTC) buses in Coimbatore. Yoganathan has been distributing saplings for free

GREEN HEROES SUGGEST

Planting a sapling and taking care of it should be a part of the school curriculum. The government should make it mandatory for real estate developers to plant a certain number of saplings before commencing construction. Just like rainwater harvesting and reserving parking space

— MARIMUTHU YOGANATHAN

Stop cutting a cake on your birthday. Instead, plant a sapling and gift one to each of your friends and relatives

— JADAV PAYENG

Start growing a vegetable or herb in your kitchen garden and see it prosper. It will not only give you something healthy and chemical-free to eat but also teach humility and a sense of achievement

— VIJAY JAREKHARI

Yoganathan spends his spare time visiting schools and inspiring the younger generation



to his passengers for the past 40 years. No wonder he's called the "Tree Man of Coimbatore." Since 1987, he has planted over four lakh saplings in Tamil Nadu. He also spends his spare time visiting schools and colleges to create awareness. A projector which he purchased on a PP loan, is his constant companion. "We have to make it interesting for the students to pay attention. The projector helps me share interesting facts about how we get water,

what made the deers find go extinct, and how trees around the country."

At the campus of Bharathiar University, there will soon be a *Kapil Thappa* (bird sanctuary in Tamil), thanks to the efforts of Yoganathan, who's busy building the sanctuary, which will have 2,000 saplings of native, rare and fruit-bearing trees in Coimbatore.

But his ultimate dream is to ensure that each household in every village in India

plants five saplings—one each of mango, chiku (sapota), coconut, guava and jackfruit. "If every home had these five trees in their backyard, they could build a cooperative society and a business. There would be no hunger, and we would have built a forest of fruits."

JADAV PAYENG, Assam

In 1986, Jadav Payeng was 16 years old when a major flood hit Assam, and his land on Majuli island was washed away. The widespread destruction deeply impacted him, and he spent the next 30 years planting around 40 million trees to create a man-made forest.

Life changed for Payeng in 2007 when a photojournalist saw him sowing his forest and wrote an article about him. He soon gained the attention of the Indian government, which honored him with a Padma Shri in 2015.

"An agricultural scientist once told me—plant trees, and the trees will save you. So when I saw that my village was turning into a desert, that's what I did," said Payeng, who changed over 1,300 acres of barren land (approximately the size of 15 football stadiums) into a lush green forest in Majuli island. He began by planting bamboo and betel nut in 1979 and then moved on to other species.

"I built a small boat to ferry the saplings across. People thought I was mad, but I didn't give up. I planted every day and came back to see how my plants were doing," he said. It took a loss to 10 years for the land to turn into a forest. Today the jungle is known as Mula Kuthon or Mula's forest (Mula being his nickname). It is home to tigers, elephants, rhinos and a variety of native and migratory birds.

Payeng's story is being taught as an ecology lesson at Goswami Hills School in Bristol, Connecticut, in USA.

"Planting a sapling, and taking care of it has to be a part of the education system in India. We need to teach our children the importance of trees. The is currently converting a 2,000 hectare plot near his village into a forest by using seeds from Mula's Kuthon.

Today, Payeng is an activist, motivational speaker, and mentor for PhD students.