

## **Startup Street: This Startup Is Building A Forest In The Middle Of Delhi**

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### **Afforestt Wants To Restore India's Forest Cover**

In 2008, Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki visited the Toyota plant in Bidadi, Bengaluru, to create a one-hectare forest inside the facility to turn it carbon neutral. Shubhendu Sharma, then an engineer with the carmaker, shadowed Miyawaki. Three years later, Sharma switched his career to what he calls "bringing India's lost forests back".

Today, Afforestt and its team of 13 have managed to reforest 1.5 lakh square metres of land in 144 different patches across 13 different countries, Sharma told BloombergQuint. In India, its list of clients include Godrej Properties Ltd., L&T Infrastructure Ltd., Tata Chemicals Ltd., Tata Projects Ltd. and Samsonite.

Apart from companies, the startup has also received requests from religious organisations, the Indian government and foreign organisations to consult, manage a reforestation project, hold workshops, or straight out build a sustainable forest, said Sharma.

One of its biggest projects so far is to make a 12,000-tree forest near the sundial in Delhi's Barapullah area. "The first phase of the project has been completed, we already have a patch of forest there which has started showing a difference," Sharma said. "We have monitors inside and outside the forest area and it shows a difference of 5 degree Celsius."

Seven of the top 10 most polluted cities in the world are in India, with Delhi NCR showing some of the worst pollution levels in 2018 owing to vehicular discharge, smoke from industries and burning of crop residue by farmers in the neighbouring states.

For the second phase, the startup said, it is waiting for the government to clear the next round of funds required. It is also considering corporate sponsors, which Sharma said would only need a fraction of what companies spend as a part of their "sustainable initiatives".

The tree-planting startup is months away from launching its new service—building small 9-12 square meters of a forest patch for private individuals. The service, called Tuiny, has already been launched in The Netherlands where an person can have a forest in their backyard for €198 (roughly Rs 15,000). While this is a subsidised price, Sharma hopes to launch the service for roughly Rs 60,000 in India.

But Sharma is uncertain about its success in India. “There (In Holland), people are paying now for a forest that will be built in November. I don’t see that happening in India,” he said, adding that the product will have to be packaged differently for his native country.

That isn’t the only challenge in India. “The biggest challenge is that of supply chain,” Sharma said, explaining how the country generates sapling of only 100 species when it has over 2,800 different species in its flora. The startup plans to soon enter the seedling-generation business to overcome the supply-chain limitations.

India has lost over 1.6 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2018, about four times the geographical area of Goa, according to a study released by the World Resources Institute in April. This includes multiple lost species, native to the country.

The Green India Mission 2020—launched in 2010 to protect and restore India’s diminishing forest cover and responding to climate change—is also severely underfunded. “The scheme is proposed for 10 years with an outlay of Rs 60,000 crore. During 2017-18, Rs 47.8 crore has been allocated for the scheme which is grossly insufficient as the committed liability for 2015-16 and 2016-17 is Rs 89.53 crore which is much more than the budget allocated,” according to a parliamentary committee report in February this year.

To increase the forest cover, Afforestt said it plans to plant 2,800 species of trees in different parts of the world. “We are hoping this will tip the scale somewhere and influence others to do the same,” Sharma said. The startup said it documents all its methods and techniques and keeps them open sources for others to refer to.

Source: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/technology/startup-street-this-startup-is-building-a-forest-in-the-middle-of-delhi>