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Creating a Forest in Hosur

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A few hours from the city lies a 50-acre oasis, thriving within a noisy factory compound of Chennai-headquartered TVS.

Deliberate wildernessA lake, stream, ponds and woods were brought up within factory premises by planGeeta Padmanabhan

It is an unearthly 4 am bus ride to Hosur, but if you are travelling with members of the Madras Naturalists' Society, the compensation is immeasurable. The conversation stays at a "high" level, about birds, and the expedition is bound to throw up pleasant surprises.

This trip is to the TVS facility for a forest walk. P Venkatesan, vice-president-civil of the company headquartered in Chennai, begins the journey by saying, "A visit by naturalists is special for us, since what we have here is Nature designed by engineers. We get their comments, and consider their recommendations for implementation. We are constantly working to improve our methods."

After refreshments, we watch a short film on the genesis of the jungle. Impressive, but we are sceptical. Wilderness, a full-fledged forest, across factory yards? Soon, we cross a fence and begin trekking - into a magic land of thick woods, vines, narrow paths, undulating terrain, ponds and streams - till we come to a wall with neatly-made rectangular peepholes. We look through, and see a stunning bird sanctuary on a lake.

In so many ways, this forest is a marvel. It is a 50-acre urban oasis carved out of a 320-acre campus. It spills into an industrial expanse, known more for machine noise than a mynah's song. The woods, bordered by buildings, host 443 species of plants, and have about 70,000 trees, 15% of which are native. It is a wilderness where mongooses, owls, wild hare, rusty spotted cats and butterflies have found a home.

The mother of invention

Interestingly, the forest came about because of the need for water. The facility, the first TVS plant for two-wheelers, began manufacturing mopeds in 1978-1979. In 1983, no bike production got underway. New orders and new buildings necessitated large amounts of water and the factory depended on ground water for its needs. Let us create a water body, suggested the chairman, in what proved to be a turning point.

The lake was born, fed by a series of percolation ponds. Irregular in shape, it has slopes, islands and different depths. With their uncanny ability to find food sources, birds arrived - storks, darters, grey herons, cormorants, paradise fly-catchers and grey hornbills perched on the island, rested and fished during their annual visits. "We release fishlings in the lake during the migratory season. The birds thrive in the midst of noise from factory machines and vehicles being tested," said Venkatesan. "When their numbers increased, we did some landscaping. The forest is now a micro-habitat."

The storks and herons on the islands soon moved to the trees in the surrounding forest. Fresh-water turtles and water snakes sunned themselves on the rocks placed for them. Ants and spiders were the next guests. Rainfall is deficient, but water-harvesting efforts have kept the lake free of algae and filled with oxygen.

We hike our way listening to such stories. A heap of large stones was left untouched when jungle cats were found breeding in them. Arjuna trees were planted around the lake to help large birds like pelicans land



with ease. When chicks were seen hitting the glass windows of the factory building as they learnt to fly, nets went up to form hammocks so they would fall in safety. Baya birds, that had moved out by 2000, appeared in 2015, and date palms were planted for them to weave nests. In the breeding season (November-April) starlings cloud the sky with their numbers and “dance in fabulous waves”. Annual surveys show additions of species.

Education is an integral part of the venture. Wildlife photographers visit to shoot jungle cats and slender loris. Locals are invited to watch birds and participate in conservation activities. Employees are shown some of the 19 species of snakes that include rat snake, Russell’s viper, keel back and cobra. Tunnels have been built to help them cross roads; chicken wire protects them from attacks.

It is a holistic attempt to go green. The factory recycles grey water and composts organic waste. A nursery grows saplings out of the forest seeds. The stream, flowing through a series of ponds, supports the different habitats of the forest. A herbal plant corner boasts of aromatic plants, and a butterfly garden has a board with information about the insects that flit about.

Planting forests in factory compounds is the final frontier to keeping biodiversity alive. “If all factories take this example, we will have wilderness within city limits,” said KV Sudhakar, founder-member, MNS. “With such forests, factories need not be seen as polluting agents.”

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