

**Kerala teacher's green triumph: PM Modi's Mann Ki Baat shines spotlight on Miyawaki forest success**

27 June 2023

Raphi Ramnath's phone has not stopped ringing since June 18. And invitations to public meetings keep pouring in. The last few days have been hectic for this 42-year-old school teacher-environmentalist. The reason: Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his Mann ki Baat address, referred to Ramnath's successful implementation of the Miyawaki plantation, a technique developed by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, to create a dense urban forest on a barren piece of land at the Vijnana Vilasini Higher Secondary School (VVHSS) in Thamarakulam, Alappuzha district.



"My son now taunts me, saying I have suddenly become a celebrity. It has all been a surreal few days for me," Ramnath told *The Indian Express* during a chat at the school compound, still trying to process the instant fame, even though he had already been known locally for his conservation efforts.

"News channels occasionally come here to shoot a feature about the Miyawaki forest in the school. So I thought it was something similar when Doordarshan came a few days ago and interviewed me. But then, on Sunday morning, they called me again and said they were coming to my house for another shoot. They came and asked us to tune into the Mann Ki Baat radio address of PM Modi. That's when I realised that the episode had a segment on me," said Ramnath, who lives with his parents, wife and two sons at the Thekkekkara village in Mavelikkara.

I want to thank PM Modiji for mentioning this small teacher in his public address. I'm very proud and will consider this the biggest appreciation for my activities as an environmentalist. This will serve as a

motivation to do more nature conservation projects and guide the next generation. I hope this motivates many more to take up projects like these,” he said.



The Miyawaki forest, named Vidyavanam, on a five-cent (around 2,800 square feet) plot is protected by fencing on three sides and the compound wall on the fourth. (Express Photo)

The school premises is alive with the incessant chirping of birds and rattling of squirrels. The Miyawaki forest, named Vidyavanam, on a five-cent (around 2,800 square feet) plot is protected by fencing on three sides and the compound wall on the fourth. There are approximately 460 trees of as many as 115 native species — ranging from big trees like rosewood, jack, mango, and nutmeg to mid-sized pear and water [apple](#) to small plants like Malabar nut and holy basil. Four boards display the names of each plant species with QR codes to help students scan them and get relevant information from the internet.

“We call this forest a digital library. Children from other schools and BEd students come here to learn more about plants and trees,” said Ramnath, who began working on the project just over two years ago after the school manager P Rajeshwari asked him to explore the possibility of a Miyawaki forest on the school campus as the idea was gaining traction in Kerala. He approached the forest department, which executed the Rs 3 lakh project and inaugurated it in September 2021.

“We dug the ground one metre deep, made a layer of organic fertiliser using coir pith, dry cow dung, goat droppings and rice husk and planted the saplings on the top layer of soil densely — as many as five on a segment of one square metre, that too of different layers, like shrub, sub-tree, tree and canopy. In the Miyawaki method, the saplings grow fast as the soil’s water-storing capacity is very high. Thus, a Miyawaki forest will attain a natural growth of 20 years in just three years,” said Ramnath, who noted the support of headmaster A N Shivaprasad, principal Ratheesh Kumar, other teachers and the students. Watering is essential for a Miyawaki forest for the first three years, and Ramnath makes it a point to water it using a hose pipe for more than an hour every day after school hours. He criss crosses the entire area, making up for the deficiencies of the drip irrigation system. The nests of various migratory birds and the sight of multiple insects give him the satisfaction of creating a microhabitat for different species.

Radhakrishnan, who was a section forest officer in the Alappuzha district when the afforestation initiative began at the school, said Ramnath's diligence in maintaining the Miyawaki forest in the right way ensured its success even as similar initiatives at other places failed to yield the expected result.

M R Hari, managing director of Invis Multimedia, who met Prof Akira Miyawaki in Japan to understand the practice's nuances, and popularised it in Kerala, said it was wonderful to see the prime minister promoting the model. "More people will know about the method, which can only lead to a positive outcome. Carbon sequestration and groundwater recharging are the most significant benefits of Miyawaki forests. If the movement becomes bigger, we can hope to fight global warming and climate change," said Hari, who has associated with the Kerala government to plant many Miyawaki forests across the state.

The Miyawaki forest is Ramanath's second labour of love on the VVHSS campus. When he was the environment club coordinator between 2009 and 2013, he established a herbal garden with 50 medicinal plants and later increased its strength to 150.

A recipient of the best conservationist award of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board and the Vanamitra award of the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, Ramnath had in the past organised protests against nailing signboards on trees and secured a ban on the practice.

With sweat dripping from his forehead on the sultry afternoon, Ramnath said, "See, we are at the end of June now, and still, there is no rain. The weather is so unpredictable these days, and climate change is a real issue that we must all accept and do something to address. In a small way, I'm trying to increase the green cover and teach my students the value of our environment."

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kerala-teachers-green-triumph-pm-modi-mann-ki-baat-miyawaki-forest-8687254/>