



Kollakkayil devaki amma: The woman who built a forest

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Long before the world had started taking to the streets and raising their voices against environmental degradation, Kollakkayil Devaki Amma was already undertaking the initiative of creating a sustainable environment in her backyard. It was her love for the environment and her desire to mitigate the effects of climate change that allowed her to create a forest over the five acre stretch around her home.

Devaki Amma's grandfather, a *vaidyan*, was a great source of influence for Devaki Amma. It was he, who helped her inculcate a love for horticulture. Her feelings were intensified when she married Gopalkrishna Pillai, an English teacher, in whose family all women were required to engage in agricultural work. Devaki Amma would assist her mother-in-law in cultivating paddy until 1980 when she injured her leg and was advised against walking. After three years, she planted a sapling in her backyard and the process began.

In a short duration, she had developed a lush green forest in her patio in Alappuzha district of Kerala. Devaki Amma reminisces, *"I used to enthusiastically participate in paddy cultivation. But, following the accident I was bedridden for almost three years and was forced to abandon rice cultivation. But it led to something more important. Helped by the family members, I started planting saplings 35 years ago. I never thought at that time the place would become a forest."*

Her husband and family played an instrumental role in uplifting her spirits. Every day, without fail, her husband would bring seeds and saplings for her. Even now she is regularly

gifted saplings and seeds by her family members, relatives and friends. She acknowledges their efforts and says, *"I get enormous support from my children, grandchildren and their children in conserving the forest. They contribute in a big way and want to protect the forest in the best way possible."*

Her grandchildren visit her during their holidays and zealously assist her in her endeavour. In fact, being inspired by her one of her grandchildren is pursuing botany to further help the cause and efforts of Devaki Amma. Her daughter, Prof. D Thankamani, who serves as the Head of Environment Department at *Thiruvananthapuram Engineering College*, said, *"Four generations have contributed to my mother's journey of planting trees. During school vacations, Amma's grandchildren and their children visit the house to see the status of old plants and to plant new ones. The enthusiasm and fervour around planting trees is almost like a festival."*

Since protection of the environment has been her aim, Devaki Amma uses only green organic manure to grow and sustain the plants and trees. The forest houses over 3000 trees like Teak, Mahagony, Tamarind, Mango, Pine, Bamboo, etc. Some rare plants like Lakshmi Tharu, Chinese Orange, etc are also found. Apart from the 200 different varieties of trees and shrubs that supply fruits, vegetables and flowers in abundance, the forest also has ponds, a wetland and animals like cows, buffaloes, oxen, etc.

Deavki Amma taking pride in her work says, *"Instead of restricting the birds and animals by putting nets, I have made water and nest provisions for them. As a result, you can see peacock, monkeys, and exotic birds like Amur Falcon, Bluethroat, Black Winged Stilt and Emerald Dove in the forest."* To prevent environmental degradation and to curb environmental pollution, she stresses on the need to neutralise carbon footprints and says, *"Planting a tree is the most effective and feasible option. Our family is cancelling carbon footprints by planting trees for four decades now."* She has also made rain water harvesting facilities available in order to deal with the water problems.



The forest in Devaki Amma's backyard.

This woman made forest has become both an educational and a tourist spot. A large number of botanists, tourists, researchers, students, etc flock to the area to learn about social forestry from Devaki Amma, who tries providing them with descriptions of different trees, explain their importance, and highlight ways of mitigating environmental pollution

through sustainable use and development. Devaki Amma may, on request, also provide saplings to those who require it.

Devaki Amma is 85 years old now but her deep affection for the flora and fauna remains intact. Her age no longer permits her to plant new trees or take care of the forest but she makes it a point to take a stroll to remain connected to her trees. Thankamani, her daughter, says *“Covering five acres of land is no easy task. But every morning she makes sure she walks even if it is for five minutes. Since there are very few occasions when she plants a sapling, she talks to trees. This way she doesn’t feel that she is neglecting her forest.”*

Devaki Amma has received a number of awards for her dedication and hard work. Two awards by the Central government have come her way- *Indira Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Award* and the *Nari Shakti Puruskar*, which was presented to her this year by India’s President Ram Nath Kovind. He congratulated her for her efforts on his facebook post. His post read, *“Devaki Amma has been relentlessly working toward protecting biodiversity by plating and nurturing plants from various parts of India. Her contribution toward the environment has been a driving force of change and has raised awareness and consciousness of people.”* She has also received a number of awards by the State government like *Vanamitra Award*, *Hari Vyakti Puruskar* and other awards like *Bhumitra Puruskar* by *Swadeshi Science Congress*, *Social Forestry Award* of Alappuzha district.



Devaki Amma receiving the Nari Shakti Puruskar from President Ram Nath Kovind.

Devaki Amma stands as an exemplary figure. Her dedication and diligent efforts serve as ideals for the modern, capitalist world which lacks environmental consciousness. Devaki Amma’s attempts can only prove to be fruitful when we, as a collective, take note of her achievements and methods and take individual action by incorporating them in our everyday lives in whatever little way possible.

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