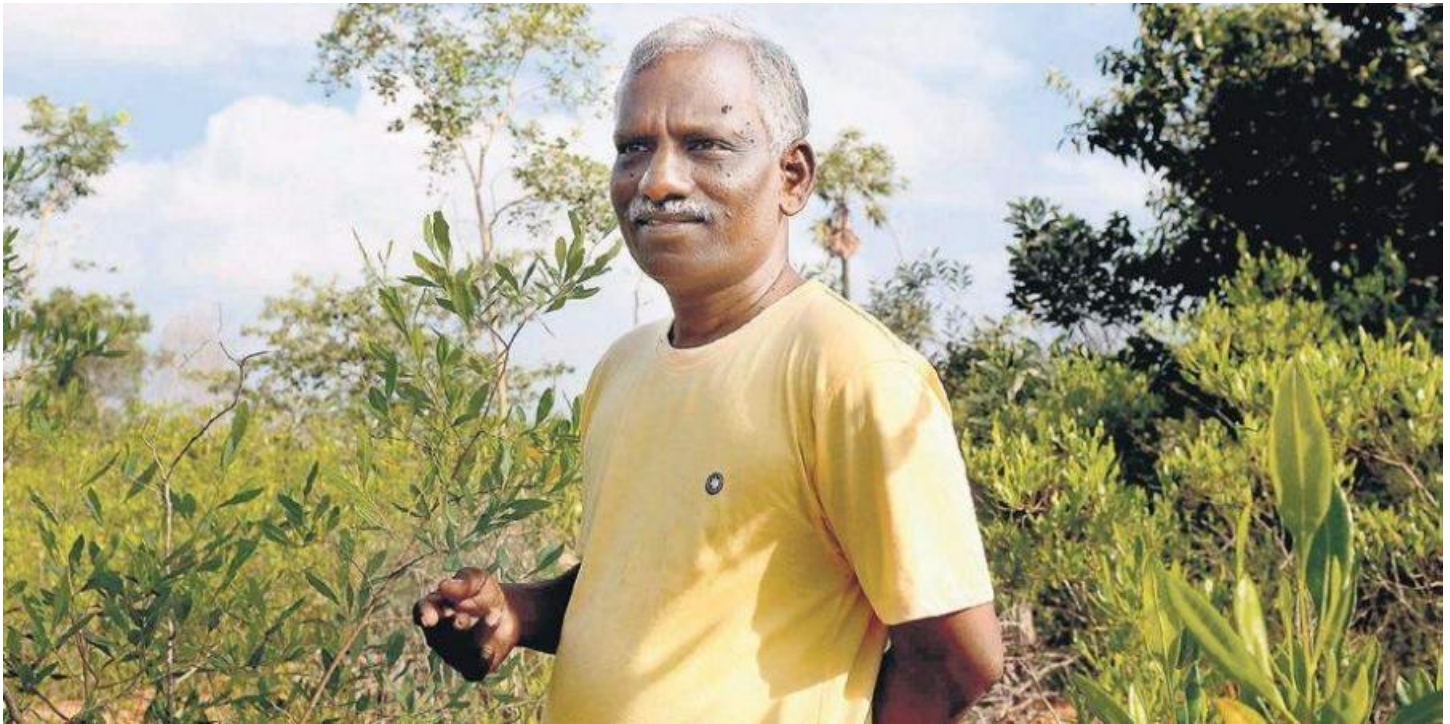




One man and his forest

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Thanks to D Saravanan and his family an uncultivable land, Aranya Forest & Sanctuary near Puducherry is now home to 32,00 varieties of plant species.



The sound of leaves rustling in the cool breeze enveloping the entire forest. The loud chirping of birds and the buzzing of crickets in intervals are punctuated by the croaking of lazy toads. Gravel crunches under his bare feet as he walks a few paces ahead of us, while his white veshti and yellow t-shirt shine under the shimmering sun.

"This entire land was completely barren," says D Saravanan, honorary wildlife warden of Aranya Forest & Sanctuary, as he clears the path ahead of him. "It took us nine years to recharge the forest ecosystem and makeover this place."

Till 1988, the forest — on Poothurai Road, 20-odd km away from Puducherry — was an unoccupied piece of land, caught in court cases. It was the first space chosen by Mirra Alfassa, aka The Mother, to set up the Auroville township. However, after she picked the 20 sq km land, which the township now sits on, the Aurobindo Ashram expressed the desire to take this land under their wing but lost the case to protesting members of Auroville.

"Auro Navy, a schoolgirl from Auroville, along with her friends, were the first to plant seeds here in 1993. They brought the seeds their parents had carried from their respective countries. As they were not native to India, many did not take to the conditions of the land," says Saravanan. A year later in 1994, Dr Rafale from Auroville began studying the land and came up with new farming techniques. "His intention was to farm and not set up a forest cover.

That's why his methods didn't give the expected results. The land was too barren to support any kind of vegetation," he says. Around the same time in 1995, Saravanan was working to build an indigenous plant cover across Tamil Nadu. "When I was made in-charge, I set off searching for and planting as many indigenous plants as I could find. All I could think about for over three years was seeds. I used to travel to Madurai and Javadi Hills regularly in search of them," he says, pointing at a red sandalwood tree nearby.

The breakthrough

As we walk under a canopy of vines and branches, listening to peacocks cawing away in the distance, it seems impossible to picture the land without this forest. "Every ecosystem begins with the birds. They bring seed and worms. We kept millet grains outside to make them stop and settle here," shares Saravanan.

Every now and then he picks a wild berry and offers it to us. "The first thing we did was dig bunds to hold the water flowing through the land. This was before the monsoon began. We coated the topsoil with a layer of mulch to increase fertility. Then, we just waited for the birds. Wherever they defecated, we saw saplings breaking the surface in two weeks," he explains. "Our dreams then began to take shape."

Saravanan began working for environmental groups when he was 14 years old. "I had taken an interest in conservation after I completed class 8. My uncle started a small NGO in Javadi Hills to save the Western Ghats. I was a part of it. We conducted a lot of awareness programmes in and around Vellore district," he says, talking about his passion for nature. "During one of the awareness programmes, I came across Auroville. They appreciated the knowledge I had and invited me to work for the bioregional awareness programmes the Auroville Green-work Research Center (AGRC) had conducted in 1994. I was with them when I first came across Aranya," he shares.

Breathing new life

When Saravanan first saw this piece of land, he had no hope for it. The topsoil was damaged and the whole place looked like a desert. "Even grass wouldn't grow here. We dug a 100-foot-deep borewell for water and used solar power to run the motor. At that time the availability of water fluctuated. An ashram nearby shared some water with us for the plants. I hardly used 10 to 15 litres of water for over 100 saplings. That's all they needed," he says.

He first planted wild grass in 1996. When the grass grew long enough, the birds had a place to settle. Slowly, the animals came too. It started with porcupines, then came the hares. Soon enough, there were civet cats, wild pigs and snakes too. "It became evident to us that the forest was breathing again," he says. Saravanan then scattered seeds of wild fig and flame of the forest or sacred tree. "I made sure to plant only indigenous plants. Every week we used to weed out foreign plant species because they grow in different soil and develop ecosystems that may not fertilise the land appropriately," he says.

The then 36-year-old turned his complete attention towards developing the forest. In 2003, his family moved in with him to support his passion. "I felt good when we moved here. At first, we were completely isolated, but now we are used to it and I appreciate the beauty. There was a lot of work but we could see the change setting in.

We became aware of how much water we were wasting and how much plastic we were using. We eventually moved to a zero-waste concept and are now almost 100 per cent self-sustainable," chips in Vatchala, Saravanan's wife. They moved in when their elder daughter was four years old. Vatchala used to travel 15 km with her to Auroville to work as a translator. "People don't realise it takes a lot of care, research and understanding to be able to ensure that the plant becomes a tree," insists Saravanan.

Poaching problems

By 2002, there were trees all around. Pugmarks, snake tracks and wild pig droppings appeared regularly around the forest. Not long after, they began hearing the howls of jackals and coyotes at night. "At night, it is pitch black. One cannot see if there is no moonlight. I used to sleep in the hall. I could hear every animal

and bird moving in the forest. After listening to those sounds for ten years, I can now make out the animal species just by the sound of their footsteps,” he says.

All was well at the Aranya Forest till 2006. Then the poachers moved in. Aranya had become a haven for many rare species of animals. “One night, I heard shuffling in my forest. It didn’t sound anything like the regular sounds I heard,” Saravanan says. He wandered around the moonlit forest trying to trace the sounds. The further he went into the forest, the louder the sounds became. Suddenly he heard a loud whisper. Saravanan hid behind a bush to confirm his suspicions.

Soon enough, two flashlights turned on. The two men had around five hare carcasses in their hand. Armed with nothing but a stick, Saravanan confronted the poachers. He managed to scare them into burying the carcasses in the forest before swearing never to return. “They were from the Narikurava tribe. I understand, they have been taught how to hunt by their forefathers and now depend on it for an income,” he says.

Due to poaching, animals that were responsible for aerating the topsoil were disappearing and the ecosystem was taking a hit. “We noticed that saplings in some areas were drying up faster than we expected. It was because they weren’t able to pull enough nutrition from the topsoil,” Saravanan says. He then set up a wired fence around the forest to safeguard it and conducted awareness programmes for villagers and the Narikuravas about the value and purpose of ecosystems to maintain soil fertility. And then, the poaching cases reduced.

Sustaining sustainability

As we walk further into the thicket, we notice a banyan tree whose roots had created a canyon in the sandstone. “This is the power of nature. It can cut through stone to continue living if it has to,” Saravanan says. The 30-foot-deep canyon had light green moss covering its walls. “That indicates the presence of water. If you go down, you’ll notice how much cooler it is there,” he tells us. A little motivation had us crawling into a hole in the sandstone that opened up to the bottom.

The floor was covered in dried leaves which doubled as a soft carpet making it easier for us. Narrow passage walls coated with moss exposed layers of pebbles compressed in between. Banyan roots snaked their way to the surface forming a natural ladder. However, we took an easier root and climbed out of an opening which led to another part of the forest.

After a three-hour walk, we head back to the lone house that stands at the entrance of the forest. As we cross the solar panels that Saravanan had installed in 1996, he says, “We have been using these for over 20 years now and they are still going strong.” It has been 16 years since the family moved inside the forest. “We received funding recently from Auroville as well as the government. Just last year we built the education centre here. Students come to learn about sustainability and forest ecosystems. We also have families who come to learn about sustainable living,” he says.

On cue, two buses enter the clearing just then. Class 11 students from Blue Stars Higher Secondary School step out and Saravanan introduces himself to the group. Fifteen minutes later, we sit in the educational centre on the 100-acre property. With large windows at the front and back of the room, students get a good view of most things they were studying inside. “To whom does this earth belong? We must make sure that the forest is healthy enough for our future,” he says.

Source: -<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2019/oct/22/one-man-and-his-forest-2050962.html>