

Puneites get close and personal with nature through forest bathing

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While it's not uncommon to spot people exercising or jogging in SPPU's Alice Garden daily, on the weekends you might run into some doing the exact opposite – such as meditating in a quiet corner, creating artwork from leaves and branches, or 'opening up their senses to the greenery around'.

Meet the forest bathers – a growing clan in the city, that believe in the healing power of trees and forests.

The practice of Shinrin-yoku, or forest-bathing, first originated in Japan in the 1980s. Tanya Ginwala, a Pune-based clinical psychologist and practitioner, describes it as "simply being in nature, connecting with it through our senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. It acts like a bridge between you and nature. By opening our senses, it bridges the gap between us and the natural world. All you need to do is slow down and follow your senses. Find a spot, sit there and just soak in everything nature has to offer."

India was introduced to Shinrin-yoku only recently, and at the forefront of this trend is filmmaker Nitin Das, whose 51 minute-long, 2018 documentary film, titled *India's Healing Forests*, brought the practice into the spotlight in the country.

Meet Pune's growing tribe of forest bathers

The documentary – that takes the viewers on a journey through lush rainforests, sacred groves, cloud forests, city forests, food forests and deep valleys of the Himalayas – features different people from various walks of life expressing the benefits they witnessed after indulging in the activity.

The filmmaker believes that the activity can facilitate healing. He explains, "Certain conifer trees like pine, cedar, and cypress give out phytoncides to protect themselves from pathogens. Breathing these phytoncides are beneficial for the human body." In fact, Tanya has inculcated forest bathing in her therapy sessions as well. We take a closer look at the practice and the new tribe of forest-bathers in the city.

THE ART OF FOREST BATHING

So, what's a forest bathing session like, we ask Tanya, who proceeds to break it down for us. "One of the first things we do in the beginning of the session is to talk about our one memory with nature. I come across people who don't even remember the last time they were in such a green space, so I start with recollecting memories in nature. Then starts the sensory activity, which is about connecting to your senses. Then, we move on to perceiving the environment through that sense organ. Though we have five senses, we hardly use them all these days. There's so much going on that we tend to ignore our surroundings. You will be surprised with the kind of things people hear, see and smell," explains Tanya.

She clarifies that these sessions are unlike nature walks, where one learns about different types of trees or flowers. Instead, it's about talking to yourself and slowing down, so that you can appreciate and understand things.

Apart from this, she also incorporates art, poetry and most importantly, solo time in the sessions. "I ask the participants to collect anything from the space around, and create something out of it with the help of the others, I also ask them to write about how they are feeling and most importantly, I also give them alone time in the end, when they can find a quiet spot to spend some time with themselves," says Tanya.

Tanya organises these forest-bathing sessions once or twice a month, in areas like Pashan lake, SPPU and Koregaon Park. She always prefers smaller groups and the activities are decided based on the kind of participants attending the session.

'FOREST BATHING CAN HELP WARD OFF ILLNESSES, JUST LIKE EXERCISE AND YOGA'

Several studies have pointed out the various benefits of the practice, that go beyond it just being an antidote to stress and depression.

According to a study conducted by the Department of Hygiene and Public Health, Nippon Medical School, Tokyo in 2007, forest bathing leads to an increase in the numbers of NK, perforin, granulysin, and granzymes A/B-expressing cells in the body, that can prevent cancer development.

“Human beings have lived in nature for ages. It’s only in the very recent past, with growing urbanisation and technology, that we have disconnected from nature. This disconnect is affecting our health mentally, physically and spiritually,” says Tanya, who has been trained under Nitin. The latter clarifies that forest bathing alone cannot help with medical conditions. This practice is more like an add-on to ongoing medical treatment. “Forest bathing is a preventive activity, just like exercise and yoga. It is not a substitute for doctors. Benefits kick in as soon as 20 minutes into the activity. Most practitioners recommend at least two hours a week. For best results – which can last up to a month – one should try a two-three day trip to a relaxing, nature-based area,” explains Nitin.

Navneesh Makkad, a therapist and another forest bathing facilitator, who is also trained under Nitin, believes that in order to get the benefits of nature, it’s not necessary for one to be in a forest. A single tree can also help you, he says, adding, “A park can also have the same effect on you. A forest is considered to be ideal because of ancient reasons, but anything in your vicinity can work,” says Navneesh.

IT’S RELAXING, AND EXTREMELY ENLIGHTENING, SAY FOREST BATHERS

According to the facilitators, most people attending these sessions fall in the age bracket of 25 to 35. One of the biggest reasons why, explains Navneesh, is because that’s the demographic that recognises the importance of mental health. “Today, youngsters are recognising and addressing these issues much more, as compare to the previous generation. If they are stressed, they will say, ‘I am stressed and I want to fix it’. That is also because of the reducing stigma around the same. They are able to come out and talk about it,” says Navneesh.

Narendran Rajendran, a training consultant, who attended a forest-bathing session recently, says, “I was very curious to attend the session. The name Shinrin-yoku itself was fascinating enough to draw my attention. But the session was so much more than I had expected. That one hour was a much-needed break from my busy life. I got to reconnect with nature and just silently observe and be one with it. For the first time, I could actually hear myself, and my mind was at ease.”

Siddhant Mantri, a full time investor, took up forest bathing in order to take his mind off his daily hectic routine, and to reconnect with his childhood memories amidst nature, “I had an experience that was

extremely enlightening. Walking in the forest silently makes you realise your own nature. I felt a wave of silence wash over me. The forest has so much to offer, if only we could slow down and learn to take it in. It helped me relax, appreciate beauty more, and feel a sense of connection with the universe. I went home feeling very recharged and excited to live,” says Siddhant. He adds, “As a practice, I walk slowly in parks and gardens everyday. This is one of the best parts of my day. I make it a point to not touch my phone during this time that is devoted to myself. I go wherever my body wants to go, touch whatever I feel like touching and try to consciously absorb nature using my senses. Over time, the practice of taking in the forest becomes effortless. I am grateful that I came across this, it has benefited me immensely. Best of all, it is free and available to all.”

With the growing urbanisation, and deforestation on the rise, Nitin believes that tree-cutting can be controlled be through this practice, because people will stand strongly against it. “The more people connect with nature, the better is the chance of protecting our forests. If people cannot easily access the forest – like in the case of the elderly or people with disabilities – one can also do sense-based exercises around indoor plants and nature-related objects,” says Nitin.

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