

Vacant ground turns orchard

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Residents of Mudhalipalayam hamlet in Muthugoundanpudur Panchayat are now spending as much time as possible in a three-and-a-half acre plot, where they went until a few years ago to only defecate in the open.

The plot, a government land, is now an orchard and home to a variety of birds, to which the residents are attracted.

The transformation began around three years ago when the panchayat and the District Rural Development Agency came together to reclaim the land after the residents stopped defecating in the open.

Sources in the agency said after the administration and panchayat constructed toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission to stop open defecation, the hamlet residents stopped using the



The orchard at Muthugoundanpudur Panchayat in Coimbatore is now home to a variety of birds.

land. But the plan for developing the land did not start immediately.

It started only after the villagers realised that there were attempts by a few to usurp the land.

The first work was fencing the land to protect it from encroachments. The agency officials then suggested that the land be developed into an orchard, for which they said a component of the Ma-

hatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act could be used.

The villagers then got together to work on the land by levelling it, digging pits, adding manure and then planting saplings of fruit-bearing trees.

M. Gowri, the local coordinator for the MGNREGA, said eligible men and women from among the 5,000 hamlet residents worked to

nurture the plants.

The Horticulture Department officials too chipped in with technical expertise right from suggesting the size of pits to maintaining optimum distance between saplings, said Muthugoundanpudur Panchayat president V.P. Kandhavel.

In his personal capacity, he also helped the orchard with drip irrigation.

The agency sources said there were 500 saplings of 10 varieties in the orchard, which had now become home to a variety of birds.

Mr. Kandhavel said the villagers were so happy and filled with pride that those working under the MGNREGA preferred to work there than do any other work.

Collector G.S. Sameeran, who visited the orchard recently said, the panchayat could convert it into a business opportunity by selling the fruits, grown organically.