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Kareem's dark and deep forest

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If one drives to the nondescript hamlet of Puliyankulam, 30 km on the NH-7 between Kasargode and Payyanur, near Parappa in northern Kerala, one cannot miss Kareem's Forest Park. The genesis of the 32-acre botanical park can be traced to 1977. This oasis of greenery is the result of the solitary effort, patience, perseverance and grit of Abdul Kareem who spent three decades transforming a wasteland into a beautiful forest park of high botanical value. It has 300 varieties of trees, herbs, medicinal plants, creepers and rare fruits and also plays host to myriad insects, butterflies and birds fluttering around tufts of wild flowers blooming in a clearing.

After working in Mumbai dockyard and later at a travel and placement agency in the UAE, Kareem returned to Nileswaram, his native village in Kerala in the 70s. Recalling his earlier forays in afforestation, Kareem said: "During one of my meanderings around the area, I found this rocky terrain which pained me. I have always yearned to resurrect a *Kaavu*, a sacred grove that every village in Kerala had once upon a time. So, on an impulse, I bought five acres of barren wasteland in a desolate place, 16 km from Nileswaram at a throwaway price since the owners of the craggy terrain didn't have much use for the land. When I bought this arid land which used to be inhabited by tribals, I became the laughing stock of everybody. But what inspired me were the sacred groves, The greening of deserts in Gulf countries also ignited my desire to recreate an oasis of greenery."

Kareem began to plant saplings of wild trees in spaces between the laterite rocks. Though he nurtured them with water ferried from afar in containers slung on either side of his bike, the saplings dried up and withered in no time. The local villagers were baffled when he bought another 27 acres of arid land adjacent to the plot. Undeterred by his initial failure, he dug deeper into the rocky terrain and planted selected saplings, ferrying water from miles away. The impact of humus on the hard laterite rock was astounding. It accelerated the disintegration of hard laterite into small gravel and slowly to fine soil enriched by tons of decaying leaf litter, rich with humus. In the third year, his patience and persistence bore fruit. A few saplings showed signs of life. To his astonishment, he found water seeping into his derelict well. As the forest trees grew, the water



Abdul Kareem in his forest

Environmentalists, botanists and nature-lovers have flocked to the forest to understand how Kareem transformed a denuded, rocky terrain into a lush jungle.

source improved. The once parched wells in the surrounding environs also became bountiful and overflowed for weeks after the monsoon subsided.

Kareem embarked on a planting spree. A variety of plants -- herbal medicinal, selected exotic varieties and rare botanical specimens were planted. A few years later, his plants grew to a certain height heralding the arrival of birds which dropped more seeds, initiating a cyclical process. "Nature took charge. Weeds, rare herbs and medicinal plants sprouted. Hare, jungle fowl and beehives started colonising the nascent man-made forest. I was a mute spectator watching nature at work," says Kareem.

After consulting experts about conservation, he dug rainwater catch pits, set up embankments to store rainwater and raised walls with rock pieces across the slopes to retain topsoil otherwise carried away by flowing rain water. Word spread about his grit, and his commendable achievement. The same villagers who laughed about his initial attempts at conservation flocked to Kareem's nascent 'forest'. Today, three decades later, the woods are lovely, dark and deep. Sunlight scarcely penetrates through the thick green canopy overhead. As one wends one's way through the painstakingly developed man-made forest, the

