

Civic body getting its strategy on Miyawaki forests all tangled

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CHENNAI: It has been envisaged to increase the much-needed green cover, but are the Miyawaki type of forests that are springing up in the city and across the state being scientifically implemented? Greater Chennai Corporation seems bewitched by the concept, having set up at least 30 such forests - each with a minimum of 2,000 saplings and a maximum of 10,000 - but scientists wonder if the method popularized by Akira Miyawaki is being followed in letter and in spirit.

In many places, proposals to replace closed parks with such forests don't include space to walk, run or play. The one in Shenoy Nagar, which was closed in 2011 for metro rail work and where 138 trees were axed, is a case in point.

Data available with TOI shows that many NGOs and activists, who are creating such 'lungs', are using non-native species and aren't following the basic rules including planting at least 50 different native species in at least five different layers and specific species in a specific layer. Scientists documenting such plantations say several ecological services of the trees are not realised.

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Species should be planted as per a combination replicating a nearby local forest, but in most cases they are being planted in a dense group over a few sq m. Selecting the species of trees to be planted is also an issue. "Carbon sequestration is not the only aim. Trees provide a lot of ecological services such as weather regulation, habitat for birds, animals, micro climate

regulation in the locality, water harvesting, nutrient cycle and reducing heat island effect. All this is deprived when a miyawaki forest is not scientifically planted,” said Chennai-based botanist Dr Narsimhan.

The Institute for Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding will study the Miyawaki forest at Singanallur lake in Coimbatore to see if it has served its intended goals.

Shubhendu Sharma, founder of AFFOREST which has created urban forests across the country and abroad since 2011, said many groups have used the organisation’s open-source manuals to create such forests. “However, we have also noticed non-forest, orchard, ornamental, avenue, and non-native species being planted... To create a proper Miyawaki forest, it takes a minimum of 4 years... The genetic make-up of a neem tree from Odisha is different from that of the same species tree in Chennai and it’s important to use seeds from naturally growing forests in the area for saplings.”

Miyawaki method will work only if the species selected is as per the geographical conditions, say experts. Else, the trees would get stressed and almost 50% may not survive due to lack of space. “Not all green spaces should be miyawaki forests. We need parks. We need places to sit and relax,” Narsimhan said.