

The Green Life

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Filling the bottle for wick irrigation with Aviram.

The coastal belt from Visakhapatnam to Ramanathapuram was once covered with a dense tropical deciduous evergreen forest, and less than one per cent of it remains today. Almost everything in this arid landscape is coated in red dust. On the outskirts of Auroville, we get off the highway to Tindivanam and navigate mud roads till unexpectedly, a nondescript sign, '

Sadhana Forest

' appears.

The programme's director, Harsh Valechha, left his financial consulting career to take up this position. He escorts me past an adobe-style hut to an open kitchen where students from The School KFI, Chennai, are on a visit for three days. Cheerful calls for cinnamon and garlic compete with sounds of vessels clanging and vegetables being chopped for their vegan meal. Valechha says, "We use rocket stoves, where the wood maximises fuel consumption." He shows me a bank of solar panels installed behind shrubs. Twenty dry compost toilets are set up for humanure (human manure), which provide fertiliser for the trees. Roofs of newer dormitories are made of recycled corrugated tetra-pack. The heart of Sadhana Forest is pumped by renewable solutions, self-sustenance and low-energy systems.



Inside the main hut at Sadhana Forest



Solar panels



Roofing made of Tetra Pak

The founder, Aviram Rozin, says, "The only thing that makes me cry is when I walk into a forest we planted, or see a tree we planted in a Kenyan desert, grow." When Rozin and Yorit arrived in Chennai from Israel in 1998, they felt an inexplicable bond with the people and place. Perfectly aligned with the beliefs of Shri Aurobindo and Mother, the Rozins, along with their daughter Osher, made Auroville their home in 2002. "It was the right vision, the right set-up and the right place," says Rozin. A desire to lead a simple life, engaged in service of the planet, led them to indigenous forestry. They were granted 70 acres of land to manage that belonged to the Auroville Foundation. "We thought that we would plant trees and they would grow. That did not happen so easily," he adds. The land was so dry that even a heavy downpour would run off down the slope. So, they created bunds and then, the soil absorbed the water, nourished the aquifer and automatically, the forest began to regenerate. The grass grew and birds started to bring seeds to germinate. "We sent the call and nature gave the response," he says. "For five to six years we were working, things were growing, but there was no forest. Then all of a sudden, in one year, the area became a forest." In six years, they raised the water table by six meters. Volunteers planted local seedlings sourced from Auroville's nurseries, where extensive research has been happening over the last 40 years.

In 2012, Rozin came across the concept of wick irrigation on the Internet and he tweaked the process to suit their needs. Valechha explains, "We plant a plastic bottle with water next to the sapling. A half-inch thick, foot-long cotton wick goes to the root of the plant." With this effective method, watering plants daily is not required and a two-litre bottle could last for a month.



Inserting the wick beneath the roots of the plant

Rozin recalls the amazing ways in which their gift-economy has been facilitated since they started in 2003. Within five days of their settling, volunteers came to help. Inspired by their cause, even people who barely made an income for themselves, came forward and contributed funds. Many learnt practices at Sadhana

Forest and started to implement them elsewhere. Rozin's group was encouraged to plant Sadhana Forests in Haiti and Kenya. "When we say we are going to start a forest, the people, money — everything just appears," he says. Their primary mission is to develop the forest, so all vegetables and pulses come from surrounding villages.

Every year, they get thousands of volunteers at Sadhana Forest. At any given time, there are about 40 volunteers. Rozin, who celebrates his 50th birthday this year, says, "I feel healthy and happy. My second child was born in Sadhana Forest and grew up here. The biggest breakthrough is how from a small family of three, we became a community — this is truly inspiring."

*First published in **The Hindu** Read [More Forests to Grow People](#): the story on Sadhana Forest that was **written specially for this website**, and [its translation in Tamil](#) Read another article on Aviram Rozin's work - [Aviram Rozin: A man who left his job and came to India to grow 70 acres of edible forest](#)*