

The Resilient Green Heart: My Journey with 'The Woods'

-Dr Devender Singh Meena, Assistant Professor of Botany, Shivaji College, University of Delhi

My first encounter with 'The Woods' was, in many ways, an awakening, initiated by Mr. V.P. Rao. What began as a simple nature walk in June 2019 for residents quickly blossomed into a profound, ongoing collaboration. As a botanist at the University of Delhi, I have visited so many biological parks, studying ecosystems, but what I found here, and what it has become, is truly a testament to remarkable vision and ecological resilience.

From that initial stroll, where we navigated patches of tenacious weeds and debated the potential of the land, a shared vision with Mr. V.P. Rao ignited. I remember countless discussions, often over cups of tea, dissecting lists of native plants, poring over their ecological benefits, and strategizing how to introduce them to this challenging site. It wasn't just about planting; it was about meticulously planning for a self-sustaining ecosystem that would not only beautify the area but, more importantly, provide a crucial haven for local wildlife. This was a collaboration that continued, uninterrupted, even through the isolating times of the COVID-19 pandemic, a quiet, determined commitment to a green future.

Our early efforts were a fascinating blend of scientific intention and sheer physical resolve. Mr. Rao and I prioritised the planting of native and fruit-bearing trees, knowing these were the key to attracting a diverse array of avian life. I recall the joy of seeing the first few fruit trees beginning to flower, imagining the birds they would soon draw. But it wasn't just about the grand trees. We paid meticulous attention to the understory, introducing various grasses and smaller plants. I'd often explain to curious residents that these humble additions are, in fact, indispensable – providing vital shelter for insects and other small creatures, enabling them to lay their eggs safely. It's in these subtle layers that the true biodiversity of an ecosystem begins to thrive.

Of course, the journey was not without its formidable obstacles. In those nascent stages, the land, having endured years of neglect and misuse, was indeed a thicket of haphazardly growing grasses and stubborn weeds. I distinctly remember the challenge during the monsoon season; the growth was so rampant it became genuinely difficult to walk through, and yes, it regrettably served as ideal cover for some less-desirable residents, including snakes. It was a stark reminder of the long road ahead, but the unwavering spirit of the residents, under **Mr. Rao's** calm and persistent leadership, always prevailed.

To stand in 'The Woods' today, after years of unwavering dedication, is to witness a minor miracle. This once-decrepit space has been transformed into a wonderful, thriving biodiversity park, a living testament to what a community can achieve when united by a common, green purpose. The change is truly astounding.

I often find myself observing the sheer variety of life that now calls this place home. The sight of over a few dozens of species of birds, many of them migratory, flitting amongst the canopy, their calls weaving through the revitalised air, is deeply gratifying. The air is alive with the hum of countless insects, and a multitude of plant varieties, including many that are rare or historically significant to our region, have been carefully introduced and nurtured. I vividly recall the day Mr. Rao proudly showed me a thriving sandalwood sapling. To see such a valuable, historically significant species taking root here, nurtured by community hands, was genuinely surprising and filled me with a quiet sense of triumph. It speaks volumes about the level of care and vision that has gone into every square foot of this park.

Over the past six years of my close association, I have seen this place change in ways that, frankly, few would have believed possible. 'The Woods' today stands as a vibrant, safe, and nurturing environment, a direct outcome of Mr. V.P. Rao's persistent hard work and the collective vision of his dedicated team. It is a place where one can truly breathe in a wholesome atmosphere, rich in biological diversity. More than just a green lung for the village, it has become an invaluable outdoor classroom and playground for children. I often imagine them running through its paths, eyes wide with wonder, discovering a vibrant butterfly, or learning the name of a unique tree. This fosters a natural curiosity about the flora and fauna of their own region, sparking what I hope will be a lifelong appreciation for the natural world. This profound transformation of 'The Woods' is, to me, an exemplary model for urban ecological restoration, built on community spirit and an unyielding commitment to nature.