

Conductor of Pastoral Symphony

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Marimuthu Yoganathan is not your average bus conductor. He utters botanical names of trees with the ease of a biologist and talks on eco-conservation and global warming with the zeal of a missionary. After listening to him speak on the hazards of CFCs (he expands it for my benefit), I am stumped to learn later that he has not pursued formal studies beyond school. But then, as I mentioned earlier, he is not just another working Joe.

For the past 25 years, Yoganathan has been campaigning for tree conservation, motivating school and college students into planting trees every year. It's a business he conducts quietly without any fanfare. He has planted around 1,20,300 saplings so far, and has visited 3,007 educational institutions in Tamil Nadu. His efforts have not gone unnoticed, and Yoganathan has received several awards, including the Timberland Unsung Hero award and the government's Eco-warrior award. "I have bundled them and put it on the loft. I don't have space for them," says this conductor, who lives in a rented house in Coimbatore.

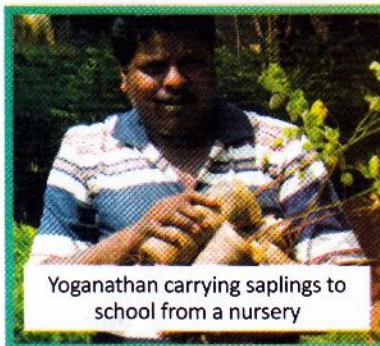
Recently he received the 'Real Heroes,' award presented by CNN-IBN and Reliance Industries Ltd. He fondly remembers meeting several luminaries from the cricket world and Bollywood at the award presentation ceremony held in Mumbai.

A native of Mayiladathurai, Yoganathan grew up in Kotagiri tea estates of Nilgiris, where his mother and elder sister worked. Writing poetry was his first love. As a teenager, he would sit under the canopy of trees in the neighbouring forests and scribble his thoughts. That's when he first confronted workers who brought down trees. "The trees were used as firewood for processing tea in the estates," says Yoganathan. "I would protest lying down in front of lorries that carted the trees."

Poverty and family commitments prevented Yoganathan from studying further. In 1999, he joined the state transport corporation.

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Yoganathan carrying saplings to school from a nursery

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warming. "Students of panchayat schools of classes 3-8 are at an impressionable age. With visuals I am able to hold their attention. These children are my ambassadors," he says.

Making his classes interesting are nuggets of information on how the Black Widow spider earned its name, and how the scorpion, after mating, eats its partner, and in turn is eaten by its hatchlings after they emerge. Yoganathan cautions students against nail polish, perfumes and lipsticks due to the CFC content in them and offers them substitutes. Another no-no in Yoganathan's lecture is the use of plastic cups and carry-bags.

His projector broke down a month ago and he is not able to procure its spare parts. "A new LCD projector will cost Rs.48, 000," the 43-year old environmentalist says sadly. Today, his group, Yogu Tree, includes 20,417 members, most of them students, and the number is growing. "I have a list of their names with their birthdays and contact numbers," he says. On their birthdays, he reminds them via SMS to plant a sapling.

The Rotary East Club, Coimbatore presented him with 10,000 saplings this year. He collects discarded milk sachets from hotels and after cleaning them, fills it with soil and sows seeds for saplings. As faculty at State NSS Project Training Centre, Avanashilingam, he conducts slide shows and talks for teachers of schools, colleges and universities on environment.



Yoganathan with DIG Govindraj, Prisons department watering a sapling at Presentation Convent, Madukkarai