

His tailor, Kari, made him two green shirts to be worn on the big day. "On the first day of shooting, he wore an old khaki shirt that was frayed at the collar. He was asked to wear a better shirt the next day. But that too was frayed. So I made him new ones in the colour that defines him and his work," says Kari. But, conductor M.Yoganathan would rather spend money on saplings than a new shirt. "Isn't that more profitable?" he asks.

Today, the 42-year-old will receive CNN-IBN's 'Real Heroes Award' in Mumbai. For five days, the channel's crew documented his life of dedication to the environment. The video was also telecast in the channel. If a tree is being felled is the city and there is a round-faced man fighting to save it, then he is probably Yoganathan. The environmental activist is a familiar face in schools, colleges and villages around the city.

The real thing

Thanks to him, 20 schools in Tamil Nadu are plastic free today, and many more are in the process of becoming so. He has planted over 1,20,000 trees in the State of which over 80,000 are in good condition. How does he do it? 'Slide shows' is the trick. He works with a projector, his collection of hundreds of slides of flora and fauna and saplings raised by him in a donated nursery, and a simple philosophy —

M.Yoganathan is a recipient of many awards. Listed below are a few

- Eco warrior award by Earth Matters
- Unsung Hero award by Timberland
- Tamil Nadu State Government award for being an eco warrior
- Environmentalist award by Vasandha vaasal



introduce a child to the wonders of nature and he or she is bound to fall in love with it and fight for its survival.

Tree love

When he's not dispensing bus tickets on S-26 route, Yoganathan heads straight to a school with his slides. "A slide show is always followed by a tree planting expedition," he says. Under his "Uyir vaazha oru maram" scheme, each kid plants a tree, which is named after him or her. Sujatha *pungai*, Ram *veppam*...they are all there in school campuses under the care of their young masters. Yoganathan maintains a record of the students in his computer and follows up with them at regular

intervals to check on the welfare of the tree. "As of now, there are 20,417 children registered under the scheme. I send emails or phone them a week before it's time to water their trees," he says. Yoganathan has also made a short film *Thaagam*, which was screened at the Fifth CMS Vataran Environment and Wildlife Film Festival in Delhi.

Perhaps it's because of his love for them or Mother Nature's way of thanking him — most of the trees he's planted get to live long, happy lives. "It's been that way, I don't know why," shrugs Yoganathan. The first tree he planted as a teenager now stands tall in a Government High School in Kotagiri. "It's a Flame of the forest," smiles Yoganathan. "It has bright

red flowers."

As a student in Kotagiri, Yoganathan was always the odd one out in class — the one who never feared to speak up against evils around him. "I would ride with P.Jayachandran, the then Secretary of Tamil Nadu Green Movement in his Fiat and put up posters against timber smugglers and illegal loggers," he recalls. "We would write slogans behind used posters during the day and put them up at night."

Loss of pay, frequent transfers, attempts at physical assault... Yoganathan lets nothing come between him and his passion.

"Not once has he brought home his salary in full. He's constantly taking leave for one programme or the other," says his wife Valarmathi. "*Appadi paatha mudiyuma?*" smiles Yoganathan.

No complaints

In fact, he took a month off to raise a nursery at the Coimbatore jail premises along with prisoners serving life-sentences.

But Valarmathi is not complaining. "Everybody is watching him on TV... We are getting phone calls from people we don't even know. You know, I'm going to Mumbai with him for the function. They've got us flight tickets. I never imagined travelling in an airplane. I'm getting to meet big people...see them appreciate his work. I would never have got such an opportunity. He has done us proud."