



**NIZHAL**  
TREE OF LIFE



While everybody else wakes up with a mental list of a million things to do through the day, she starts off her day early, armed with a pick-axe, pruning implements, watering cans, a shovel and crowbar. Her job is not destination-specific as there are plenty along the way that could use her help. A sense of ownership and passion are all it takes to keep her on her toes and override any doubts that may creep in. She is Shobha Menon and she is one of the founding members of Nizhal (meaning shade in Tamizh),

‘Nizhal’ is an NGO by a group of people who simply feel strongly for the need to conserve trees and believe that the trees need their rightful space for our future. It’s Chief Advisors have been Dr. Sekar Raghavan, Director of the Rain Centre, Mr. Dattatri, first Chief Town Planner of Chennai, Mr. Theodore Bhaskaran, former Chief Postmaster General and Dr P Dayanandan, from Madras Christian College. Nizhal came into fruition in September 2005 with a few like-minded individuals who came together with the single-minded objective of just planting trees in Chennai.

From this, the initiatives went on to focusing on indigenous trees, how to sustain these, how to prevent abuse or felling of mature trees in the city, and most importantly, how to urge the community to get involved in caring for their environment.

Nizhal’s first initiative was to make people aware of the trees in one’s own locality. A ‘Tree Walk’ initiative was started to share information on trees around the city and connect people to trees. It was during these walks that they noticed several ad boards pinned on the trees. And thus was born their next initiative ‘Free the Tree Campaign’ to prevent the abuse of trees against nailing for hoardings and winding lights around trees and to check if there is space around the roots for watering. Ironically some of these trees had the message ‘Save the trees’ nailed on to them. They then went on to plant 50 saplings along the Kotturpuram streets that led them to their next objective – the need to involve and urge the community to take responsibility for their environment. Each initiative gave birth to another and Nizhal now stands tall and strong giving shade to thousands of beleaguered trees, instilling in people



a strong sense of responsibility for not just planting trees but also ensuring their sustained long term care and empowering the stakeholders. Along the journey committed team members joined in to help Nizhal evolve. Nizhal is not just an NGO but an emotion, a way of life and a movement of people with just one common passion – Trees!

One of Nizhal’s main objectives is to shift the attitude of the people from that of a sense of entitlement to that of ownership. Dr.T D Babu, a marine bio-technologist and one of the Trustees, emphatically states, ‘The biggest challenge is in sensitising the public towards their environment. They think a green environment is their right, but do very little to ensure greenery.’ Nizhal is a community-driven effort. Their core is in getting people to take responsibility for not just greening their areas but sustain it, thereby increasing the biodiversity in the area. The media in their obsession with numbers often reports of number of trees planted in an area. But how much of this is really true and if it is, how many of those have survived, what kind of care had been given and what is their status now, are the questions?

Our urban living is a concrete jungle where unless we have the view of the blessings of nature, we will never be able to hear our own breathing or find our peace. Unfortunately we are in an era of rapid urbanisation and in the name of development make way for the habitat of man. As more trees are cut, ecosystems that have taken years to develop are lost. The understanding of this is something we as the inhabitants have failed to realise. Nizhal has undertaken this onerous task of creating these ecosystems.

Nizhal’s flagship project has been the Kotturpuram Tree Park. A four and a half acres of dumpyard until few years ago, the PWD approached Nizhal to make it green. Their challenges were, there were no funds; no electricity and no water supply. All they had was just the intention to turn the place around. With just a hand pump, several volunteers pitched in and laboured for four to five years and the result is now over 600 trees of tropical dry evergreen species and a green zone that has regenerated biodiversity and ecosystem. This Tree Park is striding towards being a community park as a pocket of excellence, where people have



communities, as they grow their own organic vegetables, take greening as a responsibility, make their own compost and sell it outside and ensure sustenance of these. How many of the actual so-called gated communities can boast of this kind of effort?

Another prestigious feather in the cap for Nizhal is the Neer Vanam, or the green belt around the Chitlapakkam Lake, in Chennai, a place that was encroached but now boasts of indigenous tree species along the bund creating yet another ecosystem. The most magical aspect being, it is being sustained by the efforts of volunteers from the neighbourhood. Once people sense the possibilities of nurturing green cover, they come forward to sustain the efforts for their own sakes. This Nizhal believes is the secret of their success.

Choosing to plant indigenous trees is yet another concept that is synonymous with Nizhal. The usefulness of a tree planted, whether it is location specific, what kind of trees needs to be planted where, knowing its habit, how it grows, and the biodiversity



it is likely to bring in, are paramount. Sensitive greening is the key.

Nizhal emphasises on trees that are unique to our own region and that needs to be prioritised. The Arjuna or the Neermarudhu is a tree which has flaky bark, has cardio protective properties and brings back the rare Tussar silk moth into its fold. The Veppalai is used to treat psoriasis. The Poovandikottai is the soap nut tree which is used to make organic soaps and conditioners. The Azhinjil's leaf extract is used to treat animal bites and the Kadaldarchai with its leathery leaf is known to be a bio-shield of sorts in coastal areas is not known to many. The Putranjiva Roxburghii boosts immunity in children. The Purasu, is the real Flame of the Forest, from which the area Purasaiwalkam derives its name. The Jamun tree finds its name in shlokas – Jambudhweepa Bharathavarsho Bharathakande. The seed of the Jamun tree is known to reduce sugar. Pots made from its wood are used to fill drinking water, and are even exported to Japan. The uses of these trees are unlimited and they stand tall guarding humans in all ways. The relationship just needs a symbiotic transformation.

Shobha entirely credits the committed Core Team and her enthusiastic volunteer networks for Nizhal's commendable work. Bhuvana, Latha, Sowdhamini, Swaminathan, Kasiraman, Rajani and Gajendran.... all come from diverse backgrounds and professions but give genuinely to the cause. Even people, who are young and hold full-time demanding jobs, manage to find time once or twice a week to do their bit for the cause of Nizhal. The work may not necessarily be planting of trees, but tree care sessions like mulching, digging a compost pit, weeding, watering, pruning etc but there is always enough and more work to go around. She also lauds the efforts and the cooperation of several agencies like the Corporation and the Forest Department. Chithra V, another Trustee,



leads initiatives like the Palliyil Nizhal, Junior Yuva and Mugam Maarum Marangal, all for students to inculcate a sense of greening at grass-root level.

Nizhal envisions a green city where each and every tree is adopted by an individual and cared for. This would impact positively the psyche of the people as when something is cared for deeply; it changes them as the Earth has music for those who listen. In an era where space is a constraint, Nizhal urges us to look at our own backyards or space inside the building complexes and look at ways to green. Even on a veranda a pot of herbs can be grown. It is simply a matter of intent and action they add philosophically.

The Nizhal Team exhorts each of us to think 'What can I do, to make a difference to trees around me, in my home, in my street, and in my neighbourhood?'

Meera Shivashankar

taken charge of their environment and thereby their own sustenance. It has also inspired more community parks like the Madhavaram Tree Park, inside the Milk Colony area.

The Nizhal Green Prisons Program, in Tamil Nadu is yet another landmark success story for Nizhal that reinforces their belief that in greening, we only receive and pave a path for a healthy, wholesome future. What started off as just a greening endeavour of 100 acres of Puzhal jail turned into a full-fledged self-sustaining horticultural module that served as a skill development and a future livelihood option for the prisoners. This module has now been adopted in jails across Tamilnadu, in Salem, Vellore, Pudukottai, Trichy, Cuddalore, Coimbatore, Palayamkottai, and Madurai. Shobha calls these prisons as the Real model gated