

Kansas Man Sows Seeds of Dream

By WILLIAM ROBBINS
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WICHITA, Kan. -- From an unusual base, Balbir Mathur, an unusual Kansan, will set off for India Monday to continue his pursuit of a goal that seems to him altogether reasonable. He wants to help reforest the world and help feed its hungry.

And if that seems ambitious to others, he says, let them consider this: The organization he founded here five years ago has already planted more than 900,000 trees in five states in India, 700,000 trees in the last year alone. In January, he plans to distribute 500,000 seedlings at a religious festival.

And if a petition drive now under way succeeds, the United States and the Soviet Union will soon be helping to plant 100 million more food-bearing trees in underdeveloped lands around the world.

Mr. Mathur, a 53-year-old naturalized American who came here from his native India in 1958, pursues those goals with the help of a staff of about 15 people, including about a dozen volunteers, working out of contributed space in a local church. An additional 30 volunteers in India work with him.

Restoring the Environment

Mr. Mathur, who calls his organization Trees for Life, sees it as a sort of laboratory, not only working to restore an environment damaged by depleted forests and to feed the hungry with the fruit of the trees he plants, but also developing methods to share with others. A half-dozen other American organizations have similar goals, including the much larger National Arbor Day Foundation, but he says he knows of no other with a similar instructive purpose.

Trees for Life won the Arbor Day Foundation's international projects award two years ago, Mr. Mathur says. The award is given to programs that foster tree planting projects with environmental impact.

Mr. Mathur's trip to India is one of three or four he usually makes each year. On this trip he will prepare for the three-week religious fair Kumbh Mela, that begins Jan. 14 at Allahabad in central India. Every 12 years it attracts about 10 million Hindu Pilgrims, and Trees for Life plans to distribute a half-million seedlings.

A soft-spoken man with a quick smile, Mr. Mathur speaks with a modest manner that seems disproportionate to his vision.

A Visionary Experience

"Miracles still do happen," said Mr. Mathur, interviewed at his headquarters here. "And miracles are caused by people."

Even the start of his career in this country, as he describes it, has something of a wondrous quality. Mr. Mathur, a graduate with a master's degree in political science from the University of Allahabad, had persuaded a Wichita industrialist visiting India to finance his immigration to the United States. Once in the United States, he persuaded a department store



Balbir Mathur standing under a sycamore tree. Mr. Mathur, who has dedicated his life to fighting world hunger, is the head of an organization called Trees for Life, which has planted more than 900,000 food-bearing trees in five Indian states.

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to provide space for an international bazaar that he ran while studying management at Wichita State University.

'I decided to dedicate my life to fighting world hunger.' Mr. Mathur was working as a consultant in 1982 helping international businesses set up joint ventures when he had what he describes as a visionary experience, a sort of epiphany.

"I was flying over Cyprus when it happened," he recalls. "I looked down, and it looked so small. And suddenly I could see how small the earth would look from a divine eye. And I was going round and round that little speck of dust."

'Fighting World Hunger'

He could see, he says, that "one side of this speck of dust was so different from the other. On the one side there was plenty," he says, "And, on the other, one child dies of malnutrition every few seconds and another is blinded or retarded."

Later, he says, "I decided to dedicate my life to fighting world hunger." He spent a year learning how to go about it.

The world, he discovered, was rapidly losing its forests, and in many areas the result was severe damage both to the land and to the atmosphere.

In 1983, he recalls, while visiting his mother in India, he decided to plant some

fruit trees and, after they were blessed by a Hindu healer, he persuaded 2,500 villagers not only to accept and plant them but to plant 18 more from their seeds each year.

Back in Wichita, he told a class of eighth-grade students about that, and they were stirred to start a fund drive to send 103 fruit trees to India.

"In that class that day was born the idea for Trees for Life," Mr. Mathur says.

Soon many in Wichita were helping. Two bakeries began making donations based on the number of loaves they sold during a fund drive, and an outdoor advertising company and many grocery stores joined the campaign.

Now, Trees for Life is one of many organizations trying to save India's vanishing forests, to restore the environment while providing trees for both food and fuel and to distribute more efficient stoves for villagers to slow their consumption of wood.

In this country, Trees for Life has a Grow-a-Tree division, distributing packets of materials, seeds and instructions in schools and summer camps for student projects. [see The Trees for Life Adventure©]

But Mr. Mathur's most ambitious project is a petition drive calling upon the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union to join in a move to plant 100 million fruit trees in developing countries.

Even that many, he said, "would be a drop in the bucket" so far as restoring the depleted forests is concerned. But, he said. "These 100 million trees will be an announcement of our commitment to end world hunger and to stop the destruction of the environment."



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