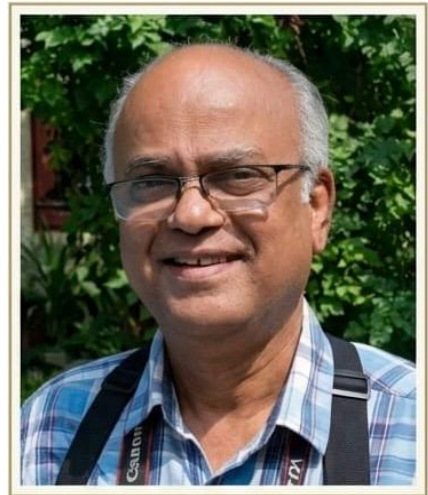


Fr. Robert Athickal, SJ (1953–2026): A Jesuit Who Gave Voice to Creation

The death of Fr. Robert Athickal SJ on 19 July 2026 marks the passing of one of the most creative and prophetic Jesuits of the Patna Province. As a priest, environmental educator, retreat director, artist and founder of the Taru Mitra movement, he devoted nearly five decades of his priestly ministry to awakening ecological consciousness and integrating care for creation with Christian spirituality. Long before environmental stewardship became a global concern and decades before Pope Francis called the Church to ecological conversion through *Laudato Si'*, Fr. Robert had already made the care of our common home the central mission of his life.



Born in Kerala on 15.05.1953, Robert Athickal entered the Society of Jesus with a keen intellectual curiosity, artistic sensitivity and deep love for nature. Early in his ministry, he served as Assistant Director of the Pre-Novitiate at Sanjiwan Niwas, helping to form young Jesuits. Those who passed through his care remember not only his gentle guidance but also the breadth of his interests, which ranged from literature, poetry and theatre to theology, ecology and the visual arts. Formation under him was never confined to academic instruction; it was an invitation to discover God in every dimension of life.

Fr. Robert's most enduring contribution was the founding and nurturing of Tarumitra, an environmental movement that emerged from a simple conviction that protecting nature is a sacred responsibility entrusted to humanity by the Creator. Under his leadership, Tarumitra developed into one of the country's pioneering ecological initiatives, mobilizing schools, colleges, religious congregations and thousands of young people to plant trees, conserve biodiversity, promote sustainable living and cultivate respect for the natural world. For Fr. Robert, environmental education was never merely about preserving natural resources; it was about forming responsible citizens and faithful stewards of God's creation.

His ecological commitment was profoundly theological. Inspired by the Ignatian vision of "finding God in all things," the cosmic spirituality of the Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the universal fraternity proclaimed by St Francis of Assisi, Fr. Robert understood creation as an ongoing revelation of God's presence and love. Nature was not simply a resource to be managed but a living sacrament that invited wonder, gratitude and responsibility. This conviction shaped his ministry of eco-spirituality,

through which he conducted hundreds of retreats, seminars and formation programmes for priests, religious, educators, lay leaders, and school children across India.

The publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015 gave fresh ecclesial affirmation to convictions that had long animated Fr. Robert's ministry. He enthusiastically embraced the encyclical, developing presentations, workshops and retreats that introduced its message to religious communities, educational institutions and social organisations. His work helped many recognize that ecological degradation, social injustice and spiritual renewal are inseparably linked.

Beyond his environmental leadership, Fr. Robert was a man of remarkable artistic gifts. He was an accomplished painter whose works adorned chapels and retreat centres, a gifted cartoonist whose wit enlivened community life, a poet, playwright and designer who approached every project with originality and imagination. The Tarumitra campus itself reflected his artistic vision. Its architecture, open spaces and thoughtfully named cottages expressed his belief that beauty, simplicity and harmony with nature go together. Even practical challenges became opportunities for creativity, and he was known for devising ingenious, low-cost solutions using locally available materials which are called jugaad technology.

One of Fr. Robert's distinctive qualities was his ability to inspire collaboration. He recognized that lasting movements are built not by individuals working in isolation but by communities united around a common vision. He brought together Jesuits, women religious, teachers, volunteers, environmentalists, benefactors and students, encouraging each to contribute their talents with freedom and responsibility. Many who today serve in environmental education and ecological advocacy acknowledge his encouragement and mentorship as decisive influences in their own journeys.

Despite his wide recognition, Fr. Robert remained a man of simplicity and humility. Gentle in conversation, generous in appreciation and respectful of differing viewpoints, he possessed an uncommon interior freedom. Praise never inflated him; criticism seldom discouraged him. His quiet confidence rested not on personal achievement but on fidelity to the mission entrusted to him. Those who knew him best remember his warmth, his sense of humour, his hospitality and his capacity to make others feel welcomed and valued.

His influence reached far beyond the institutions he established. Thousands of school children discovered environmental responsibility through Tarumitra. Religious congregations encountered a richer understanding of creation-centred spirituality through his retreats. Countless collaborators found in him not merely an organizer but a mentor who believed in their potential. In an age increasingly threatened by climate change, ecological degradation and environmental injustice, his witness appears more relevant than ever.

Fr. Robert Athickal belonged to a generation of Jesuits who anticipated many of the concerns that now shape the Church's pastoral priorities. He demonstrated that environmental stewardship is not a peripheral activity but an essential expression of Christian discipleship. His ministry united contemplation with action, science with spirituality, beauty with responsibility and ecological concern with the Gospel.

The measure of Fr. Robert's life is not found only in the trees planted, the buildings constructed, the paintings created or the programmes organised. His enduring legacy lies in the ecological imagination he cultivated—a way of seeing the world as God's beloved creation and of responding to it with reverence, gratitude and care. Through his life and ministry, he invited countless people to recognise that love for God finds authentic expression in love for the Earth and all who inhabit it.

As the Church and society bid farewell to this remarkable Jesuit, they also inherit the responsibility of carrying forward the vision to which he dedicated his life. The seeds he sowed—in hearts, in minds and in the soil itself—will continue to bear fruit for generations to come. His memory will remain alive wherever creation is cherished, the vulnerable are defended and humanity learns anew to live in harmony with our common home.

Fr. Tomy Nishaant, SJ