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SUNDAY EDITION

TREES OF LIFE

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After terrorists came close to destroying the symbol of Buddhism — the Mahabodhi Tree at Bodhgaya — recently, **Deebashree Mohanty** talked to botanists and conservationists to bring you a story on the other such trees which have been a global topic of interest. Be it the great banyan trees of Kadheri and Kolkata, or the ‘murderous’ eucalyptus being worshipped at Jwala Mukhi or, for that matter, the unique mango tree which grows 300 variety of mangoes, it is about time India came abreast with this rich heritage which few know about

The Hara Bhara Bhagwanji in a remote village near Jwala Mukhi in Himachal Pradesh is a 250-year-old eucalyptus tree that has managed to survive on its own in adverse conditions. The tree has a unique ability to suck in water from any plant/tree within a 5 km radius. Though villagers call it the murderous tree, they are scared to uproot it. Instead, they perform all rites and rituals under this tree in the hope that no ill luck befalls them. The Government has spent almost around Rs2 crore in the last four years trying to understand this phenomenon. They have also invited reputed research scholars and botanists from Germany, the US and Sweden to find an answer. There is a special fertiliser priced at \$7 per 100 gm that is brought in specially from the US and is fed to the tree twice a month

The Great Banyan (*ficus benghalis*) in the Acharya Jagdish Chandra Bose Botanical Garden, Kolkata, is another tree which has been of immense interest to botanists, marine scientists and the Government for the past few decades. The original trunk of this 250-year-old tree has a circumference of 1.7m and from the ground it is 15.7m high. The area occupied by the tree is 14500 square metres (about 4 acres). Its crown has a circumference of 1 km and it has 3,000 aerial branches. The great banyan is often referred to as a forest in itself. Conservationists say, it is the most expensive tree in terms of upkeep

The peepal tree in Puri, Odissa, is one of the oldest trees still alive in India. This 270-year-old tree is one of the mainstays of the Jagannath Puri temple. Worshippers tie a thread around the tree hoping that their wishes will come true. The tree is known for its medicinal value. Its bark is used to cure mental illnesses and memory loss — sold for Rs100 for a 2-inch bark that needs to be massaged over the patient’s body. According to Ananda Panda, member of the Puri temple community, the authorities must have sold bark worth Rs10 lakh. The money that they make goes to the temple fund and is utilised in the upkeep and maintenance of this tree.

We have built a radius wall of about 1.5 m around the ‘Great Banyan’ so that people don’t get anywhere close to it. There are about 200 staffers appointed to take care of this botanical garden. We have spent money in crores acquiring the right kind of chemicals required for the great banyan. We have also invited research scholars from around the globe to study the preservation of this great tree,” Dr Paranjit Singh from the Botanical Survey of India says. Dr Singh also tells you that protection of such trees is mostly labour driven. The cost of chemicals and fertilizers aside, on-ground job has managed to keep these trees in good condition.

“The great banyan needs careful attention because it even has aerial roots which reach the ground. During summers, the tree has a lot of dry leaves which is the main cause of forest fire. So we have many gardeners employed specially to pluck these leaves. All this adds to the cost but we are doing everything in our capacity to ensure that all trees in this garden are well protected,” he tells you.

According to Vishnu Pratap Dahia, principal gardener of Lodhi Gardens in New Delhi, the ancient banyan trees need the most attention because of their age. “We have spent Rs10 lakh already just in procuring the chemicals that need to be sprinkled over a 125-year-old banyan tree in the garden. The tree which has a circumference of 1m needs a manual labour for 4 hours daily, which is why we have a separate gardener for this one tree,” Dahia says.

The tree has now become a lover’s paradise under which young people meet, greet and share notes.

Some enthused youngsters have also requested the gardener if they can use the tree for marriage purposes. “February is hectic time for this banyan tree because more than 200 couples land up here to sit under this tree and soak in the sun. There is no history behind this mammoth structure. It is a feel-good tree that comes under the BSI now,” he says laughingly. Dahia has been the gardener since 1997.

It is not just the banyan trees that make it to the protected list in India. There are some peepal, tamarind, sandalwood, coconut, mango and even a few eucalyptus trees that are considered unique.

The reasons are varied. “Trees become national property if they are very ancient (more than 100 years old at the very least), if there is any historical or religious sentiment attached to it, if the trees are of medicinal value or if

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they have some unique property that is of interest for botanists. Once it acquires that stature, a tree becomes the most important thing to be preserved or protected," Dr Abhijit Pathak, marine biologist and author of many books on trees of India, says.

Dr Pathak states that he was the saddest when a 200-year-old peepal tree perished due to a cyclone in Kolkata in 2008. That tree was known for its ability to cure many ailments, including reducing the risk of heart attacks. The tree, Pathak recalls, must have cured over 100 high blood pressure patients.

"There is no scientific reason to believe that a leaf from the peepal *ka ped* mixed with water can cure BP. But many people swear by it. Even if the tree is no more, people throng this place to offer their prayers and light a *diya* in the name of their loved ones," he tells you on phone from Indore.

Then there is the strange troika of the peepal, banyan and a tamarind tree that grows intimately at the Ram Ghat in Ujjain which has been written about by foreign scholars. The trio has been happily coexisting for a decade now and there is no sign of decay.

According to Yoav Daniel Bar-Ness, a 34-year-old American forest ecologist and bio-geographer, these trees are the most remarkable part of India. "In true sense, this is the symbol that India is a very compassionate country which embraces all cultures and religions. According to botanists, a tamarind and a banyan can never grow side by side because of their interlocking roots system. But this troika has magically co-existed for a long time," Barness replied on email.

He said he is in awe of the Malihabadi mango tree on the outskirts of Lucknow owned by one Kalli Mulla who has been the caretaker of this particular tree for the past two decades. The Malihabadi mango tree grows over 300 variety of mangoes.

It is mystical, Barness says that so many varieties of mangoes grow on a tree of a single root. "This is the only one in the entire world that displays such Godly properties. The sad part is few in India are aware about its significance so maintenance is a concern," he writes.

But the great Kalli Mulla begs to differ.

The National Green Preserver Award winner says it is years of hardwork that has made the tree what it is today. "I have owned and nurtured this tree since I was 15. Since then, it has been my responsibility. We have spent a fortune to ensure that the tree gets the best of attention. Of course, there was a lot of marketing involved as well. The mangoes are sweet and unique and hence have a price to them," 68-year-old Mulla says on phone.

It is his drive to make the mango tree popular that made Mulla give each of his mangoes a distinct name. So it grows have a Saif Ali Khan Mango, a Kareena *aam* and also the Nirbhaya *aam*.

"The worst damage you can do to a mango tree is to pluck raw mangoes not allowing it to come into full bloom. I have spent sleepless nights to ensure that street children don't ruin the tree. I have attended many seminars the world over at my own expense to learn more about mango tree conservation. Then there is the cost to buy fertilisers and medicinal sprays," Mulla says.

Popular conservationists in the area opine that the tree is living and thriving because it has been looked after well. "Mango trees attract a lot of bugs and insects. It is a perennial problem to keep these insects at bay but there is a special powder that we have brought from France which helps us overcome this problem. The medicinal powder which costs Rs25000 lasts for two years," Nikhilesh Bhatt, a nature conservationist and wholeseller of the mangoes from this particular tree, says. The mangoes are sold at a premium price of Rs 1000 a kg.

But why do we need to protect our trees in the first place? "The ancient trees all have some connection with our past. In some sense, they give us our identity. If we let them perish, we are also in jeopardy. There are a lot of scientific reasons as well that urge us to take care of the roots of our old trees," Dr Pathak says.

For many others, trees are a symbol of our being and hence should be protected against all odds. "They have reached your roots, there is nothing you can do to save humanity now. For us this attack on the Bodhi tree is symbolic — *pralay* is here. It is as if disaster has reached your backyard and your time is up," Acharya Sandeep, a monk and member of the Bodhi Tree Foundation, says.

The Acharya was witness to the bombings that shook Gaya recently. "I am a seer and I saw how the branches shook, how the tree very briefly disappeared from my sight only to appear again —it is a symbol," the 47-year-old monk insists.

Then there are historians who feel in the same. For them, our trees are upholders of our culture and heritage. We lose them, we lose our own identity, they say. "Indian geography is full of remarkable and marvellous trees which date back to ancient times. Each tree has a reason to be, thrive or perish. We cannot allow manmade disasters to uproot the trees because, in that case, we will only be harming ourselves," Prof Samay Majumdar, ecologist and natural conserver in JNU, says. Majumdar has been a part of a team of researchers who led the Save Historic Trees campaign in 2007 and the findings of this research are outstanding.

According to a rough estimate made by Majumdar, there are more than 100 trees in India that are being protected, preserved and/or are the subject for a lot of research. Everyday, ecologists from all over the world discover fascinating trivia. "It is unfortunate that people in India don't understand the relevance of these trees. Most of them don't even know these legendary trees. But foreigners, especially eco American scientists, go to lengths to study them," Majumdar states.

Only recently, he led a team of 21 doctors from Washington to a remote village near Jwala Mukhi in Himachal Pradesh to study the unique roots of a 250-year-old eucalyptus tree. The tree, popularly known as *Hara Bhara Bhagwanji*, is the place of religious worship and centre of a lot of activities.

"This particular eucalyptus tree is thriving in an area which is not fertile enough for a tall tree like it to grow. But, astonishingly, its root has the capacity to draw water from nearby plants/trees to itself. In one sense this tree is a murderer which doesn't let any other tree survive in its vicinity. The root can draw water from a plant in its 5 km radius. We are still studying the phenomenon. But till then villagers are mighty scared of bringing down this eucalyptus. They believe in keeping the tree happy so that no ill luck befalls on them," Majumdar says.

Also in the list of protected tree is the Himmama Marimanu tree in Kadehri, Andhra Pradesh, which is known as the world largest banyan tree.

"The first time I laid my eyes on that beauty I was overawed. The tree looks like a house of green. It's expansions are anything but natural. Having proliferated into several interlinked roots and stems since the birth of the main trunk, this banyan tree is almost 300 years old on a rough estimate. The Government is doing everything it can to preserve the tree which has been ailing for the past 13 months.

"There is a special type of a fertilizer being fed to the tree which has been bought from Switzerland. There are three dedicated gardeners who look after its stems and some branches which have been ailing for past year-and-a-half," Barness says.

I was an adult when I was supposed to be a kid. So now I am an adult and I am acting like a kid.

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We are very close to throwing out Assad. We hope that our friends in the United States and in Europe will help us.

Free Syrian Army chief | General Salim Idris

Others on protected list

Green being, Colaba Rain tree

Situated near the National Gallery of Modern Art, across the Prince of Wales Museum, this tree has been voted as the Most Popular Tree in the recent Green convention held in the US. More than 500 people can come under this broadly spreading shade tree. The tree also features in almost all environmental journals as the 'Green Being'.

The 4.30 tree, new delhi

It's an old Peepal tree at the junction where Barakhamba Road merges into the CP Outer Circle. Barness calls it the 4.30 Tree, because he explains if the Connaught Place is one big clock dial then this tree comes in at 4.30. It's the largest surviving tree in CP and has been the talk of the town where people have also called it the haunted tree .

Pipleshwar, ahmedabad

A peepal tree near a temple in Bapunagar in Ahmedabad is called the Pipleshwar Mahadev. Local residents attribute the sudden fame of the tree to the mysterious appearance of a Shivling on one of its branches. The shivling was discovered by a couple of women devotees who spotted a black stone-like object on the tree at the Khodiyar temple.

Tree for childless, mandu, mp

The Baobabs (Adansonia Digitata) nestled in the historical ruins of Mandu, in Madhya Pradesh. These trees also cradle the legendary love story of Baz Bahadur and Roopmati from that era. Baobabs are African trees brought to India around the 16th century. This tree is also known as the tree of romance where couples without children come to pray.

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