

Rooting for the revival of a grand tree

Service Tree of the Aurobindo Ashram, worn down by time and natural disasters, to be restored



DEFERRING DECAY The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, Dehradun, along with the Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding (IFGTB), will help to restore the tree that has gained spiritual significance

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PUDUCHERRY: Any visitor to the Aurobindo Ashram in Puducherry would have most definitely noticed the elegant service tree that holds a place of honour in the ashram. The tree is an 82-year-old *Peltophorum pterocarpum* that stands next to Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi, which was named 'Service Tree' by the Mother.

Through the years, this Service Tree has faced a number of natural disasters, including the recent Cyclone Thane. In this cyclone, several branches were broke and the canopy was unbalanced.

This resulted in strain on the trunk of the tree, ashram sources said.

In addition, infections and age have weakened the tree and made it brittle. All these factors have led to various agencies coming up with restoration plans for the octogenarian tree.

The tree has so far been looked after by the garden service of the ashram, and they have now consulted ex-

perts from India and abroad to look after the tree.

On a recent visit to Puducherry, Director General of the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, Dehradun, VK Bahuguna told *The-Hindu* that his institution, along with the Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding (IFGTB), would help to restore the tree.

They had worked with trees in Angkor Vat and the Bodhi tree in Gaya. Since the Service Tree was also of spiritual significance, they would be helping to prevent fungus and other infections in the tree, he said.

Scientists from the IFGTB were expected to inspect the tree and identify the measures they could take.

According to an ashramite, in the meanwhile, the ashram's garden service had also taken certain measures to restore the tree. The concrete structure, which has supported the branches for over 50 years, has now been strengthened with steel girders and rounded tops that will allow the branches to

remain undamaged even in heavy winds. More supports have been added for stability.

The decaying parts of the tree and dried twigs have been trimmed and painted with neem oil to prevent infections. Parts of the trunk and major branches that were affected with fungus have been cleaned and neem oil has been applied.

Former Director of the SERC (Structural Engineering Research Centre) is being consulted on the project, along with US-based landscape architect Martin Mosko and officials from the Agriculture and Forest Departments.

The service tree was brought into the Puducherry region by the Mother and it was used extensively in Auroville during the initial forest cultivation. It is a low-land species and is found in Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Singapore and similar countries. It grows in tropical climates where the dry season lasts around three months and thrives in seasonal conditions, the ashramite said.

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