

ECOLOGIC

The treasure trove that endures abuse

An eco-walk in Gandhi Nagar, led by tree expert T D Babu shed light on how they provide eco-sensitive solutions



PAVITRA
SRIPRAKASH

@pavisriprakash

A wide variety of native and foreign species of trees like Vepam, Ilupai, Arasu, Athi, Mandarai, Pungai, Ilavam Panju, Poovanthi, Nettulingam, Maramalli and Othiyamaram. have taken root in Gandhi Nagar

The 'Recycle for Gandhi Nagar,' is a citizens' action group that took a Sunday morning walk around the neighbourhood in South Chennai. This field activity was excitedly taken up by residents that included children, senior citizens, youth and homemakers. The walk was led by TD Babu, an expert on trees.

Gandhi Nagar is a cooperative society formed in the early 1950's with many old trees that are worth knowing more about. A wide variety of native and foreign species of trees have taken root there. Apart from providing oxygen (aka fresh air!) these trees create eco-systems for birds and bats.

Many native tree species were spotted and their Tamil names identified. They were Vepam, Ilupai, Arasu, Athi, Mandarai, Pungai, Ilavam Panju, Aanai kundumani, Poovanthi, Nettulingam, Maramalli and Othiyamaram.

Each of them uniquely affect the environment and some even



The line of different trees in Gandhi Nagar

provide eco-sensitive solutions to problems. For instance, the *Ilupai* (Madua) is an Indian tropical tree found all over the country. Their leaves are eaten by moths, which

produce tassar silk, and its fruits are favored by the flying fox bat. The immortal *Arasu* (Banyan) has been widely written about in ancient Ayurvedic texts. Their leaves

and bark have medicinal value and are used in traditional medicine for treating diabetes and skin ulcers. It is a skin conditioner and provides relief from nosebleeds!

The *Pungai* (Indian Beech) is a pretty flowering tree, belonging to the pea family. It was interesting to know that the *Pungai* is well suited to intense heat and sunlight with a tight network of roots, which make it drought-tolerant. Also, due to the dense shade it can slow the evaporation of surface water thereby bringing down the ambient temperature by a few degrees.

Some foreign species were also identified from countries including Uganda, Madagascar, Australia and Great Britain. The Rain-tree and Mayflower are beautiful large trees with extensive canopies and beautiful blossoms while the Bay Cedar (False *Rudraksham* or *Then Poochi Maram*) act as air filters and reduce pollution caused by particulate matter!

Many other fun facts shared showed that there was a treasure trove on the streets of Gandhi Nagar that quietly improves the health of people. They are endowed with supercharged powers, such as gently removing

dirt off silk sarees without the need of harmful detergents or treat leprosy!

The truth is that many of these trees that still live in our cities and are standing amidst growth and expansion. They mutely support advertisement banners and television cables. Very often they are cut unscrupulously. How long they have endured abuse while supporting fauna, enriching human lives and cleaning the environment. Roads and pavements are laid up to the circumference of their trunks, which virtually choke them.

Preserve the trees instead of felling or strangulating them. It was popularised that you could make up by planting two trees for every one cut, but this is in the case of controlled forests, not urban trees. We must do all we can to preserve trees — the charm of our cities.

(The writer is an architect, urban designer, dancer and chief designer at Shilpa Architects)