

Trees in Valmiki Nagar

with NIZHAL and Krishna Iyer

Notes by D. Indumathi; Dec 2, 2012

1 Introduction

In December 2012, a group of students who learn music from Krishna Iyer decided to learn something about different. Along with some volunteers from Nizhal, a voluntary organisation of self-confessed tree lovers, the students, some parents, and of course, Krishna herself, went around Valmiki Nagar (4th Seaward Road and Balakrishna Avenue) looking at the neighbourhood trees and learning more about them. Here are my notes from the walk. I deeply appreciate Nizhal's efforts to educate people like us. While I cannot guarantee the correctness of all the content, the mistakes are mine and I would be happy to get feed-back and more information as well. I've used relatively low-resolution pictures everywhere. If you are interested in the originals, please ask.



Well, the first thing we learned was that trees give shade! Here is a photo of some of the group under a wattle tree. We were also told that hammering nails and other stuff into trees causes damage to the bark, which is like puncturing the skin and breaking the first line of defence.

Acacia or Wattle: There are many type of wattle. This one has long pointed leaves and yellow flowers in the shape of long pods. You can see the yellow pods in the smaller photos. It grows quickly but with twisted trunks.



Neem tree: One of the most well known ones, all the children knew this tree. It gives out a lot of oxygen and is therefore healthy for humans (and other living things too). Native to India, it is very hardy and survives even when there is a shortage of water. Since it puts long roots into the soil it survives storms as well, making it an ideal choice for road-side planting. It is also known as the village pharmacy, and used to soothe the skin of those having chicken-pox. It is also used in creams and pesticides. I know that neem oil is very useful but I don't know which part of the tree yields it.

The tree had no flowers, which are cream and fragrant and usually seen in Mar-Apr.



Red bead tree: This friend was growing next to the neem. Its name comes from the fact that it has long curved pods containing glowing red seeds. Apparently the seeds have so constant a weight that they were used for weighing gold accurately. We were told that 4 seeds weighs a gram, so the next time I find a pod, we will try and check this fact! The leaves are rounded and you can spot the pointed neem leaves in front of the more rounded leaves of this tree in the centre of the picture. If you can't see it, look at the close-up on the next page!





Neem leaves showing up in a foliage of redbead leaves.

Maramalli: Officially called Millingtonia (I didn't write down the official names for all the trees) or Indian cork, it has shallow roots and so falls easily in cyclones. However, it seemed to be growing profusely in this area. Its possible popularity as a road-side tree may be because it grows easily. Notice small shoots on the side that makes it widespread. The leaves are like the neem, but larger. Its name comes from its fragrant beautifully shaped flowers. Look for the bird's nest in the photo and admire the colour and shape in the close-up!



Gulmohar: This tree is from Madagascar so animals are not the only things that escaped from there ! But it is almost native by now. It is also shallow rooted and so grows fast as well as falls fast! But it is a very common road-side tree because of the former reasons as well as the fact that it showily displays very red flowers in the summer so it's very ornamental. It is characterised by its feathery leaves that are propped up almost horizontally, virtually defying gravity. It also has a very smooth bark. Unfortunately when it fruits, not too many birds come to it, unlike neem and other local species; perhaps because the native birds don't like their exotic taste! Later it has green and brown pods.



Also notice that unlike maramalli, the gulmohar does not support too many trees around it (just cars *under* it)!



Quiz 1: Can you identify the leaf, flower, pod? And the child?!



Subabul: Also called the cornflake tree, it was caused to be planted in large number by Smt Indira Gandhi as part of a major reforestation project. It also falls easily in high winds. It is a favourite of livestock. Its leaves are very like the gulmohar but its pods (see in clumps in the photo) are different. Its *look* is different from that of the gulmohar because its leaves are not so horizontal and it does not give that spreading feeling. Apparently it has tiny white flowers but I could not see any.



Yellow bell tree: Although not useful, it is a very decorative tree; see the beautiful yellow flowers against the blue and green background. (Can you also spot the gulmohar leaves peeking in from behind?) It is also supposedly poisonous. It's an exotic tree but apparently very common in this region.



Peepul: Also called the Bodhi tree, because it was supposedly under his tree that Gautama Buddha meditated and discovered Buddhism. This was one of the 2.5 trees I thought I knew, but I learned to my surprise that this tree has no flowers! The leaves have a characteristic pointed end; When small they are pinkish and beautiful. This tree is also a good oxygen source and is often planted near temples. It is a member of the ficus or fig family.



I was told that banyan, peepul and fig all don't flower! The figs have red round berries and the flowers are inside. The flowers are apparently pollinated by the female fig wasp through a small opening. The fig wasp comes in many varieties for each of the 500 or so different types of figs. The wasp lays its eggs inside the fig and dies there. When the eggs hatch, they come out, and in the process, pollinate the flower! The fruity bits of the berry grow afterwards. I am amazed that such old and well-known common trees are pollinated by such a unique and rare process. The trees fruit all the year round so good for birds and monkeys.

Pu-aran: *Pu* means flower and *Aran* means king in Tamil and it is a majestic tree. Like the peepul, it is native to India and a good tree to plant and so children naturally like to stand under it! It is a sturdy tree, so good for Chennai and windy areas. It is also called Portia tree or Indian tulip tree. It has big yellow almost gauzy flowers, but only the flower pods are seen in this picture. If you are living nearby do try and see if they are in bloom now!



Tabebuia: Not a local tree again, but again very common in Chennai. The leaves come in a pattern of fives, and it has purplish flowers. Apparently they are very common on the Anna University Campus. You can see the large flowers, the pods and some feathery open pods in the photo.



Scarlet Cordia tree: An ornamental tree from Cuba, it is very common. It attracts lots of birds like sunbirds. It has largish leaves, rough to the touch, and small scarlet flowers. Another photo is on the next page.





Copper pod: Like the Gulmohar to look at, but the bark is not as smooth and its leaves are bigger. It has yellow flowers that falls copiously in March, forming a yellow carpet.



India laburnum: This flowers in May. At that time, the leaves fall off and the tree looks spectacular, adorned with golden yellow flowers. So remember to look for it then. Now you can only see the pods hanging in front of our friend the wattle.



Mandaarai: Also the Bohemia or camel-foot tree. It has very pretty small flowers (see the close-up) and its well-shaped leaves are very convenient for making “dhonnai’s” or bowls for serving food in. A local variety, it will be in full bloom in December, so go out and look for it now!





Close up of the mandaarai leaf and flower.

Magizham: Also called bulletwood. With longish leaves it has tiny white flowers when in bloom that are used to make scent. The berry is what you can see now, if you look closely, so the flowering season is over, and it is edible.



Vaagai tree: Also called siris or commonly known as silk tree, they have creamy white powder-puff type of flowers when in bloom. It is like the raintree (which we didn't see) flower but white. The bark has an interesting texture, like the maple. In Chola literature, it was used to crown the hero. Here you can see the profuse pods near the top of the photo.



Bamboo: This is a tall grass.



Kalyanamurungai: Called the coral tree because it has red flowers (in Mar-Apr) at which time it looks beautiful. A local tree, it attracts lots of birds. Its leaves are an unusual shape as you can see, and it has a striped bark. Its leaves are edible; hence the name.



Story of a kalyanamurungai: We came across a kalyanamurungai that was infested with caterpillars. I didn't know it was possible! They had burrowed and burrowed and eaten up almost one half of the tree, that too at the base. The tree was also bent over completely. Some children were very concerned about the fate of the tree. So Kitty aunty aka Ms Krishna Iyer called a friend who knows about trees, who sent a tree-doctor called Mr Harish to look at the tree. He said the tree could be saved.



So one week later, Lavanya, Leela and Maya went to see them save the tree.

The *annas* who had come pruned the tree to reduce its weight. They also cleaned out the caterpillar infestation (plus all the fecal matter) and put some medicine on the bark. While this was being done some of the local residents came and talked to us. We also met a *maama* who proudly said that he had planted that very tree 17 years ago. The ironing-man who has his shop under this tree also said that the tree had been diseased for about 3 years. The *maama* who had planted the tree said that in spite of this it did not fall during the recent cyclone. All of them promised to watch the tree and take care of it. They also said they would try and dissuade people from putting nails into it.



The lopped branches looked healthy and fine. The leaves were gathered up and distributed to cook. We also got a recipe: wash and grind the leaves and put them into *adai-maavu* for a great taste!

Mast tree: Named so because it is used for masts on ships. It is a bat-pollinated tree, and that is another fact I didn't know: that bats can pollinate trees. It is also called false Ashoka (look at the long thin leaves).



Indian ash: At least, I think it was an Indian ash. All I can see it that it is a large tree; if you know more, please tell me!

