

# Extinct tree found after 180 years in Kollam grove

It was in 1835 that *Madhuca diplostemon*, a threatened species of the Western Ghats, was last spotted

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A tree species, long believed extinct, has been rediscovered after a gap of more than 180 years from a sacred grove in Kollam district.

Scientists at the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI) at Palode, near here, have identified the tree as *Madhuca diplostemon* (family Sapotaceae), a threatened species of the Western Ghats whose specimen was first collected in 1835.

Only one mature tree has been found so far, which makes this remarkable rediscovery extremely valuable from a scientific, environmental and conservation point of view. A paper on the



**Survival instincts:** *Madhuca diplostemon* tree is seen at a Siva temple in Kollam. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

finding authored by Shailajakumari S., Santhosh Kumar E.S., Sreekala A.K., and R. Prakashkumar of the JNTBGRI and Parthipan B. of

S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, has been published in *Rheedeia*, the journal of the Indian Association for Angiosperm Taxonomy.

The lone mature tree was located at the Koonayil Ayiravilli Siva temple at Paravur, Kollam. Locally, it was erroneously believed to be the common *attilippa*. Shailajakumari, one of the authors of the paper, had collected a specimen and brought it to the JNTBGRI two years ago as part of her Ph.D. dissertation. However, surveys in other sacred groves in Kollam district failed to find another tree of the species. Since the species is represented only by one specimen in a single locality, it is eligible to be categorised ‘Critically Endangered’ by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), the JNTBGRI has noted.

*Madhuca diplostemon* has

an interesting history. In 1835, Robert Wight, a surgeon-botanist with the East India Company, collected three specimens. In 1848, he described it as *Diospyros obovata* in his famous work *Icones Plantarum Indiae Orientalis*. Later, C.B. Clarke corrected it as *Isonandra diplostemon*, and in 1960, P. Royen described it as *Madhuca diplostemon*.

Interestingly, “since its original collection, specimens of *Madhuca diplostemon* were never collected again, neither from its locality nor elsewhere, and botanical explorations in the Eastern and Western Ghats failed to locate the species,” notes the paper on the rediscovery.