



The grand old tree of Paravur bids adieu

A 700-year-old banyan tree, which was part of North Paravur's identity, fell recently, and was then cremated

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A little away from where the ancient banyan tree stood, its remains were being wrapped in fine muslin cloth. It was laid with reverence on a bamboo frame and decorated with garlands. The priests then performed the final rites before lighting the pyre. People of North Paravur, the northern suburb of Kochi, looked on as flames engulfed their dear tree.

The *Nambooriyachan aal*, believed to be over 700 years old, fell on April 3, in the middle of the day, without causing harm to people or property. It was cremated with ceremony. "This tree was almost a part of our lives; it has been there forever," says P Madhu, a resident of North Paravur and one of the founder-members of a Trust that was formed in 2005 to protect the tree. "Banyan trees are considered sacred and are usually cremated," he adds.

Legend has it that the tree got its name from Nambooriyachan, a devout Bhadrakali (a form of Goddess) worshipper from Puliyanur Mana in Kozhikode, who is believed to have breathed his last (attained *samadhi*) under it. People in the region worshipped the tree by lighting lamps and offering camphor, turmeric and *kumkum*. "This could be the reason why the tree remained despite being in the centre of a busy junction, where traffic flows," Madhu adds.

A new sapling will be planted after following a set of rituals. The life span of a banyan tree ranges from 1,000 to 2,500 years, says K Binu, a tree doctor, who has been treating ailing trees and nursing them back to health. Since the *Nambooriyachan aal* stood in the middle of the road, surrounded by tar and concrete, the roots had begun to dry up. Part of the tree had fallen in 2019. "According to Vriksha

(tree) Ayurveda, the banyan tree is considered sacred. It is revered as the king of trees. Therefore, as per the ancient scriptures, it has to be cremated just as a king would," he adds.

Pieces from the top, middle and root of the tree were chosen for cremation. "Trees were treated as Gods. The Vedas contain

prayers that are supposed to be said before a tree is felled for a human need. It also stresses on the importance of planting a new sapling," Binu adds.

Gone too soon

The *Nambooriyachan aal* was a reassuring presence for the people who lived in and around the area.

For over 25 years, lottery seller P T Rajan started his day lighting a lamp under its giant canopy. At 6 am, every day, he would sweep up the fallen leaves under it, light the lamp and set up his stall. Now in the absence of its benevolent shade, Rajan says he would have to bring an umbrella to work. He also misses the tree like he would an old friend. "I was right under it when it fell, thankfully, nothing happened to me or my vehicle," he says.

"The bus stop was built right under the canopy of the tree, so we never felt the heat while waiting for the bus," says Shamseer TA, a resident of North Paravur, who works at Infopark. "There was an auto stand under it, people would park their vehicles in its shade. It was a source of comfort in the middle of concrete buildings," he adds.

Almost all political gatherings were held under the grand old tree. According to local history, a long list of political leaders including R Sankar, EMS Namboothiripad, K Karunakaran, and C Achutha Menon have given their speeches under this tree. Election campaign rallies, including the most recent one, usually begin and culminate under the *Nambooriyachan aal*.

"The new tree, which will be planted soon, will take at least two years to grow and spread out its branches," says Rajan, adding "The tree may no longer be here, but its legacy will live on."



Loved by all (Top) *Nambooriyachan aal*, (above) From the cremation ceremony ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT