

HC directs continuous monitoring of 150-yr-old banyan tree, joint inspection of site within a wk

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NEW DELHI: Preservation of an over 150-year-old banyan tree in old Delhi will now be constantly monitored by the forest department and other agencies, the high court has directed. Justice Prateek Jalan recently ordered that the local tree officer and MCD to periodically inspect the tree that got damaged due to construction and was painstakingly restored.

The court decided to dispose of a petition concerning the tree after binding down the authorities to track its welfare. It also took note of several steps taken on securing the iconic tree before ending its monitoring.

"The Tree Officer and MCD are directed to carry out a joint inspection at the site within a period of one week from today, and

to take such further action as required to ensure the preservation of the tree which is stated to be approximately 140-160 years old. The Tree Officer and the concerned Officer of MCD will thereafter conduct an inspection at least once in four weeks to ensure that the site is being maintained in the manner conducive to the preservation of the tree," the court noted.

It recorded the submission of the forest department that it found digging of approximately 5 to 6 feet from the ground level that would damage the root system of the tree, construction of a wall that might destabilise the root zone of the tree and large quantities of iron guarders/rods were found unattended at the location.

Subsequently a joint inspection by the forest department and MCD was conducted in August this year after

which the authorities decided to act.

"It is stated in the status report that the aforesaid action has been commenced by the Tree Officer and MCD. MCD has also filed a status report in which it is stated that all the above observations of the Forest Department have been complied with at the site. However, the platform around the tree has not been removed keeping in view the requirements of support to the tree," Justice Jalan observed, while taking note of the stand of the government authorities.

HC was dealing with a petition filed in 2020 alleging that unauthorised construction was being carried out in a property in Chandni Chowk by way of deviations from the Building Plan which was sanctioned online based on plans submitted by an architect. The plea highlighted that extensive damage was caused to the tree which was then estimated by HC to be around 300 years old, but the forest department put its age at around 150-160 years.

Taking a serious view HC had then started monitoring to "ensure that the 300 year-old badh tree - Ficus Benghalensis, could be saved from being choked by concrete and restored to some health from the extensive cutting of its branches, prop-roots and subterranean roots."

Upset at "merciless mutilation and cutting of the majestic grand old tree" HC had underlined that the "living entity has been a mute and patient spectator to the unfolding of history in the city of Delhi for the past three centuries" and termed it an "invaluable heritage in the courtyard" of the private builder who chopped it off to extend living area.