

Geo-tagged digital identity helps Kashmir's famous chinar trees stand tall

The J&K Forest Research Institute's 'Digital Tree Aadhar' initiative provides a unique number for each chinar tree; metal cards featuring barcodes provide information, including the tree's location, height, and health

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Leafy wonderland: The foliage of tall trees at Nishat Garden in Srinagar creates a warm glow.

Wide angle: Tourists click photographs at Pári

The JKRFI began a chinar census in the Union Territory in 2021. According to data from the JKRFI, Kashmir was home to around 40,000 chinar trees but the numbers are falling steadily. The widening of highways has also taken a toll on many chinar trees.

“The aim of the JKRFI is to establish a detailed database of chinar trees using the Geographic Information System (GIS)-based, quick response (QR) code-enabled surveys,” Mr. Tariq said. Around 28,560 chinar trees have been geo-tagged across the region, with fresh plantations covered in recent years.

Chinars grow in Jammu’s Chenab Valley, and in the Pir Panjal Valley. They too will be covered under the digital initiative.

Ganderbal district has the highest number of chinar trees, including the world’s third-largest chinar, with a girth of 74 feet. “We will record the top 20 chinars of Kashmir, with girth between 60 ft. to 74 ft.,” Dr. Tariq said.

“We plan to create a chinar atlas of J&K. We treat them as collective heritage. This initiative will help create digital data,” he added.

The JKRFI said chinars protect biodiversity as they are a favourite with avian species, especially crows and kites in Kashmir. They also absorb carbon.

Kashmir is home to multiple chinar groves. Geotagging has rescued the trees from illegal felling.

The ‘majestic chinar’ or *Platanus orientalis* (oriental plane) grows to a height of 30 metres with a girth of 10 to 15 metres at the ground level. The tree features prominently in Kashmiri folklore, literature, politics, religious practices, and even romance.

Locally known as *buen*, Islamic preachers who travelled to Kashmir four centuries ago from Central Asia and Persia introduced the oriental plane to the region. The 700-year-old tree that rises to 14.78 metres and was planted by Sufi saint Syed Qasim Shah in Chattergam in central Kashmir’s Budgam district is the oldest among them.

In the 16th century, Mughal rulers planted chinar trees in the fabled Naseem Bagh, Nishat Bagh, Shalimar garden and Harwan in Srinagar. Several Bollywood blockbusters have been filmed with chinar trees as the backdrop. The tree is revered by both Muslims and Hindus, with shrines and temples sheltering it. From the Hazratbal shrine to the Kheer Bhawani temple, chinar trees are an intrinsic part of the setting of these religious places. With 'Digital Tree Aadhar', majestic chinar trees can now safely stand taller and longer in Kashmir.

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