

## Rajapalayam's great grand Baobab tree is bride of eternity

25 October 2021



VIRUDHUNAGAR: "Knowledge is like the Baobab, one person's arms cannot encompass it," goes a Ghanaian proverb. Back home, a massive African Baobab tree located inside the campus of Chinmaya Vidyalaya at Ilanthope in Rajapalayam, Tamil Nadu, embodies the proverb and reminds the students to be grounded, and patiently be in the quest for knowledge that is as vast as the tree itself.

Scientists may call it *adansonia digitata*, but for the tens of thousands of this school's alumni, the Baobab is their own *pei maram* (ghost tree). There are varied tales on how the tree got its name. "Some say it is called *pei maram* because it sheds all its leaves early every year and resembles a skeleton. There is also a myth that dead people were encased in the tree's hollow trunks long ago," wildlife conservationist TS Raja said.

The Baobab also goes by the names of *kalpataru*, *pondam puli*, *aanai puliamaram* and so on. "In Africa, it is known as elephant tree because elephants during droughts, puncture the Baobab trunks with their tusks and drink water from it," Raja added.

While the tree is native to the African continent, it is believed to have been planted here by Arab traders, noted school principal (in-charge) Usha. "The tree inside our school campus is estimated to be at least 700 years old. It is also one of the oldest trees in Tamil Nadu. The students and staff call it the 'the great grandma of the campus'," she said and added that the Baobab at Chinmaya Vidyalaya is home to rose-ringed parakeets, honey bees and bats. The school also houses several tamarind trees that are over a hundred years old.

This is one of the many trees that were planted in the Ramanathapuram to Madurai belt when south India had trade links with the Arabs. "Mahatma Gandhi had also conducted a meeting in the tree's vicinity during the Independence struggle. People from several villages came in bullock carts to attend that meeting. This place was a tamarind tree grove back then," Raja added.

Baobab trees are believed to live for over 5,000 years. "Its age is estimated by its diameter. Other old trees in Madurai and other places are not even one-fourth of our tree," points out Arumugam, environmental educator of the school. He also added that saplings of the tree are being grown by the Ramco group in the district.

The African Baobab found in Chinmaya Vidyalaya is 78.08 feet high, 57.30 feet in girth and the canopy's diameter is said to be 41.2 feet. "The children are taught from a very young age that the trees and our environment should be protected. They do not damage the trees in any way," Usha added.

There is a local belief that all wishes made under this tree will get fulfilled. This being as an old wives' tale or not, standing under this tree, one can't resist the urge to kneel down before its majesty that has seen seven centuries unfold and make a wish!

Source: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2021/oct/25/rajapalayams-great-grandbaobab-tree-is-bride-of-eternity-2375491.html>