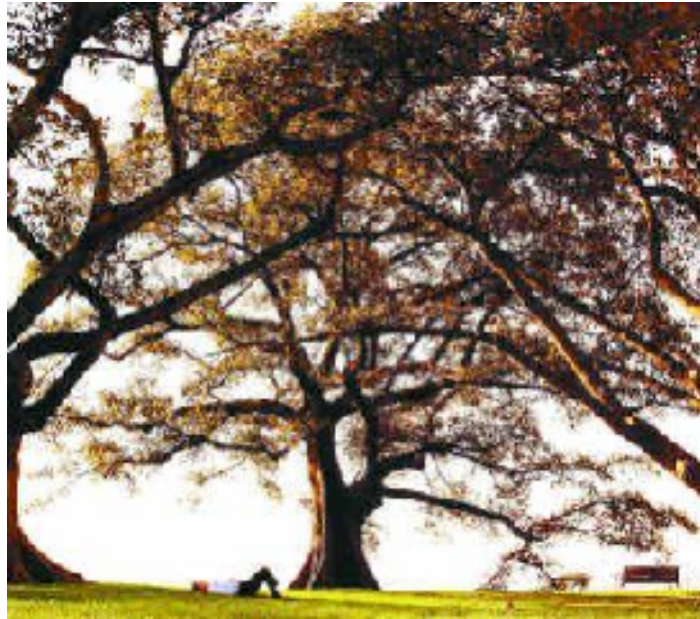


Tree, most majestic

SHANTHA BHUSHAN

It is a tree that gives - food and shelter for the birds and a shade for humans to relax.



AN OLD FRIEND: Absolutely fascinating. PHOTO: REUTERS

The memory of the trek to Sonanadi (river of gold) sanctuary in Uttaranchal is still fresh. I had finished my standard V exams and was thrilled to know that I was going on a 10-day trek with my friends. It was a trek, which was both difficult and rewarding. On the third day, we had just crossed a stream and at the turning of the path, spotted a glorious green magpie. We stopped in our tracks to look at the bird through our binoculars and some of us made appreciative sounds, which of course irritated the serious bird watchers. By the fourth day the entire group was hooked to bird watching and, all of a sudden, Salim Ali's *Pictorial Guide on Indian Birds* became a very important book.

Old friend

Our last stop was a guesthouse, built more than 80 years ago, by the British. Right next to the guesthouse was a beautiful, majestic fig tree and I was immediately fascinated by it. The tree seemed to call out to me like an old friend. I decided to stay back and spend time with it while others went for a long walk in the forest. The sun had started to set and I sat watching birds of different colours and sizes come to eat the fruits. There was the hornbill with its huge beak and

there were the tiny sunbirds, all coming there to partake of the fruit. Hours passed and all the birds went about business as usual, ignoring my presence.

Being with the fig tree changed my life. I realised what a "giving" tree this was! It provided food to so many different birds without asking anything in return.

Home for all

That night, I lay restless, trying to understand what I had seen and felt. I spent the next few days in recollection of how the fig tree actually supported life.

I returned home, transformed, and decided that one of the ways of helping the birds in the city was to plant and protect fig trees. This is how our "Fig tree club" was born. Gradually, my friends in other schools heard about this and also joined in. Together we did our little bit to save the tree and learnt so much with it.

What can I do?

Walk around your neighbourhood and count the number of fig trees. Especially check the new building complexes. Are there any fig trees? Once located, try and make a list of birds and insects that live on them.

Tell others the importance and use of the fig tree. Maybe you could form a club to protect the fig and other trees and in doing so the beautiful birds.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group