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Wood Apples on Cathedral Road

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More Madras Week Nostalgia



It was 1960. Amidst the chirping of birds and screeching of crows, Sister Thanga Mary was teaching multiplication tables to a restless and disinterested bunch of girls of Class 2 at St. Ebba's School for Girls in Mylapore.

Thud... came another sound of a wood apple that had succumbed to the forces of gravity at the end of the corridor where the classrooms ended. She could sense the distraction among her students and could almost hear them salivating as soon as the bell rang announcing the end of the mathematics class, the girls would rush out and pick the fallen wood apples from near the pond, clean the exteriors, break each open and cherish the sweet and sour fruit along with its crispy seeds.

Cathedral Road stretches from the Music Academy, past St. Ebba's and Stella Maris College, to the erstwhile Woodlands Drive-in (currently Semmozhi Poonga) before passing below the Anna flyover and merging with Nungambakkam High Road.

In the early 1990s, at Stella Maris College too, where I was a student, there were wood apple trees, tall and lined up against the compound wall on the green patch of land behind the canteen that also doubled up as the NCC ground.

Unlike my mother who, as a little girl at St. Ebba's, grew up eating the sweet and sour wood apple fruit, I do not remember having the luxury of too many wood apples falling on the ground or being relished by me or my college mates. The trees were far and few between and lined up along the compound wall adjacent to the highly populated Teynampet High Road perpendicular to Cathedral Road. The gardener took dedicated care of the landscaped garden and the trees on the campus, so that nature's bounty was beyond the reach of the some 3000 and odd students who studied at the College.

Fast forwarding a couple of decades later, in 2013, I visited my alma mater. No, I am not someone who gets involved with alumnae networks and college reunions. Actually, I was summoned on official work to the US Consulate General in Chennai. I did not want to take chances with the high and mighty at that feared office, so I arrived early for my appointment. About three hours early!



Wood apple tree at Stella Maris College.

To kill time, I walked across to Semmozhi Poonga, Chennai's newest botanical garden. Blame it on my luck, but it was a Tuesday and the Poonga was closed for its weekly holiday.

Stella Maris was only about a couple of minutes' walk from the poonga. It was vacation time and there was hardly any activity in the College. This suited me well, because socialising with strangers is not exactly my cup of tea. SMC had not changed a bit, at least externally, since my time. The grey façade of the main block which houses the arts department flanked by the science blocks was exactly as it was all those years ago. It must have been the same in my mother's day. Nothing much had changed.

Huge tracts of land that may once have been wood apple orchards were carefully preserved by institutions like St. Ebba's and Stella Maris. Christian institutions pretty much owned most of the land along Cathedral Road.

The trees on the Stella Maris campus have now been labeled and given botanical names by the environmentally-conscious students who came after my years in college.

I went to check if there were wood apple trees still there near the canteen. A new block had come up there, but I did manage to spot a wood apple tree. A raw and ill-formed wood apple fell from the tree, perhaps as a souvenir for me to carry away as a memory of my college days. I was thankful for that.

It was Woodlands Drive-in that hosted the most wood apple trees on Cathedral Road. When the 99-year-old-lease Woodlands had ended in 2008, the dispute over control of that land was keenly watched by old citizens of the city who feared commercial development as one of the few lungs in the city. Among those who expressed their opinion was a group of urban planning experts and environmentalists who sought to protect the wood apple trees and other precious varieties of trees that the locals were so familiar with during their visit to Woodlands over the previous 40-60 years.

Thankfully they won the battle. But I was told the major objection came from the adjacent US Consulate General whose security staff objected to any highrises surrounding the consulate general. And, so, in November 2010, Semmozhi Poonga, Chennai's own botanical garden, came into existence with 500 varieties of species of trees and shrubs newly nurtured and, more importantly, about 80 trees already in existence, some of them more than 100 years old, to be protected.

This nostalgic reflection on wood apples was triggered by finding to my surprise, while I stocked up vegetables and fruits during the weekend for the week ahead in Bangalore. I saw a fruit-seller selling wood apples from his cart. At Rs.10 a piece, this was cheap given the cost of fruits in our neighbourhood. The wood apple trees on Cathedral Road from the time my mother grew up in the 1960s and I grew up in the 1990s may be on the verge of extinction, but elsewhere they are growing and thriving, albeit for commercial interests.

Many more people enjoy the sweet and sour taste of the Vilampazha Pachidi (wood apple pachidi). Amma and I relived our respective childhoods that evening after shopping in Bangalore by breaking open a wood apple and eating it raw