

## **NEW LINK TO MEDIA # 8M**

**WPC PIL 14046/2022 FILED IN HON'BLE HIGH COURT OF ORISSA IN THE MATTER OF DAMAGE TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE BY CUTTING AGE OLD TREES FOR MLA COLONY IN BHUBANESWAR**

### **VALUE OF A TREE**

**What's the value of a tree? Age multiplied by ₹74.5k: SC panel**

**The five-member committee of experts added that a heritage tree with a lifespan of well over 100 years could be valued at more than ₹1 crore.**

**For this purpose, the court, while hearing a case relating to cutting down of 356 trees for construction of five railway over-bridges (ROBs) in West Bengal, appointed a committee of five experts -- Nishikant Mukerji (managing director, Tiger Environment Centre), Soham Pandya, (secretary and executive director at the Centre of Science for Villages), Sunita Narain (director, Centre for Science and Environment), Bikash Kumar Maji (assistant chief engineer, ROB unit, West Bengal government) and Niranjita Mitra (division forest officer, North 24 Parganas).**

**According to the report filed in February last year but made public on Wednesday, a tree is worth ₹74,500 a year. Out of this, the cost of oxygen alone is ₹45,000, followed by cost of biofertilisers, which are worth ₹20,000. Upon adding costs of micronutrients and compost, the report stated, living trees will more often than not outweigh the benefit of most of the projects they are felled for.**

**Commenting on the West Bengal government's plea to cut 356 trees, some of which were heritage trees, the committee evaluated their worth at ₹220 crore.**

**The Supreme Court has not accepted the report yet, and sought the responses from the central government, West Bengal government and an NGO involved in the case. "The committee's recommendation will make every government go bankrupt. So, we need to fine tune a few suggestions," the court observed on Wednesday.**

**The committee also suggested that instead of cutting trees for highway projects, the governments should first explore alternatives such as using existing waterways and railway lines to facilitate traffic and transport infrastructure.**

**In case trees must be removed, the committee said, the first endeavour should be to relocate them, making use of modern technology, and if they must be felled; it also added that planting five saplings**

in lieu of one tree was not good enough since a 100-year-old tree cannot be equated with a few fresh saplings. It recommended that for a tree with small crown size, 10 saplings should be planted; 25 saplings for a tree with medium crown size; and 50 saplings for a tree with large crown size. Crown is part of the tree from which branches grow above the trunk.

The bench, during the hearing on Wednesday, commended the committee's efforts, adding that it was inclined to lay down certain new guidelines for all future projects which required felling trees in view of the report. It found favour with the recommendation that a developer must look to use existing waterways and railway lines before insisting on a road project that required cutting trees.

The top court further expressed its displeasure at a central government notification that did away with the need for an environment impact assessment (EIA) for a road project of less than 100km.

"Your notification is untenable. It is based on an assumption that no damage is done to the environment if a project is less than 100km in length. We will examine validity of your notification," the bench told additional solicitor general Aishwarya Bhati, who appeared for the Union government in the matter.

Apart from Bhati, the court also asked the West Bengal government and advocate Prashant Bhushan, who represented the NGO Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, which challenged the decision to cut the trees for the ROB project, to submit responses to the committee's report. The bench will hear the matter next after two weeks.

Speaking to HT, Sunita Narain, a committee member, said: "It is very important to identify and assess the historical and ecological significance of the heritage trees. They cannot be equated with fresh saplings, given the exceptional historical, cultural aesthetic values such trees they have because of their age or their association with an event or a person. All efforts must be made to accord them special protection."