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Gandhada Gudi losing aroma

State Sees Dip In Sandalwood Growth Annually

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Bangalore: Karnataka once prided itself to be Gandhada Gudi (temple of sandalwood) for its high production of the scented wood. But now the state is sniffing a near extinction of the tree, with production plummeting.

Annual sandalwood production in Karnataka has dipped from 1,000 tonnes in 1981-82 to just 60 tonnes in 2013-14. "The government's inability to protect the trees and strict rules imposed on sandalwood trade by the forest department have contributed to the decline. Sandalwood is likely to become an endangered species in India in the next five years," says H S Anantha Padmanabha, forestry consultant.

Currently, farmers can grow sandalwood in their land and own the precious commodity. But the state forest department has monopolized the trade: the farmer can cut and sell it only to the department, Karnataka Soaps and Detergents Limited (KSDL) or the handicraft department in Karnataka.

Given the restrictions and money involved, smugglers are constantly coming up with ingenious ways to dabble in sandalwood trade but the forest department is unable to control the theft. "Also, it is such a valuable commodity that people are willing to take risk. We cannot provide protection to every single tree out there in the open," said a



THE SCENT OF MONEY: The Karnataka forest department is unable to control theft as smugglers come up with innovative ways to dabble in sandalwood trade

DECLINING GROWTH, RISING PRICE

Sandalwood is in a sorry state across regions where it is produced. Its annual production is dipping drastically, while the price is northbound

2001-2: 1,400 tonnes (Rs 12.88 lakh per tonne)

2005-6: 600 tonnes (Rs 33.9 lakh per tonne)

2010-11: 350 tonnes (Rs 51 lakh per tonne)

2012-13: 300 tonnes (Rs 58 lakh per tonne)



forest official. A tonne of sandalwood is priced above Rs 80 lakh.

The department has written to the government to liberalize the laws of selling sandalwood outside the three mentioned agencies. Sources in the forest department though draw solace

from the fact there is a turnaround in the state of affairs. They point out that production hit an all-time low of one tonne in 2008-9 and proactive policies have salvaged the situation, resulting in increase in production. In 2012-13, the production stood at 36 tonnes.

TIMES VIEW

It's unfortunate that Indian sandalwood is losing fragrance in its homeland. While the state government must do a rethink on some of its archaic policies on trade in the precious wood, the move to rope in corporates is welcome. The main issue is securing sandalwood trees that are worth crores of rupees. When industry receives largesse in the form of land and other subsidies from the government, it's time for payback. Moreover, planting sandalwood trees enables corporate sustainability. Perhaps the government can devise some sort of a quid pro quo where the corporates also earn carbon credits.

Hopes now on corporates

In a bid to protect the threatened sandalwood trees, the Institute of Wood Science and Technology (IWST) has come up with a novel idea - distribute sandalwood seedlings to corporates who can plant them on their secure premises. The institute hopes to receive quality seedlings in a week after which they are likely to approach corporates. "Corporates secure their premises 24x7. The fact that trees do not grow very tall helps in maintaining them. Moreover, it is an invaluable asset," said V Ramakantha, director, IWST. Experts too back the move. "This is a novel way of tackling the issue. This way, corporate premises will look good and the species can be protected," said Padmanabha. Forest officials too are open to this idea as they admit that the department will be saved the burden of protecting it. TNN