With a little help from Lanka & Thailand, world's largest coconut born in Shibpur

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KOLKATA: At 119, she has become a proud mother of twin daughters who are just one year old. But their birth didn't come easy. It required artificial insemination with sperm cells from a mate who lived thousands of kilometres away in Sri Lanka.

The scientists tried and failed… failed and tried for all of seven years. But all her children would die before they could attain maturity. The experts were on the verge of giving up their trials, when they decided to give one last try with sperm cells from a different individual — from Thailand. And this time their labour bore fruit! Here at the Botanic Garden in Shibpur. This is the story of *Lodoicea Maldivica*, a rare and endangered coconut tree that bears double coconuts — ones that are the biggest in the world.

Originally found on just two islands, Praslin and Curiose, of the 115-island Seychelles archipelago, some of their seeds drifted across the Indian Ocean, allowing the tree to take root in the Maldives, too, where it was first spotted by scientists in the 17th Century. Since it was found in the ocean, locals called it 'Coco-de-Mer' (Coconut of the Ocean).

"She was brought to India by the British in 1894. Since then, she's been the only specimen of her kind in the country and remained cut off from her tribe for ages. But it was only when she was 98 years old and started flowering that scientists learnt she was a female. The search for her mate, a male, began only then," said SS Hamid, senior scientist of the Indian Botanic Garden in Howrah.

Scientists came to know that three potential mates were still alive at the Paradeniya Botanic Garden in Sri Lanka.

■ Hamid shows off the fruits.