

## Let's not torture our trees

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**B**Y some estimates, more trees have been chopped off in the past decade than probably in India's recent history. Along newly broadened national highways, new roads, new constructions, trees have been brought down without a thought. In Delhi alone it is estimated that over 200,000 trees have probably been hacked for various projects leading to the Commonwealth Games, 2010.

The same destruction is taking place in cities all over the country. In Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, Lucknow, trees are being cut. Many of these trees are old, even ancient and are part of our heritage. Recently, while travelling in the US, a native Punjabi cab driver bemoaned after learning where I came from: "They have cut trees everywhere. Delhi is not the same anymore."

In Delhi the skyline has changed in visible ways. Roads which were green and shady are now bereft of tree cover. As the city becomes a crisscross of roads and metro rail tracks, transport corridors have taken precedence. 'Efficiency' has become the sole driver of this change. No thought is given to keeping the city's character intact.

At the same time, the State has been acting in a non-transparent manner. There is little information about the number of trees that are to be cut or the places from where they will be cut. More often than not, this is only discovered once it happens. Public protests about tree cutting have been dealt with subterfuge, instead of openness and concern.

When the tree campaign, Trees for Delhi, was at its peak and the media was glaring down at the government, trees were simply cut in the dead of the night. The government formed a Tree Authority advisory body and included NGOs. But promises to provide public information, street marking of trees, etc have not been kept. It now appears that the public campaign was dealt with as a government public relations exercise.

Claims of re-planting and compensatory afforestation in suburban city forests have been made, but without addressing the core issues raised by the campaign, namely keeping in-city and neighborhood trees intact. New colonies have been markedly bereft of tree cover. Those who spoke about saving trees were branded 'eco-terrorists,' 'romantic,' 'anti-development.'



**A tree chopped down in Delhi**

The issues being raised are relevant both to the 'tree' and to what the city of the future is meant to be. City trees provide a livable landscape. You have to see a tree-less city like Dubai to know what this means. Trees change skylines, provide a habitat of birds, bird calls, nests and insects, and a constant realisation that life has other dimensions.

While investments in city infrastructure are being done arguably to ease the lot of its 'poor', (even as they are moved out of the city) yet it is these citizens who have lost the most. The poor have even closer everyday links with trees. Trees provide shade, a place to set up a little food stall or a bicycle repair shack. Only engineers and planners who want to reduce all of life's values to a concrete 'functionality' cannot see this. In fact, the tree should be as much a part of the city development debate, as stadiums, highways, or market complexes are.

Is it that we are unable to value anything which does not generate 'revenue?'

Trees help percolate groundwater, make soil stable, lower temperatures and influence micro-climates. However, it is equally relevant to think of trees as adding another critical quality dimension to our lives.

Most trees have disappeared to accommodate more cars on the road. With no end in sight to the unbridled increase in cars, roads are now extending from house front to house front. Most widened roads have no place for pedestrians or for cyclists, leave alone trees. The Trees for Delhi campaign discovered that the path between houses was legally a 'right of way' and that city planners had full right to do what they wanted in that area. It is clear that trees are not even thought of when road widening plans are made, and they are treated only as an inconvenience.

In many cases, it is possible to change road orientations to save trees, but this is not done. Once such plans have been made, clearance for tree cutting is a mere formality, even though cities like Delhi have a Tree Preservation Act. It is not possible for the Tree

Officer, who is the Conservator of Forests, to reverse matters at this late stage when plans have been approved and budgets sanctioned. In the case of the Commonwealth Games, trees have also been brutally chopped off on construction projects. Even the Reserved Delhi Ridge Forest has been a victim of the Metro line. At Siri Fort, another protected forest where the DDA is constructing a badminton stadium, local residents protested. Even the Supreme Court appointed committee (2009) stated... "this site is not an appropriate location for such a project. It is far from any Metro Station, and furthermore it has involved the savage cutting down of a humongous number of trees, in what can only be described as a wilful and heartless manner."

Surprisingly, in many cases, residents themselves have been insensitive to trees. Each winter, there is a clamour to 'prune' colony trees. So branches are lopped off by hired contractors who gain by selling the wood. It is not uncommon to see beautiful large trees standing precariously unbalanced, their branches cut on one side, rather than scientifically pruned. Despite the presence of a large population of such trees, proper equipment such as lifts and long shears are not available with the municipalities to prune the trees as required.

The problem of tree tiling has been highlighted for a long time, mainly through the efforts of environmentalists. Kalpavriksh in Delhi has even gone to Court to obtain orders against this menace which intensifies just before the end of the financial year in March. Contracts are handed out to 'tile' pavements, even though in many places natural grass and soil is preferable. Tiling chokes the tree. Then the tree is subjected to lopsided pruning. It becomes unstable and often falls when the wind speed is high. Despite alternatives like porous tiles and despite court strictures of leaving adequate space around the tree trunk, tiling continues unchecked.

Citizens have been protesting in many places. In Bangalore, the Environmental Support Group (ESG) along with others have started a campaign against thoughtless road widening and the taking over of public spaces for infrastructure projects without any public consultation. In Pune, environmental groups like Kalpavriksh and citizens have been trying to stop tree cutting clearances by initiating transparent procedures. The battle is uphill. Trees need to be considered part of the city's planning exercise, otherwise it often becomes too late to save them.

For me, personally, the mango tree in the backyard of our government bungalow was my afternoon retreat after school. Later, this led me to the forest, taking children for walks, and guided my entry into environmental work through the Save the Delhi Ridge Campaign. The mango tree was an inspiring imprint, an image I visited and revisited, a bond of imagination which exists to this day. My tree is surely 'functional,' but in very different and important ways.

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