

Tree walks in Delhi's green spaces offer solace and a dollop of history

by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi on 30 September 2020

- *Tree walks and nature trails have found a growing audience in Delhi where urban citizens are keen to connect with natural surroundings.*
- *In Delhi, trees keep alive the narrative between history and nature. The city's oldest trees are the khirnis, dating back about 600 years.*
- *While the British brought species from across the world to Delhi's gardens, the Mughals build magnificent funerary gardens in the capital.*

Tree walks and nature trails are a great way to connect with natural surroundings.

Delhi's green spaces offer ample opportunity for tree enthusiasts, and the constant monitoring has also led to the better chronicling of the flowering cycles of different tree species.

Delhi has good green cover compared to many other national capitals, says heritage expert and author Vikramjit Singh Rooprai. Some of the best-preserved green spaces are Sanjay Van, Sundar Nursery, Northern Ridge, Central Ridge, Muradabad Pahari in Vasant Vihar, Aravalli hills, Sultan Ghari Park, Yamuna Biodiversity Park, and Mehrauli Archaeological Park.

Pradip Krishen, author of *Trees of Delhi: A Field Guide*, agrees. "The centre of Delhi is wonderfully green compared to most urban spaces across the country," said Krishen.

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Children play cricket under a tree in Mehrauli Archaeological Park. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

"As citizens, we must visit these places and promote them. It is also important that we ensure they remain clean and litter-free," said Rooprai.

Tree walks connect people with nature

In 2013, Kavita Prakash conducted a tree walk for the first time in her neighbourhood. Undeterred by the initial refusal by the president of the Residents' Welfare Association who denied permission, Prakash led a group of 12 enthusiasts on June 5 (celebrated globally as the World Environment Day).

Over the years, Prakash has conducted

(<https://www.facebook.com/TheSausageTreeNatureWalks/>) 70 walks in prominent places like Lodi Gardens, Jahanpanah City Forest and Sundar Nursery. Though such tree walks are enjoyable and help connect urban dwellers with nature, Prakash conceded that there are not many takers. People do not want to pay for getting familiar with trees, she added.

Her love for nature goes back to childhood days. Prakash recalled how her family always enjoyed the outdoors, travelling in the car through the countryside and picnics. "While my father took me to picturesque locations on holidays, my mother introduced me to wildflowers," she added.

But it was at The Doon School in Dehradun (<https://hillpost.in/2012/10/though-just-12-of-them-but-girls-in-doon-school/52989/>) that she finally had the opportunity of seeing magnificent tree species. Prakash further strengthened her bond with trees through a school project and by reading Krishen's book.



A path lined with trees in Mehrauli Archaeological Park. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

Prakash describes her walks as "simple exercises" and wants to conduct them in every colony and institution of Delhi. She introduces the trees by their common names and shares a few interesting facts about them. "The intent is not to pile the participants with too much knowledge, but only to kindle their interest. People have attended my walks five to six times at different venues."

Prakash encourages her participants to share interesting experiences to make the sessions interactive. Tree walks lasting one to one-and-a-half hours, with a snack break in between, works wonders, she said.

Over the years, Prakash's acute observation has also led her to discover flowers never seen before. A couple of years ago, she spotted flowers on the Reid River Box Eucalyptus (https://outreachecology.com/landmark/lti_a017/) (*Eucalyptus brownie*) tree and it was an exhilarating experience, she said. Her favourites are the two old Semal (https://outreachecology.com/landmark/lti_a012/) (*Bombax ceiba*) trees in the Lodi gardens.

Prakash's participants swear by her passion and love for trees. A participant based in Noida, Priti Khanna, remembers a walk in Lodi Gardens that she thoroughly enjoyed. "It is about the art of storytelling and how one connects with people," Khanna said. Vipra Malik, who lives in Sheikh Sarai in South Delhi, said Prakash is very enthusiastic and comes well prepared.

Another participant of her walks, Sudhir Khandelwal, an architect, said that he had taken part in all of Prakash's walks. "Her passion for the environment is something I hanker for in myself. If I look at a tree and cannot identify it, I click pictures and send them to her," he said.

Heritage expert Rooprai has a different way of familiarising people with nature and trees. "I hold discussions related to nature when I take participants to see monuments, as most structures bear floral patterns. The most prominent ones are Safdarjung Tomb, Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort and the Qutub Minar Complex. I talk about flowers like tesu or palash (*Butea monosperma*), marigold, lotus and tulip as well as mango and palm leaves carved on monuments and talk about their significance."



Makhdoom Sahib mosque in Mayfair gardens in south Delhi has many trees. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

According to Rooprai, heritage comprises three aspects: built heritage, cultural heritage and natural heritage. "Each walk of mine consists of information from all three. Since nature is also part of our heritage, my walks offer information on natural heritage as well."

Delhi's green spaces: From the Mughals to the British

It is a well-known fact that the Mughals were fond of gardens. Most gardens in Delhi are funerary gardens of the Mughals or the Lodis, said Syed Mohammad Qasim, who formally started nature walks in March last year and runs an organisation called Wonderful Wanderers (<https://www.asianage.com/life/more-features/080919/in-tree-guing-trails.html>).

However, not many Mughal gardens remain now. Krishen cites the example of Humayun's Tomb gardens, which fell into ruins at the start of the 20th century. "Lord Curzon had to clear out the vegetable plots and badminton courts that had come up in the midst of the ruins and the entire garden was replanted. This is true of all Mughal and Sultanate gardens in Delhi. They have gone through a cycle of ruin and rejuvenation, and not always for the better," Krishen said in an email to Mongabay-India.

When the British shifted their capital from Kolkata to New Delhi (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/86-years-ago-new-delhi-took-over-as-power-capital-of-india/articleshow/57133366.cms>) in 1911, they brought unique tree species from all over the world and grew them in Sundar Nursery. "They avoided Indian species like peepal or sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) and bargad or banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*). This was because in 1857 revolutionaries had fired at British armed troops from hiding behind trees with large girths. So, the British wanted tall and straight trees keeping in mind the security factor. They also did not want the beauty of the buildings to be hidden by large trees. Many trees kept in Sundar Nursery are found in Lutyens' Delhi (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/rare-trees-in-delhi-nursery-highlighted-on-world-environment-day/articleshow/76222530.cms>)," Qasim added.

Sundar Nursery has about 220 types of trees. Out of those, 25-30 species are unique and not found anywhere else (in Delhi), he added. Qasim cites the example of the African Mahogany (<https://www.iamrenew.com/environment/delhis-sunder-nursery-restoration-thing-beauty/>), a beautiful tree, found nowhere else in Delhi.



Sundar Nursery, where the British had maintained many tree species before planting them in Lutyens' Delhi. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

According to Krishen, the story of British planting is interesting. For the avenues of Lutyens' Delhi, Lutyens and Mustoe (<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/a-century-later-lutyens--showpiece-turns-to-a-friend/1072366/>) (who are credited with choosing the tree species) "made some mistakes that we have to live with. But overall, the legacy of imperial Delhi from the early 20th century is a rich one."

Rooprai points out that the British removed Delhi's native trees from all the Charbaghs and introduced the eucalyptus and kikar (*Prosopis juliflora*) trees, which destroyed Delhi's flora (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/delhi-indigenous-vines-to-be-used-to-kill-invasive-tree-species/story-6owi4Ep4JysSKOvui521jL.html>).

Qasim, who is relatively new on the tree walk scene, offers interesting insights on myths associated with trees as well as their history. One such tree which fascinates him is the khirni (*Manilkara hexandra*) in the Chirag Delhi dargah (https://outreachecology.com/landmark/Iti_a007/), which is 600 years old.

"It is massive and still looks young. It is fully green and bears yummy fruits. It was planted at the time of Feroze Shah Tughlaq's reign," he said.

Khirni trees are also present in the dargah of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (<https://abdaal.wordpress.com/tag/history/>) and in Jamaali Kamaali in Mehrauli Archaeological Park (https://outreachecology.com/landmark/Iti_a008/), possibly Delhi's oldest ones, according to Krishen.



This Khirni tree is said to have been planted by Hazrat Makhdum Jahania Jahangast in 14th century in Chirag Dilli Dargah. It is part of 18 trees that have been given Natural Heritage of Delhi status. Photo by Syed Mohammad Qasim.

Qasim's most successful initiative is "Stories of Trees of Delhi." As part of it, he takes participants to parks, leftover gardens and jungles around the city. "I talk about the medicinal uses of trees, leaves and flowers and try to cover all aspects to connect people to trees. If people love trees, they will ensure that they remain standing," he said.

"I read about them, document and try to identify. As part of another initiative, Delhi Nature Walks, I urge people to hug trees and make them walk barefoot on the grass. When participants join my Nature Bathing Walk, they lie down on the ground and smell flowers, which help them to lift their mood," Qasim told Mongabay-India.

Importance of urban spaces

Simone Borelli, a forestry officer at the Food and Agriculture Organization, said the New Urban Agenda (<http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11, highlight the importance of green spaces in improving the living standards of cities.

Through urban and peri-urban forestry, cities have the opportunity to lead the way towards healthier lifestyles. "While trees and forests are among the first resources usually affected by urbanisation, their preservation and sound management can be part of the solution," Borelli said.

Trees in cities are a priceless resource for several reasons. "Trees can increase thermal comfort by mitigating the effects of both climate and seasonal changes. By intercepting rain, increasing the permeable surface of cities, retaining water and stabilising soils, trees and forests contribute towards decreasing the impact of natural hazards on urban communities," the FAO expert added.



View of Qutub Minar from Mehrauli Archaeological Park. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

When it comes to tropical cities like Delhi, mitigation of temperature is essential. High tree diversity in tropical regions offers the potential of selecting species that can provide multiple benefits. "As many of the world's fastest-growing cities are in the tropics, future research should explore challenges and opportunities to ensure that they obtain full benefits of urban ecosystem services," Borelli pointed out.

Read more: [Book Review] The stories of our roots

(<https://india.mongabay.com/2019/06/book-review-the-stories-of-our-roots/>)

Banner image: Sundar Nursery, where the British had maintained many tree species before planting them in Lutyens' Delhi. Photo by Deepanwita Gita Niyogi.

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