

### **Trees of Delhi: The bistendu trees of Roshanara Bagh**

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The short trees with gnarled trunks and thin branches have green cherry-sized, bitter fruits hanging from them. When ripe, the fruits of the bistendu turn yellow, as some have on the trees in the garden near the 17th-century tomb. They stand in a quiet part of the garden, a little distance away from a cricket game underway near the tomb. Dogs lie near the shade of the trees, on the grass scattered with dried, black fruits of the bistendu trees, and squirrels scamper up the short tree trunks. The branches of some of the trees spread wide, providing ample shade. The garden itself was laid on the orders of Roshanara, Shah Jahan's daughter, and her tomb lies within a pavilion, open from all four sides, in the garden. It is a monument protected by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI).

The trees begin to bear fruit soon after the flowering season in April and remain on the tree till February or March of the following year, Pradip Krishen writes in his book *Trees of Delhi*. The leaves of the bistendu trees are a bright green, lying on the twisted branches in dense clusters. While the long leaves usually begin to drop in January, the trees at Roshanara Bagh are far from bare, with their canopies still dense.

Bistendu (*Diospyros cordifolia*), also called Bombay Ebony, is known to thrive in dry forests, including Delhi's Ridge. The twigs and leaves of the tree are used for fodder, while some communities in Central India crush the fruit and drop it into water to stupefy fish, Krishen writes. The bistendu tree is found commonly in the Ridge and in some of Delhi's parks. Older trees have spines that grow at the end of the twigs. The trees have dark brown trunks and branches.

Prof C. R. Babu of the Centre for Environmental Management of Degraded Ecosystems said that the bistendu, a tree with elegant leaves, is found on hilly terrain and the fleshy fruit is eaten by some herbivores, while the tree bears white flowers. It is a tree that is native to these parts, he said.

In his book, Krishen describes the bistendu trees as "one of Delhi's least known native trees". Even among the tall trees that command attention at Roshanara Bagh, the bistendu is mostly inconspicuous.

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