

Trees offer multiple benefits — don't kill them, breed them

In 1979, Dr. T.M. Das of Calcutta University estimated the value of a tree to be \$2,00,000 | Photo Credit: [S. SIVA SARAVANAN](#)

Officials in Delhi wish to fell about 17,000 fully grown trees in some parts of the city to make space for building housing colonies. And to “pacify” people who object to this tree destruction, they say that for every tree that will be felled, they will plant 10 saplings. Interesting — the minister knows it; the National Building Construction Corporation (NBCC) knows it and we all know it — that this is a stupid answer. “What you lose today, I will make up” (20 years from now? and if the saplings survive?) And this is not just in Delhi. Government and city planners in several other states do the same. This attitude shows not just ignorance but arrogance, disregard for trees and their value. It is time planners wake up and understand the value — economic, ecological, health-related and sociological — that trees offer.

Value of a tree

Way back in 1979, Dr. T.M. Das of Calcutta University estimated that the monetary value of a tree, during a life span of 50 years, amounted to about \$2,00,000 (at 1979 rates). This was based on the amount of oxygen it produces, the fruit or the biomass and the timber it offers when felled and so on. For every 1 gram that a tree accumulates as it grows, it generates about 2.66 grams of oxygen. Dr Nancy Beckham of Australia, in her paper, “Trees: finding their true value”, points out that “trees and plants silently carry out their daily routine years after years, stabilizing the soil, recycling nutrients, cooling the air, modifying wind turbulence, intercepting the rain, absorbing toxins, reducing fuel costs, neutralizing sewage, increasing property values, promoting tourism, encouraging recreation, reducing stress and improving personal health as well as providing food, medicine and accommodation for other living things”. (Link: <https://www.uow.edu.au/~sharonb/STS300/valuing/price/pricingarticles.html>).

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The Department of Environmental Conservation of New York State, USA offers numbers in this connection (see <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/40243.html>), along with references to scientific papers which estimate these numbers. It points out that (1) healthy trees mean healthy people: 100 trees remove 53 tons of CO₂ and 430 pounds of other air pollutants per year; (2) healthy trees mean healthy communities: tree-filled neighbourhoods lower the levels of domestic violence and are safer and more sociable; (3) healthy trees mean healthy environment — 100 mature trees catch about 1,40,000 gallons of rain water per year; (4) healthy trees mean home-owner savings — strategically placed trees save up to 56% of air conditioning costs; evergreens that block winter winds can save 3% on heating; (5) healthy trees means better business — in tree-lined commercial districts, shoppers report more frequent shopping and spend 12% more for goods, and (6) healthy trees means higher property values.

The minister and the NBCC officials are smart people and they surely know all these facts. Yet for them, a mature tree is “dead urban space” and clearing 17,000 trees means real estate for building houses, colonies and shopping malls in a city that is gasping for clean air. (Delhi Greens, an NGO, estimated in 2013 that a healthy tree is worth Rs. 24 lakh a year, just with respect to its oxygen producing capacity). And for them a sapling occupies (today) about a hundredth (or even less) space. But where will they plant the saplings — where the trees were? How will they survive if construction starts already? Clearly the officials’ attitude is: ‘well, we will be gone (transferred/retired) and do not need to answer’. What Gurgaon was then, and is now, makes the point.

Admire trees, don't axe them

In stark contrast to their cruel attitude towards trees stand the examples of Sunderlal Bahuguna's "chipko" movement, Saalumarada Thimmakka of Karnataka who has planted 398 banyan trees — each representing her own child, and Majid Khan and the team of biologists and horticulturists who are offering "intensive care" (injecting insecticide mix in to the phloem of each branch) to a 700 years old "pillalamarri" banyan tree near Mahabubnagar, Telangana, spanning a 4-acre canopy , which is being eaten up by termites, and bringing it back to life. (See: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/a-tree-in-intensive-care/article24241462.ece>). Should it have been cut and the 4 acre space used as real estate?

Obviously trees offer emotional, even spiritual solace. Indian history is replete with examples — Lord Buddha, Emperor Ashoka, and the Tamil King Pari Vallal who left his chariot near a plant to help it spread its branches.

Should not Delhi then think of building houses and colonies elsewhere in the suburbs, saving these 17,000 trees? Or if at all it has to do it in Delhi, think new thoughts, but without cutting the trees (or at best sacrificing the smallest possible number)? This impossible-sounding scheme offers challenges to architects. Indeed, high rise apartments have been built elsewhere, saving trees and even including them as part of the building. Some examples are seen in Italy, Turkey and Brazil.

India has been blessed with creative architects, both Indian and foreign, who have built houses and campuses, totally in harmony with the surroundings. The Indian Institute of Architects has about 20,000 members, we have about 80 institutions that teach architecture. Why not throw a challenge to them to come up with the best plan, offer a handsome award to the most suited and creative one, and use it to build the colony?

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