



PURSUING PLANTS PASSIONATELY

(Review of TREES OF PUNE by Shrikant Ingalthalikar & Sharvari Barve
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“I consider it as desirable that a man’s or woman’s major research work should be in a subject in which he or she has not taken a degree. To get a degree one has to learn a lot of facts and theories in a somewhat parrot like manner. It is rather hard to be original in a subject in which one has learned with a view to obtaining first class honours in an examination.” – J. B. S. Haldane
(Eminent Biologist)

The history of science is replete with instances where individuals have made significant contributions in fields which were not chosen spheres of their work. Winter-Blyth – a Brit came to India as the Principal of the Rajkumar College Rajkot, but fell in love with the pristine charm of Indian butterflies and authored the monumental *“Butterflies of the Indian Subcontinent”*. C.V. Boys was initially trained as a metallurgist. But at one stage he simply fell into love with soap bubbles. His book *“Soap Bubbles”* written in 1890, even a century later remains an unmatched piece of popular science literature. So it comes as no surprise that two of the best city tree guides in India – *“Trees of Delhi”* by Pradip Krishen and *“Trees of Pune”* by Shrikant Ingalthalikar and Sharvari Barve come not from professionals in the field but from rank amateurs.

Pradip Krishen is the well known filmmaker of *Massey Sahib* and married to Booker Prize winning author Arundhati Roy. To start with, he knew little about trees. Barring the common *Neem* he couldn’t name any tree. But one day - to be precise on 16 Feb, 1995 something magical happened. He noticed “that every dry twig had sprouted a tiny pale green affirmation that it was still alive – little, glinting points of life.” That moment seized him and compelled him to produce a masterpiece.

Srikant Ingalthalikar strode another path. In the early 1970’s he joined TELCO (now Tata Motors) as a young engineer. Telco was then led by a visionary chairman Sumant Moolgaonkar whose slogan *“Expect the best, ask for it, pursue it relentlessly and you will get it,”* set a new benchmark

for excellence. According to Tata's long term vision "*People and trees don't grow in a day,*" Moolgaonkar scouted and hired the best talent. He recruited Mr. Sharma – the Chief Horticulturalist at the Lal Baug Garden, Bangalore to landscape and green up his factory. The hundreds of acres of land in Pimpri was totally barren terrain – all rock, no soil. So thousands of holes were blasted in basalt, lovingly filled with soil, carefully planted with trees and nurtured with love. Each drop of rain was religiously impounded to imbue the plants with life. Telco planted 10,000 *Pipal* trees in a row and pioneered the propagation of the Yellow Tebebuia and freely supplied its seeds to the Friends of Trees. All this perhaps, left an abiding love for trees in Ingalhalikar's heart.

Soon he left Telco to start his own factory but continued to pursue his floral passion vigorously. Armed with a copy of Theodore Cooke's classic "*The Flora of the Presidency of Bombay*" he scoured the Western Ghats in search of rare wild flowers. And soon he came up with two volumes of "*Flowers of Sahyadri*" – delightful field guides replete with first rate photographs. Though largely a self-taught botanist, Ingalhalikar was nudged and encouraged along the way by Prof. V. D. Vartak, Prof. S. D. Mahajan and the venerable Harjit Singh Bal. These erudite scholars of great repute willingly shared their knowledge of trees freely with one and all. Prof. Mahajan can still be spotted on the Parvati Hill explaining the inner secrets of the plant world to bleary eyed school kids.

The "*Trees of Pune*" is truly a labour of love. Whereas Prof. Vartak collation of 1964 listed 293 species of trees the present book is far ahead with a count of 482. Some 20 species listed by Prof. Vartak seem to have disappeared - some of them gobbled up forever by the rampant urbanisation.

The book has interesting nuggets about Pune's gardens. The Peshwas patronized a number of mango orchards and gardens. They set up Hira-Baug, Saras-Baug and Peshwe-Baug – which despite concretization still shelter some rare trees. Nanasaheb Peshwa performed the thread ceremony of a Pipal Tree (*Ficus religiosa*) in 1754 and that specimen still stands atop the Parvati Hill.

The British on the other hand were mainly interested in botany for its economic benefits. For example, indigo (*Indigo tinctoria*) fascinated them for it was the source of the indigo dye used in textiles. To beat homesickness they created replicas of British Gardens in Pune. Dr. Woodrow – a British botanist even attempted to recreate the famous Kew Gardens at the Empress Garden in Pune. The Pune University whose photograph adorns the back cover was the British Governor's summer residence. Here the plan layout of the garden and the choice of trees were typically British. A rare specimen of the European Olive (*Olea europaea*) stands resplendent on the back cover of the book.

Many of the city's residents have travelled criss-cross the world and have planted seeds and saplings from all over the globe. Many private gardens in Pune have exotic trees from the Himalayas and Africa. No city in India can compete with Pune's love for nature. The sheer number of environment clubs, trekkers, bird watchers and nature lovers stand the city in a class of its own. When the city corporation wants to cut trees to widen roads, or sell the hills to politicians the concerned citizens of Pune rightly make life hell for them.

Apart from the Pune University (411 acres) most of the public parks in Pune are really puny – postage stamp size. Compared to the Shibpore Garden in Kolkata or the Buddha Jayanti Park in

New Delhi, they are really small. The wildest and most beautiful areas in Pune have been the preserve of the Army – the College of Military Engineering (4000 acres) and the National Defence Academy (5000 acres) and they are out of bounds for the general public. Alas the city of Pune – a major auto-hub and Detroit of India, IT and Bio-technology mega centre, the Oxford of the East still lacks a Botanical Garden.

The author is a first-rate nature photographer and has regularly contributed scores of photo-essays on trees, wild flowers, birds, insects and butterflies for popular journals both in English and Marathi. The “*Trees of Pune*” is essential reading for every young and old in Pune. Every school must procure a copy of this field guide. The user-friendly nature of the book will help even young children identify their neighbourhood trees. A special section is dedicated to the rare trees of Pune with their precise locations marked on Google Earth. This wonderful Google map (www.idsahyadri.com) will help you reach these venerable trees without any human assistance. For instance, you will be able to easily reach the 250 year old Baobab tree located in the Pune University Campus. On seeing its grandeur you will bow to it in reverence. Kids love to hug it. But it will need all of nine children joining and stretching hands to embrace the fat girth of this grandfather Baobab!

(Arvind Gupta – a toy maker is also a tree lover)