

Katie Bagli
Writer and Naturalist

On the challenges that trees in Mumbai face:

I find that there are two sets of people. I stay at Dadar Parsi Colony which is supposed to be a green area but there are so many people who feel that trees are just commodities. So if there is a branch that is coming in the way of their volleyball ground then, in the name of trimming, they will want to get the branches hacked. Very often it is done in a very insensitive manner without a scientific approach and calculations to understand the center of gravity. As a result, there is a chance that the tree will eventually topple over.

But there are other people who are very earnest and careful. Often when the BMC people come to the colony they don't know what to do because some people tell them to trim and other people scream at them.

Our colony was established in 1920 by Mancherji Joshi, a great philanthropist who planned this as a colony for Parsis. There were little bungalows of one storey or maximum two storeys and every bungalow had a garden around it and every road was an avenue of a particular kind of tree. But now so many of these heritage bungalows are being pulled down and huge highrises are coming up in their place and these highrises are concretising the entire area and building all the way to the pavement, which is such a shame.

On the role that trees play in a city:

We all need something meditative, something cool and shady. And of course every tree is an ecosystem by itself. There are so many different creatures living in each tree and that is something else to consider when you are trimming trees. I read somewhere that you are not supposed to trim during the nesting season and if there is a nest of any bird you cannot cut that branch. But all those rules are flouted.

On favourite trees:

My favourite tree is the mango tree right outside my balcony. It has inspired me to write so many stories and every year in the monsoon when it is very stormy I actually pray that this old mango tree doesn't topple over. Crows make their nests and the koels lay their eggs and there are butterflies and all kinds of life, so it is real fun to watch the tree.

On trees with a history:

At the entrance of Rani Baug there are two massive baobab trees waiting to welcome everyone. We were told by the great botanist, Dr Marselin Almeida, that these trees could easily be 500 years old. The baobab trees were brought here by the Arab and Portuguese traders when they came here. The Portuguese traders would stop over in

Africa to stock up on food and water because the journeys would take months on. They found the fruit of the baobab tree to be very refreshing. The story is that the sailors carried some of the fruit for the onward journey and planted the seeds when they arrived in India. That is why you find baobab trees all over the western coast in places like Daman, the Malabar coast and, of course, Mumbai.

There are many stories about baobabs. In the story of Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves, the thieves used to hide in the baobab trees.

The British were always very interested in botany and trees and they liked to experiment. They established Rani Baug and they got trees from different countries, which is why we have so much biodiversity. Many trees have gotten naturalised over the years, for example the copperpod is from South America but it is now naturalised. The tamarind tree is so Indian that every Indian village has a tamarind tree, but the tamarind is not a native tree. It was brought from Arabia and the name comes from Tamar - e - Hind – the date of Hindustan.