

A photograph of a tree trunk in the foreground. A yellow and red striped sacred thread (mala) is tied around the trunk. A broom-like object, made of many thin, light-colored sticks or twigs, is hanging from the thread. The background is a wall made of dark, rectangular stones. The ground is a mix of dirt and concrete.

The Working Trees of Delhi

By Salil Chaturvedi

Jeete ped, marte ped, yeh ajab tamashaa ped ka, tells me Ombir Singh, a *kabaadi-wallah* who operates his ramshackle junk shop from under a young peepul tree.

Not sure about my Hindi credentials – long hair and a Ferrari-red Santro don't help much either – he explains with a touching indulgence that while living one needs trees, when one is dead one needs the help of a tree for the onward

malls and cineplexes, a thriving treeconomy that sustains thousands of people like Ombir. These 'tree-shops' give the term 'branch office' a completely new dimension.

Like a giant swiss-knife, the tree, in an urban area like Delhi, is used variously: as a billboard – advertising anything from homeopathic medicines, soft drinks, car insurance, fashion boutiques, veterinary services to real estate and bank loans – as a closet from which to hang clothes and tools; a display window; a supporting beam; a gigantic umbrella, a bus-stop. In fact, the tree can effortlessly, even magically, morph into a garage, godown, shoe-shop, café, shed, eatery or a temple.



journey; this then is the strange spectacle of a tree. Being evidently literarily inclined (I stumbled upon his shop as he was reading the morning newspaper with friends discussing a new train from Delhi to Kanpur in three hours flat), he exhorts me to use the proverb as the title for the piece, sweeping his thumb and forefinger with a flourish to denote the headline.

It's befitting that as one of the greenest capital cities in the world, Delhi has, juxtaposed with its swanky offices, expensive cars, trendy pubs,

No wonder, there are so many takers for its services – small entrepreneurs, multinational corporates, government departments, housing societies, professionals of all hues, the police, can all be found having some sort of relationship with the tree. So much so that I've come to identify many trees not through their species but with the names and professions of the people who are associated with them. So, there is Munnalal's *chaat-bargad*, Harish's *samosa-keekar*, Jagdish's *mochi-neem*, several species in the service of Dr Kapil's Dog clinic, and so on.

On one of my drives back from shooting, I had an overpowering vision of these trees stretching their roots for hundreds, even thousands of kilometres, touching the lives of families left behind in Malda, Jalpaigudi, Meerut, Jhansi... as the earning family member toils under their shade.





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I can't help but wonder, in this urban landscape, to whom does the tree belong? To the government that plants them? To the intended beneficiary: the citizen of the city? Or to the tinker or tailor who sets up shop under it? I wonder what the tree would have to say on the matter.

But Shakeel, a key-maker who spends his entire day under a neem tree has a point of view: "*Ped to sarkari hai, par ise paala humne hai.*" [The tree is of the government, but we have brought it up.]

It's best that I let the keepers-of-the-tree speak about their relationship with them:

Jagdish, neem-mochi



"I sit on the road and meet all kinds of people from famous doctors to thieves and prostitutes, *samjhe na?* People don't treat us *mochis* well. But your body is made of *chamada*, so don't give me any of your airs. I've set many right. I've sat under this tree for six years. Earlier, I used to sit near the Medical gate. The Committee wallahs bother us once in a while but I know many doctors. In this city you have to know someone."

Harish, samosa-keekar



"We've used this tree for 16 years. We have another pucca khoka too. Every night we wash the footpath and water the tree. We light a diya every Diwali on the tree."

Shakeel, neem-locksmith

"This tree is like a brother. I have fought for it on so many occasions. You see, this is a neem tree and people would pluck twigs from it, even when it was small. The government is supposed to look after it but even the protection you see around it has been put by me."



☛ Mahagan Das, *bougainvillea-cobbler*



"I came here when I was 17 years old. Now I am nearing 50. This bougainvillea was just a mere stick and now it is so old and spread out, I have had to put sticks to support it. The tree is my dukaan and my makaan. Most of my day is spent here. When I go to my room I have to put on the fan, but under this tree I don't need anything."

☛ Kishori Lal, *ashoka-tailor*



"I came from Rajasthan 22 years ago. There was no footpath here then. The tree that you see on the footpath is standing on a narrow strip of land between two sewage lines that run underneath. Another tree was uprooted while building the footpath. The tree that I sit under grows in the kothi but I asked the maali to plant it there and got the sapling for him. If I have any trouble, the saheb helps me out. After so many years here, like this tree I have also taken roots in Delhi. But who belongs to this place? Even the sahibs are from outside."

☛ Dinesh, *neem-helmet*



"This nail that you see is sixteen years old, from the time I started using this tree. I was a small boy then and have grown into a man but this tree has been the same size. If this tree is cut, it will affect not only me but five other people – my family members who are dependent on this tree. Earlier, about ten years ago I used to earn up to Rs 20,000 a month by selling helmets. There was no other helmet shop on this stretch, from Sarita Vihar to Daryaganj. Now there are innumerable and I earn about 5,000 now."

While photographing trees I've learnt to drive in the left-most lane at a speed that is well below the prescribed limit, bringing out the best in Delhi's horn-favouring drivers. And I must surely have set a record for the number of U-turns taken on a single day, just to get a closer look at a Working Tree on the far side of the road.