



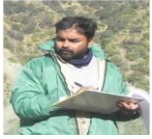
The green forefathers of the Kolkata Maidan – A tale of struggle



**Rajasri Ray¹, Partha Sarathi Bajkhan², Saumyadeep Mahanto²
and Subhasis Mahato²**



**1 Centre for Studies in Ethnobiology, Biodiversity and Sustainability
(CEiBa)**



**2 Department of Forestry, Pandit Raghunath Murmu Smriti
Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal**

E-mail: rajasri@ceibatrust.org, subhasis.prl@gmail.com

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"Nature does nothing in vain, and so whatever is, is for the sake of something else " This ancient wisdom seems relevant when logic and sensibility among us are at their peak. Environment is always an important part of our lives and so are its nourishment and protection. Our environment or surroundings differ by geographic, or perhaps more appropriately, spatial, context. Accordingly, we have rural landscapes, urban landscapes, mountainscapes, and so on where land parcels and players are different from each other. Amongst all, the urban landscape draws our attention most due to the highly disproportionate cohabitation of nature and human beings. And the most visible natural element for us are trees with different avatars.

Trees, especially, old ones, garner our attention due to their grandiose presence, a plethora of ecosystem services, and myths or tales associated with them. In scientific terms, these generally are the trees with thicker trunks, an extended canopy, and maybe signs of decay. Cities with long historical backgrounds are usually blessed with old architecture, traditional social and cultural practices, and all-inclusive environmental places like gardens, parks, groves, etc., where old trees are an integral part of the ambiance. These features undoubtedly increase the quality of life for the city dwellers in terms of aesthetics, mental refreshment, social and cultural integrity as well as economic benefits (tourism, business, health benefits, etc.). On the flip side, old trees require special attention like continuous monitoring, measures against pathogen attacks, regular trimming/pruning activities, root care to avoid damage due to infrastructure establishment in nearby areas, guard against miscreants, etc. Given that minimal management is available, old trees are dazzling treasures of any cityscape.

Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, is one of the major cities in India with a rich colonial history at its kitty. The initial cityscape was blessed with parks and unused spaces which served as an abode for entertainment and weekend gateway. Eventually, that luxury was wiped out mostly in the name of city development and expansion. Recent studies show that the city has lost nearly 60% of its green vegetation since 2000, which undoubtedly has

serious consequences on the environmental health of the city. Present-day Kolkata has less than 5% green cover and open space is less than 1% (National Commission Urbanization, 2015).

With this alarming green cover background of the city, there is hardly any systematic thought about the old trees scattered across the city, hidden within pockets, or newer members of plantation drives, if any. Established green places like parks are inadequate in this regard as they are under continuous green cover modification drives and old folks are hardly welcomed. Now the obvious question comes why old trees? Do we need to maintain them in dilapidated condition? What's the use? Most important, how do we accommodate old trees in the city? Especially when city governance is already bogged down by a huge population and their associated requirements. Answers to questions such as these are not straightforward as they must balance the often-conflicting interests of a variety of stakeholders.

In Kolkata, Maidan is such a place where the city can take a fresh breath. Maidan, often considered as "Lungs of the city", sits almost at the centre of the metropolis occupying ~400 hectares of public area. Historically, a place kept exclusively for the white population's leisure, Maidan kept its prominence in the social-political life of the city even after independence. Today, this vast open space is a miniature representation of a heterogeneous land parcel comprised of lands belonging to different administrative units: archaeology, military, sports, public parks, and transport. As a part of older and present-day greenery maintenance, the entire area has comparatively better vegetation cover than other parts of the city. However, there is much variation in green cover within the Maidan. There is much more greenery in the open grass field stretch in front of the famous Victoria Memorial, which has bordering trees and scattered loners in its middle. Similarly, the areas under military establishment and along the banks of the river Ganges are dotted with woody greens in comparison to areas utilized for public activities.



Aerial map of Kolkata Maidan (marked and shaded areas are taken for survey)

Photo: Google earth, Image: Rajasri Ray

This eye-soothing green is comprised of our very known *Banyan*, *Gulmohor*, *Arjuna*, *Sisso*, *Mango*, *Mahogany*, *Eucalyptus*, *Lagerstroemia*, *Cassia* and many like members, which increase the beauty as well as to pacify the environmentally-challenged air conditions of that busy working hub. Despite having a moderately dense green border, old trees are disproportionately less in number in the area. A glimpse of them can be found in the open field area in front of the Victoria Memorial, the military area at the banks of the river Ganges, and the newly developed walking area from the Prinsep Ghat to Babu Ghat. These trees are found in various states viz., as lone bystanders, subjects for nature photography, places for resting, places for local worship, local trade, and, even subjects of utter negligence. They are an abode for several small organisms ranging from small mammals to insects. They provide regular ecosystem services like minimizing air pollution, pollinator support, microclimate maintenance, carbon dioxide assimilation, etc. Seasonal changes are also reflected in their appearance viz. summer bloom in *Gulmohor*, *Lagerstroemia*, *Spathodea*, and *Bombax*, monsoon freshness in their leaves, fruiting phase in autumn (as in *Cassia*, *Arjun*) and aerosol-laden pale leaves in winter - a regular visitor can have all sorts of experiences. Let's get visit them!

An interested observer may identify an old Banyan near the entry of the central field area from the Park Street side. This old Banyan may not be a gigantic one but interestingly two different *Ficus* species join at the base therefore, a bifurcated tree with two different morphological identities has formed. The wide trunk with few knots stands firmly near the pond along the road. The growth of the aerial roots is restricted due to the continuous movement of passersby. The tree with its unique canopy provides a cool shady place at its base and it is a rich source of fruits for the birds.

Inside the field, a few old trees (*Ficus*, *Cassia*, *Mahogany*, etc.) are scattered across the



Trees at the open place area near Victoria Memorial. A versatile range of activities goes around them.

Photo: Rajasri Ray, Partha Sarathi Bajkhan

central area. Here the cattle grazers take a rest under the trees while their herds enjoy the monsoon-grown grasses. Amateur and professional photographers jostle around to capture breathtaking shots or satisfy their customers: young cricket trainees loitering under the

canopy during their practice break. However, this continuous inflow of visitors poses a serious challenge for tree management as they are unable to pay any attention to tree safety and growth. The easy accessibility to the area and lack of any monitoring measures accelerates the damage in multiple ways like, partial climbing on the tree, leaning against the trunk, plucking leaves, plastic disposal at the base, etc. Their isolated position, old age, distorted trunks, fallen branches, and exposed roots are a few visible indicators of their decaying stage. Similarly, a few old trees along the main roads are under utter negligence, subject to garbage disposal, debarking, and under pathogen attack. Therefore, this superficial green cover management may give us some apparently eye-soothing feelings but in reality, the ignorance accelerates the possibility of faster depletion of the old tree population in the area.

The old trees in the military administered area are in comparatively good condition due to their seclusion from general public reach. They are usually present inside the administrative campus premises and are under regular maintenance schedule. However, details of the maintenance or ecological know-how are hardly accessible due to the restrictions on acquiring the information. A better experience can be obtained along the promenade near the river Ganges. The walkway from the Prinsep Ghat to Babu Ghat is dotted with a large number of trees ranging from old Banyan to Pippal, Neem, Cassia, Mahogany, etc. The majority of these trees have cemented base for resting purpose, branch orientation and growth have been taken care of and overall, they have ample place to grow and the welcoming tone of their light green new leaves freshen up any avid viewer. These trees are part of the versatile activities of public life ranging from morning strolls to evening river worship. Tree premises are used for meeting, resting, ferry-passenger shelter, cloth drying and storing, local worship, midday naps, and countless other acts as and when required. However, old age symptoms like decaying branches, wounded trunks, Ganoderma butt rot (a fungal disease), etc. are commonly visible, indicating a requirement for timely monitoring and appropriate protection measures.



Old trees at the promenade along the Ganges River

Photo: Rajasri Ray, Partha Sarathi Bajkhan

The old trees of the Maidan present a heterogeneous experience for us. They are in different levels of accessibility, providing multiple levels of services and under various states of management. How do people think about them? The majority of the visitors in the Maidan and promenade area enjoy the presence of the trees, acknowledging their role as shade givers and pollution controllers but are ignorant about their responsibility towards these green stalwarts. Except from environmentalists and a few enthusiastic people, there is hardly any awareness drive about the presence or importance of these trees in the area. Considering the alarming environmental scenario of the cityscape, citizens need to be proactive about the proper maintenance of the green cover of the city especially in the Maidan area. Political will and citizens' involvement in green cover protection and management are of utmost importance at the moment. A coordinated effort can be implemented by following a few basic steps like, tagging the old trees, regular tree health checking, do's and don'ts for the visitors, educational and promotional tours for the students, preservation of tree architecture (prevention of unplanned branch cutting or damage), etc. This age-old city with its green lungs will be more beautiful if citizens are more responsible and sensitive towards the environment.



Old Trees at different use

Photo: Rajasri Ray, Partha Sarathi Bajkhan