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Sacred Trees of Western India: Mumbai's Green Ambassadors

By Y.D. Bar-Ness

New perspectives. Architectural marvels. Meeting new people. Visiting family. Tasting new cuisines. Temple pilgrimages. Historical explorations. Experiencing adventures and exhilaration.

All of these are great reasons for travel in the vast and varied landscapes of India. But these different pathways -- no matter how satisfying -- can sometimes leave the quiet soul wishing for a more direct contact with the natural world.

For me, chasing trees has provided not only a structure to adventures throughout India, but also provided a window into the landscapes, wildlife, forests, and rocks of the country. No other country in the world is so well endowed with sacred, notable, giant, historical, and remarkable trees.

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Let's start at the Gateway of India, and take the long way into the Sahyadri Range, over to Pune, along the backside of the mountains to Nashik, and over into the green lowlands of Gujarat. Let's get our feet wet in the waters of the Holy Narmada River, and then let's hop on the trains back down the coast into the metropolis again.

Along the way, I'll point out some of the remarkable trees that can serve as landmarks and destinations, and if you can, you'll remember these trees and keep your eyes open for them. And while we're at it, let's both try to learn something about the natural environment of India and the Earth.

A City Built on Water

The Gateway of India provides a solid historical marker, built in 1911 as a symbol of the British Empire to those arriving by boat.

Nearby, by a statue of the Vivekenanda international teacher Hindu, a ***Semal tree** grows strongly and offers a small bit of shade in the plaza.

Solid as the Gateway, the statue, and the tree may seem, most of downtown Mumbai is built on what was once water. What used to be mangrove forests in brackish water is now the climax of a city of 14 million people.



At the Prince of Wales Museum roundabout in the center of Colaba, an enormous rain tree sprawls out over the street. This tree is a visitor from the tropics of South America. Click on photo to enlarge.

Refugees and Visitors

From the giant Banyan of the Kolkata Botanical Garden, to the tenacious little pipal growing on the side of Delhi's Qutub Minar, I'd encourage you to seek out these green ambassadors. You can spot them in this article by the asterisk *.

Many of them are refugees from the forest that used to cover India, and many of them are visitors from exotic locales of the world.

Mumbai, the vibrant city with its feet in the ocean, is fortunate in many ways -- not only its energy as one of the world's largest and busiest cities, but also in its proximity to wild mountains, beaches, and forests. Let's fuse our human sensitivities of culture and history with the enthusiasm of the rockhound and the serenity of the wilderness eco-tourist.



The Gateway of India provides a solid historical marker, built in 1911 as a symbol of the British Empire to those arriving by boat.

Nearby, at the Prince of Wales Museum

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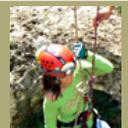
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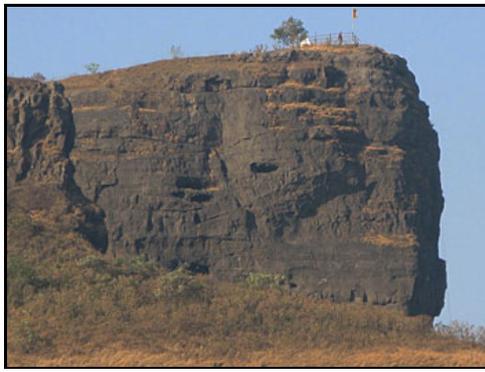
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A small Vitex mint-tree marks our ascent up the back of the Cobra's Hood in Lonavla.

The orange colors and dramatic forms of the mountains accentuate the quiet of the place. It's almost impossible to imagine the violence that created them -- a volcanic outpouring from the centre of the Deccan 65 million years ago.

Oceanic rock somehow pierced the landscape and collected in such a quantity as to create the basaltic rocks of this landscape. Amidst such an overwhelming reminder of mass, this proud little Vitex tree seems a fitting decoration for the mountain.

Before long we are tucked into the toy train leading to the Matheran Hill Station, zigzagging below, through, and above the cliffs guarding the entrance to the plateau. Above, the small town is embedded in an extensive forest, a far more greener place than we could have imagined standing at the plaza of the Gateway.

After we tire of the carnival and candy of the bazaars, we can ramble around the rim and visit the One Tree Hill lookout. While we are disappointed at the relative inaccessibility of the Hill's summit- it would be suicide to climb to it- with a careful look we can see another ***Vitex tree** standing lonely and providing a namesake. Behind, we can see elaborate spires of basaltic mountains, coming to a needle point.

roundabout in the center of Colaba, an enormous ***Rain tree** sprawls out over the street. Planted in the front of the National Gallery of Modern Art, this tree is a visitor from the tropics of South America. It evolved in the grassland savannas, and forms a spectacular canopy, offering shade to countless grateful visitors seeking shade from the tropical sun.

This talk of savannas is making us certainly desire more open spaces, and soon we are traveling in our brand-new Tata Nano on the highway to Pune, marveling at the geologic arrogance of the step-cliffs of the Sahyadris.

Stopping at Lonavla, we trek up the back of the Cobra's Hood (or the Duke's Nose), past pockets of remnant forests onto this fantastic outcrop of basalt. On the summit, a ***small Vitex mint-tree** marks our ascent.

A Fitting Decoration



Before long we are tucked into the toy train leading to the Matheran Hill Station.



At the gates to Shaniwar Wada fortress of the Marathis in the city center, we can take rest at the giant banyan melded with the walls.

India's National Tree

The vertigo is setting in, and we flag down a ride in a colorful Tata truck, down to the back side of the mountains to Pune. At the gates to Shaniwar Wada fortress of the Marathis in the city center, we can take rest at the ***giant banyan** melded with the walls.

It seems there is always some friendly tree waiting to give us some shade in the heat of tropical India. India's national tree, the banyans with their branch-roots provide shade and shelter to countless animals and people.

When the heat passes, we head north on the highway in a white Ambassador taxi, viewing surreal basaltic spires and monoliths to our left, and arrive at the sacred ghats of Nashik. Here, the ***Panchavat**, or Five Banyans, mark a spot where once rested Ram and Sita.

These five old trees must date from a time when Nashik was a much smaller village. Now, the city

pulses around the sacred bathing ghats on the river Godavari.

Throughout India, ghats can show the intimate connection between people and the waters, but environmental contamination of the rivers can make them vectors for disease. The soils of the region, rich with volcanic nutrients, are renowned as India's finest wine country.

A crowded bus takes us to Shirdhi, and we are lucky to catch a glimpse, through the gates and past the queuing crowds, of Sai Baba's ***Neem tree**. At this ashram, the popular sage is revered and remembered for his teachings given under this tree.

A Famous Toothbrush

On the longest leg of our journey yet, let's take a scenic motorbike trip back over the Sahyadri Range into the lush and fertile lands of coastal Gujarat. At our northernmost limit, we stop in Bharuch and waste no time in traveling up the Narmada River.



Crossing over on a small boat to an island of sand, we see Kabir's Vad -- the banyan tree formed when the sage and



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Crossing over on a small boat to an island of sand in this tremendously important river, we see ***Kabir's Vad** -- the banyan tree formed when the sage and mystic poet Kabir threw away a twig he was using to clean his teeth. Even five hundred years ago, this banyan would have been an impressive tree -- it sprawls in between farm fields.

mystic poet Kabir threw away a twig he was using to clean his teeth. Click on photo to enlarge.



After a bit of asking in Sanjan, we get someone to help us find **Chalto Ambo**, or the Walking Mango tree. Click on photo to enlarge.

It has unfortunately been intensely damaged by the construction of a temple within its branches, but it will certainly survive and continue to thrive. It is a poetic juxtaposition, an ancient tree surviving the passage and flow of time on a fragile island formed randomly in the surging waters of the Narmada.

To leave the island, we find the tide has changed, and the boat can no longer approach the dock. There is an escape, however -- we remove our shoes and squelch through the holy mud into the shallows.

The boat pilots have lowered a bridge of tables into the mud, and the passengers climb onto them to walk ankledeep onto the boat. Even with our muddy feet, we magically appear to be walking on water, and soon we are back to solid land.

The Walking Mango

We are heading south, and homewards. Just

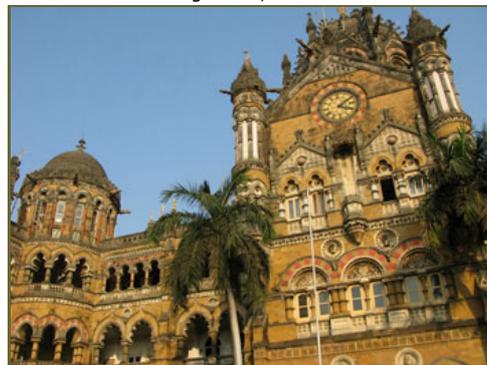
south of Wapi, claimed to be one of India's most polluted cities, we can hop off the general class train-car at Sanjan. After a bit of asking, we get someone to help us find ***Chalto Ambo**, or the Walking Mango tree.

This strange mango tree has been known for hundreds of years to local Parsis. It is not exactly walking, but rather stumbling its way across a farmfield.

As a low-lying branch hits the ground, it takes root and grown upwards. This a rare and strange mango tree, none others are known like this.

Trees, like people, have their own individual quirks and strangeness. We resolve to return one day to taste the fruit of this curious individual.

We've decided it's finally time to return to Mumbai, and look at our photos and notes from our tree-scouting adventure. What have we learned, what have we seen? We magically manage to find ourselves an AC Chair car speeding south to Chatrapati Shivaji terminal, and close our big train-bike-horsecart adventure.



The Royal Palms from Cuba flank the clocktower at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly Victoria Terminus. Click on photo to enlarge.

Countless Green Soldiers

But something new has happened. There is a new perspective. We get out of what used to be called Victoria Terminus in downtown Mumbai, and can't help but noticing the ***Royal Palms** from Cuba flanking the clocktower.

We look directly across the street and see the giant ***Pipal tree** hiding the small bazaar near the fantastic Mumbai Municipal Corporation building. Along the roads and alleys of Mumbai, we can't help but noticing we are among the countless green soldiers.

They can sense our guilt, we haven't been paying attention to them. We aren't giving them the respect they deserve. They are coming in to claim our human environment for their own, should we forsake our maintenance duties for just a few years.

Even though we turn our back on them, they remember our presence. They are here in our cities, gardens, and markets, towering over us, carefully observing the individual characteristics that make us each a unique human being.

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YD Bar-Ness is a conservation ecologist based in Hobart, Tasmania, searching for the Kalpavriksh, India's mythical wish-fulfilling tree. He hasn't found it yet, but will make sure to tell you when he does. As a scientist, he specializes in climbing trees to explore the canopy biodiversity, and as a conservationist, he seeks to use geography and photography to create environmental education materials. His writings and photos have been published or featured in Outlook Traveller, Australian Geographic, Jetwings, The Indian Express, Times of India, GEO-India and Matador. Visit treeoctopus.net to learn more about his work.

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