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On the role that trees play in a city:

Trees are the heritage for a city. You remember cities for their landmarks and some of the old trees like the banyans and the pipals and other iconic trees become landmarks. In a way they are like your grandparents and great-aunts and they play a very big role. We don't realise their importance till they fall and now, with all the urbanisation and the way everything is exploding in terms of development, many of these trees are being felled. I do remember trees from 30 years ago and when I go to the same area I feel the area is looking different and I realise that that particular tree is not there. So it is very much a part of the heritage and identity of the city.

On the challenges and battles that tree face in a city:

They have lost more battles than they have won, that is the trend now. The Aarey battle was one battle that was temporarily won when people came together and the carshed was shifted but after the change of government they brought it back.

The cementing and paving is preventing water seepage and many old trees are suddenly surrounded with cement, which is changing the way they take their nutrients. They don't die immediately. They die slowly and quietly over about five, six years and then one day fall.

When there are heavy rains the trees in a city are more vulnerable because the wind gets channeled through buildings so the velocity is greater. And the trees are also weakened because of the cementing. So their capacity to withstand natural calamities goes down.

Also, trees need to be pollinated and for that you need bees and birds and other pollinators or seed dispersers. But here most trees are discontinuous trees which are far apart. It requires a lot of energy for pollinators to go from one place to another, more than the energy they gain from food. That is why you see in a city pollinators and seed dispersers are slowly disappearing, as a result those trees cannot naturally propagate. Also, even if the seed is dispersed, where is it to go if everything is cement and concrete? There is no room for seeds to germinate.

In Bombay the rate at which things are changing, I am not hopeful. I haven't seen tree cover increasing, it has only been going down since I was born.

On favourite trees:

I cannot single out any one tree because they are like my forefathers and mothers. I feel very close to trees and if I am standing near them I am always touching them.

But there are many trees that I have been watching. There is a pipal tree in Andheri East. Every time I pass it, I catch a glimpse of that tree.

In my building there are a lot of trees. I have planted several hundred trees in all the colleges that I have attended. I planted 200 trees in UDCT and now they are all huge. As a species I love banyan and pipal trees. I love the big raintrees and the baobab for its massive trunk. Among my favourite trees in the Indian jungle are the ghost tree and the haldu. I love all kinds of ficus trees – there are many species – several of which are seen in the cities as well.

On the diversity of trees in Mumbai:

Some of these trees were around even when the British were there. The Parsis always make it a point to plant trees. They were also traders and they would plant trees from other parts of the world. But these trees also cause problems. For example the gulmohar is not native. They were brought by the British from Madagascar to plant along the roads because they had a very big fetish for red, yellow, blue flowers.

Biodiversity is high only if there are native trees, not when there are exotic trees. If you want to increase biodiversity you must only increase native trees which are in the foodchain of all our bird and animal species.