The sidewalk of a dilemma- avenue trees vs. road widening

Dr. Janaki Turaga
Environmental Sociologist
janakituraga@gmail.com

A common urban existential condition is the felling of avenue trees for road widening as part of the traffic management and transport infrastructure strategy to ensure a smooth traffic flow. A strategy based on statistics that is the highest number of users of a utility-the road *vis a vis* the avenue trees on the pedestrian path/sidewalk, where numbers that is road, would win given that the numbers are high for road users and less for pedestrian path users, would necessarily be blind to the ecosystem, social and economic value of trees.

Beautiful, old avenue trees of nearly 20 years were felled from the Vasant Vihar Bus Stop DTC/661 on Olof Palme Marg till the intersection with Vivekanand Marg in New Delhi between March 15 to 23, 2007. A total of 9 trees were cut *: Pongamia pinnata* 'Karanj'(3), *Albizzia lebbeck* 'Siris' (1), *Ficus virens* 'Pilkhan' (5). Of these 5 trees from all three tree species were beginning the new annual cycle of acquiring new leaves.

Vasant Vihar bus stop

The trees over years provided shade not just to the bus travelers, but to small businesses run by poor people, walkers on the pedestrian path, besides doing their invaluable ecosystem contribution in a system starved of natural ecosystem balances and buffers.

The photos capture the tree cutting process and the before and after scenario. This visual documentation (done on 17th and 23rd March, 2007) of the making of our urban landscape and spaces, serves us as a reminder that we make our spaces that we live in, and inhabit.

The Before and After scenarios show the state of the road, the adjustment to the livelihood made, the pedestrian's walking conditions, the traffic flow, the reduced designated green cover with the encroachment into and conversion of a segment of the adjoining Avenue plantation.

Helmet seller under Pilkhan   Helmet seller minus Pilkhan   'Clear' traffic flow

The process of tree felling is simple: the area to be felled is demarcated, trees are numbered and given out to the contractor who hires labour to fell the trees, and arranges for transport to take away the wood. These days it is a seamless and quick operation and one would not even notice that such an operation has even taken place, and it is a good mop up operation.

Tree felling – 1   Tree felling – 2

The wood was reportedly carted off to the cremation ghats near the Yamuna river and sold there, according to the labourers employed to bring down the trees and hack them into manageable pieces. The labourers came with the tools of the trade to bring down and hack the trees-ropes, axes, saws etc.

The first step in road widening is the shifting of the pedestrian path, bringing the avenue trees on the pedestrian path on to the road, which will naturally obstruct when the road is widened and tarred, and then the trees are felled. The trees in the before photographs show the extent of road widening as gauged by the as yet remaining avenue trees on the road.

In the road widening drive, the first casualty are the pedestrian paths and the trees on them, which are removed. As there are roadside plantations adjacent to the pedestrian paths, the pedestrian path has been carved out from the existing avenue plantation. The trees visible now are those which are part of the avenue plantation, and now part of the pedestrian path. The bus stop which was near the road has been shifted way into the avenue plantation, making it difficult to for bus commuters to see the bus number coming in, so most of them stand on the pedestrian path, where there are no trees.

But then the trees did not just provide shade to the bus travelers alone, but also to the users of the pedestrian path who earlier walked in shade provided primarily by the Pilkhans, now walk in the open, and to the small business people-such as the helmet

seller, the drinking water seller and other sellers near the bus stop who now have to conduct their small and vulnerable businesses in the open. Key users of trees in urban areas are the cable wallahs who string their cables across the city to bring cable television to the people and who use the avenue trees to string cables across the roads, and store cable up in the tree for use when required. The banners strung across the road are often anchored to the avenue trees.

Business in the open

All of these trees provided food, shade and nesting place for the birds in urban areas, where space is at a premium for them too-what with the destruction of their habitat and not providing them with alternatives!!!! Clearly there is no rehabilitation/relocation for these urban birds. The newly leafing Pilkhan had a nest, which fell to the ground. Were there any eggs in it? Any chicks? What was done with them? Was the nest an old nest? Was all this taken into account when the trees were felled? But the nest in the Pilkhan in new leaf was lying around empty when I visited the place few days later. The same was with the next green leafy Pilkhan which had couple of nests, as well as a nice big coil of cable presumably stored there (like a squirrel!!!) for future use by the cable wallah, all of which disappeared when the tree was brought down by the road.

With road widening, numerous old and lovely trees have been cut and those roads are now tree less. Where are the key ecosystem buffers in these areas? None. Nearly a month after the tree felling on Olof Palme Marg from the Vasant Vihar Bus Stop to the intersection with Vivekananda Marg, not a single tree has been planted in lieu of the felled trees. The trees that exist are part of an old roadside plantation, which now has been partially converted into a bus stand.

With the widening of the road, the entire landscape, and livelihood scape of the area has been altered. Everything requires a new mindscape of adjustment, of coping with insecurity and uncertainty of the future, and a daily existence without what was taken for granted-the avenue trees.

Treeless path…..