

Survey of Heritage Trees in Aundh, Satara (MS): A Study of their Ecological and Cultural Significance

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Abstract

Heritage trees are more than just old plants rooted in the soil—they are living monuments that carry the stories of people, landscapes, and traditions across centuries. Standing tall through generations, they silently witness the passage of time while continuing to provide essential ecosystem services such as shade, shelter for birds, regulation of local climates, and enrichment of biodiversity. This study was carried out in Aundh, a historically rich town in the Satara district of Maharashtra (GPS: 17.5026° N, 74.489° E), with the aim of identifying and documenting the heritage trees that define its natural and cultural character. A total of nine species were recorded, belonging to a range of families, with Moraceae and Fabaceae emerging as the most dominant. Among them, *Tamarindus indica* L. and *Ficus benghalensis* L. stood out with their immense girth and sprawling canopies, offering not only ecological benefits but also serving as community landmarks. The towering *Adansonia digitata* L., locally called *Gorakh Chinch*, drew special attention for its unique form and deep cultural resonance. Other species, including *Albizia odoratissima* (L.f.) Benth. and *Holoptelea integrifolia* (Roxb.) Planch., added to the botanical richness of the area. Many of these trees are clustered around sacred spaces, especially the hilltop Yamai Mandir dedicated to Goddess Yamai. Their survival is closely tied to faith, as generations of worshippers have preserved them as part of sacred groves. In this way, the trees are not just ecological guardians but also vessels of memory, spirituality, and identity for the people of Aundh. The findings of this study emphasize the urgent need to safeguard heritage trees as part of sustainable development efforts. Protecting them means preserving biodiversity, cultural continuity, and a shared legacy for future generations.

Keywords: Heritage trees, biodiversity, cultural landscape, sacred groves, Aundh, Satara, Yamai Mandir

Introduction

Aundh, a small but historically vibrant town in the Satara district of Maharashtra (GPS coordinates: 17.5026° N, 74.489° E), is known not only for its cultural landmarks but also for its living natural heritage. Scattered across the town and its sacred spaces are magnificent heritage trees, some of which have been standing for centuries. These trees are more than just ecological giants; they are silent witnesses to the unfolding history, the cultural practices of the people, and the changing landscape of the Deccan plateau (Singh, 2017). At the heart of Aundh's identity stands the Yamai Mandir, an ancient hilltop temple dedicated to Goddess Yamai, a much-revered deity in Maharashtra. The temple draws thousands of devotees each year and offers sweeping views of the surrounding countryside. Around this sacred site and in nearby groves, heritage trees continue to thrive, protected for

generations by local traditions that treat them as sacred and inseparable from the temple's spiritual aura (Kumar, 2018). These trees are not only ecologically important, providing shade, shelter for birds, and regulating the microclimate but also deeply rooted in the community's cultural fabric (Maharashtra Forest Department, 2019). For the people of Aundh, they embody a shared memory, carrying stories and values passed down through generations. Earlier botanical surveys, such as Flora of Maharashtra (Almeida, 1996–2003), Flora of Satara District (Yadav, Sardesai, & Gaikwad, 2010), and Flora of Khatav District (Yadav & Sardesai, 2002), have highlighted the floristic richness of this region. Building on that foundation, the present study aims to identify, document, and evaluate the heritage trees of Aundh, placing special emphasis on their ecological roles and cultural significance.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Aundh, Satara, Maharashtra. Field surveys were conducted to identify and document heritage trees. The trees were identified based on their age, size, and historical significance. Data was collected on the species, height, and girth of the trees. Interviews were conducted with local residents and experts to gather information on the cultural and historical significance of the trees.

Results

A total of nine heritage tree species were documented during the present study in Aundh, Satara. These trees, spread across temple premises, village roadsides, and community spaces, represent a wide floristic diversity. Among the families recorded, Moraceae and Fabaceae emerged as the most dominant, reflecting their adaptability and ecological resilience in the Deccan plateau. The largest and most visually striking individuals were *Tamarindus indica* L. (Tamarind)

and *Ficus benghalensis* L. (Banyan), both showing exceptional girth and canopy spread. These trees are not only ecological keystones providing shade, habitats for birds, and stabilizing the microclimate but also cultural landmarks that have witnessed generations of human life in Aundh. Equally remarkable was the presence of *Adansonia digitata* L., locally called Gorakh Chinch or Baobab. Its towering height and unusual trunk form make it stand out as one of the most iconic trees in the region, sparking both scientific curiosity and local folklore. Other notable species such as *Albizia odoratissima* (L.f.) Benth. And *Holoptelea integrifolia* (Roxb.) Planch. Further highlight the area's botanical richness and contribute to ecological diversity.

Importantly, many of these heritage trees were found in and around sacred sites like the Yamai Mandir, where they have been traditionally protected as part of sacred groves. This association between ecology and spirituality underscores the dual role of heritage trees in Aundh as guardians of biodiversity and as symbols of cultural identity.

Table 1: Heritage trees recorded in Aundh, Satara

S. No	Botanical Name	Family	Common Name	Measure (feet)	GPS (Lat)	GPS (Long)
1	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Moraceae	Pimpal	13	17.540454	74.329603
2	<i>Adansonia digitata</i> L.	Malvaceae	Gorakh Chinch	70	17.736733	74.327305
3	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Fabaceae	Chinch	90	17.537056	74.326915
4	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Moraceae	Vad	38	17.541551	74.331596
5	<i>Delonix regia</i> (Boj. ex Hook.) Raf.	Fabaceae	Gulmohar	10	17.537998	74.328042
6	<i>Plumeria rubra</i> L.	Apocynaceae	Chafa	8	17.537088	74.326818
7	<i>Albizia odoratissima</i> (L.f.) Benth.	Fabaceae	Kalshi	246.16	17.537093	74.326791
8	<i>Holoptelea integrifolia</i> (Roxb.) Planch.	Ulmaceae	Vavla	7	17.541234	74.333416
9	<i>Magnolia champaca</i> (L.) Baill. ex Pierre	Magnoliaceae	Sonchafa	22	17.530813	74.327015

Discussion

The documentation of heritage trees in Aundh highlights the strong link between biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation. Sacred groves around the Yamai Mandir serve as living examples of traditional ecological knowledge. These trees not only provide environmental services like carbon sequestration and habitat provision but also embody cultural narratives passed down for generations. As urbanization and modernization progress, protecting these heritage trees becomes vital. Conservation strategies should integrate local community participation, cultural traditions, and scientific management to ensure the sustainability of these natural monuments.

Conclusion

Heritage trees of Aundh represent a rich legacy of ecological balance and cultural identity. Their conservation is crucial not only for maintaining biodiversity but also for preserving traditions and stories deeply rooted in local heritage. Protecting these trees ensures that future generations continue to admire and benefit from their presence.

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