

Tree at the Corner

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We got up on New Year's day to a surprise gift. We didn't really know it was coming. We had seen activity at the corner of the road around the small innocuous triangle that divides it. Generally, elderly dogs slept in this oasis and elderly people stood on its low, friendly stonework to cross the road. But, a few days before the end of the year, bricklayers were at work constructing a parapet around it. Aha! we went. A garden cometh up. A few flowering plants, creepers and ferns, that's about all the small triangle would hold. Why not? Aren't we all for greening the planet?

A cynical voice in me went, nah! Someone's making money can't you see? Perhaps someone was. But why not make money greening the planet rather than denuding it? The only worry was, what would happen to the view of our landmark roundabout of lawn and hedge, from which six radial roads swung out in elegant symmetry commanded by a quiet statue of Senapati Bapat? (Pandurang Mahadev Bapat was a freedom fighter who learned to make bombs in London, wanted to blow up the Houses of Parliament but decided his skills could be better utilised in India. He was also the man who led the three-year farmers' Satyagraha against the Mulshi dam which the Tatas were constructing).

That the BMC should feel a sudden urge to 'beautify' this already beautiful roundabout, wasn't surprising. But why complain, as long as the plants in the triangle kept a low profile and did not challenge the surroundings? Alas, that was not to be. On the last day of the year, a THING of parrot green plastic had arisen at the end of the triangle directly facing the Bapat Circle. Pretending to be a tree, it looked more, to my kitchen-trained

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eyes, like a bunch of coriander stalks that had been fed rather too liberally on the Eat-Me cake in Alice’s Wonderland and grown 12 feet tall and obscenely fat. Worse, the bunch ended in thick branches that curved in the air in every direction like Medusa’s hair. And, hold your breath, the branches were topped by saucer-like hats that turned out to be solar panels.

That morning, a shamelessly jubilant man stood with three grinning colleagues below the THING, telling his boss on the phone that the deed had been done and the fittings would arrive the following day. Promptly, on 1 January, 2016, white LED lamps came to nestle under the solar hats, with the aim of illuminating a roundabout that was already well-lit with yellow sodium vapour lamps.

And that wasn’t all. Overnight, the parapet around the triangle had been painted in brightly coloured geometric shapes, inspired no doubt by Robert and Sonia Delaunay, leaders of the Orphic movement. Had the painter told himself that imitation Delaunay was precisely what would add artistic significance to an oversized bunch of parrot green plastic coriander stalks? Never. Our aesthetics are ad hoc. We get turned on by “novelty”. And what could be more novel than a pastiche of early 20th century French art on a 21st century Mumbai street?

Yesterday we caught a bunch of people looking up into Medusa’s hair with an expression that said, is it a lamp-post, is it a hat-stand, is it a candelabra? For a few days, many such will miss a step on their way to Dadar beach, Raj Thackeray’s home, Dadar station, Sena Bhavan, Sandeep Patil’s house or the College of Catering, to gaze upon this curiosity. Then, the novelty will wear off and only an eyesore will remain.

Poets have connected their innermost emotions with trees.
Remember how Robert Frost's

*Tree at my window ends?
But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost.
That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.*

Confession. The THING at the end of my street disturbed my inner weather for two days. How dared they inflict this monstrosity on us? By what right? But soon the great Indian principle of tolerance kicked in. If the THING hurt my eyes, I was free not to look at it. Meanwhile, I had a real tree of magnificent girth and foliage outside my balcony that I could gaze upon. Tree at my window, window tree ...