

Spot the last tree left in all of Bhendi Bazaar

One Indian wild almond tree stands alone in the 16.5 acres slated for redevelopment

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The Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust recently surveyed the neighbourhood and found that there was only one tree

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It's not as if Mumbai is known for its green cover – according to the latest tree census the 603 square kilometres that the city sprawls across has only 28 lakh trees. But the cramped confines of Bhendi Bazaar's 16.5 acres can't even compete with the city's unimpressive average of 18 trees per acres. There is precisely one green stalwart standing tall among the crowded chawls.

A survey carried out by the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust (SBUT) shows that the sole tree – an Indian wild almond – is all that's left in this congested neighbourhood of south Mumbai. SBUT is implementing the city's first cluster development project Bhendi Bazaar – 17 towers are to replace the narrow alleys and dilapidated buildings over the next ten years. The project has been divided into 9 clusters, and the work which will be executed in phases, has commenced on two.

The SBUT's cluster begins at Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Road, known in Mumbai parlance as the Null Bazaar signal and goes up to the Maulana Shaukat Ali Road, generally called the JJ signal. Dongri, Bhendi Bazaar and nearby areas have the lowest green cover in the city. As per the latest census, south Mumbai's B ward that covers these areas showed just 7,816 trees, most of them from the hardy, low-maintenance Ashoka family.

"When we surveyed the area for the project, it turned out that we had marked only one tree. That's the only tree we have in this entire area," said SBUT's chief executive officer Abbas Master. By current city averages, there should be approximately 310 trees in Bhendi Bazaar – the cluster redevelopment hopes to address the issue, with a plan to plant over 700 trees and shrubs. "At present there is absolutely no open space in the area. We plan to have tree lined streets and podium gardens open to the sky," said Master. The densely populated Bhendi

Bazaar has 3,200 households and 1,250 businesses. Its dormitory style constructions developed organically into a trade and business hub because of the area's proximity to the harbor. The natural environment soon began to give way to the demands of an urban population. Residents now joke about how they can shake hands with neighbours in the next building by simply reaching out from the window. What's not amusing is the fire hazard the narrow streets and restricted quarters pose – a minor blaze has the potential to spread rapidly and uncontrollably.

The long-term residents have long since grown accustomed to the lack of green. 70-year-old Dr Hatim K Bakri, who owns a 185-year-old dispensary on the Pakmodia Street said, "Earlier it was still easy to find shade. Now it is a rarity. The area has got so congested over the years that no one ever thought about how there are no trees at all."

Another shopkeeper Dilwar Attarwala, 63, who has lived in Bhendi Bazaar since he was born said that there is barely any space to walk or park. "We are hearing that there will be a lot of greenery after the project is implemented. Though it is a long wait of 10 years."

The good news: The tree will continue to stand after the redevelopment.

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DR HATIM K BAKRI, 70, RUNS A DISPENSARY IN BHENDI BAZAAR

