

What's wrong with the trees of Lutyens' Delhi?

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Pradip Krishen on the mistakes the British made in central Delhi's green cover and how the Central Vista redevelopment will affect it.

Tree for joy: An old rai jamun in Delhi. (Source: Pradip Krishen)

Pradip Krishen's books *Trees of Delhi* (Penguin Books, 2006) and *Jungle Trees of Central India* (Penguin Books, 2013) have not just tuned our eyes to look at flowers, leaves and branches more closely, but also revealed the "man-made" choices that create our wilderness. As the Central Vista Redevelopment leads to a plan to replant Lutyens' Delhi, the naturalist reminds us about the missteps that colonial rulers made in 1912, and why our natural biodiversity is so underutilised. Excerpts from an interview:

What's your opinion about the latest horticulture plan for the Central Vista Redevelopment?

All we have to go by is the article that appeared in [The Indian Express](#) on July 19 ("In Central Vista revamp, firm to focus on trees that restore Lutyens era look"). It's very worrying for several reasons. The firm HCP Design, which is executing the design for the Central Vista 'revamp', says it wants to stick to the original 'palette' of trees that Edwin Lutyens planted, and also said it was going to replant one species that has a lifespan of about a 100 years. Except that, first of all, they don't seem to know what the 'original palette' is — they mention jamun, banyan and peepal and an astonishing entity they call a 'forest ficus'. Now, first of all, banyans and peepals are decidedly not part of any original palette of trees on the Central Vista. Next, they don't seem to know what the third kind of ficus is — this in itself is alarming. Furthermore, they completely ignore several other trees like the chir (cheed) pine, maulshri and bistendu, which are a distinctive part of the landscape around Vijay Chowk. *What are they doing wrong?* I remember talking to an old jamun-seller near India Gate. It was he who first alerted me to the fact that the jamuns around Central Vista were rai jamuns that ripen in bhaadon (August-September), distinct from the smaller jamoa that ripen in aashaadh (June-July). The difference corresponds to a species difference between *Syzygium nervosum* and *Syzygium cumini*. They're distinct trees, not just in the time of ripening of their fruit, but also in their form. The big, spreading, shady trees that grow along the Central Vista are a special kind of jamun, not just any old jamun. Do they know this and will they bother to find out? Don't you think that if you're planting up a grand, ceremonial avenue, you need to know exactly what you're doing? [You've said before that New Delhi's trees are a British legacy. Could you elaborate?](#) The area chosen to be imperial Delhi — which came to be known as 'Lutyens' Delhi' — was a tabula rasa, pretty much a blank slate. Starting with the Imperial Capital Committee's Report in 1912, British planners and arboriculturists chose which trees should flank each avenue in the new capital. Lutyens himself and William Mustoe, who was superintendent, Government Gardens, in New Delhi, are said to have decided which tree should be planted where, all this over breakfast every morning in a Lutyens' bungalow on (I think) Sunehri Bagh road.

Indian film maker and environmentalist Pradeep Krishen. (Express photo by Oinam Anand)

What was unique about their plan? They wanted to choose particular trees that they thought would be exactly the right size and shape to 'frame' monuments or other features that could be seen at the ends of these roads. In that first report of 1912, they identified eight species for this purpose. That's a really tiny number for what was upwards of 40 roads and streets. Slowly, this number swelled to 12 or 13 but what's most interesting is why they chose the particular species that they did. Several trees, which were favourite avenue trees of the Mughals, trees like shisham, banyan and mango, for example, found no place in their scheme. I've tried to piece together the biases and criteria that might have influenced decisions about which trees to plant. It's a complicated story, but to simplify, these trees had to meet the following criteria: (a) they had to be evergreen (b) they should not be 'common' and (c) they had to be the 'right' size for the avenues where they were to be planted. Lutyens was not familiar with Indian trees. He would have relied hugely on Mustoe's experience of being in Punjab for many years before he was called in to Delhi. But, for me, the most curious criterion is evergreen-ness. Trees that are well adapted to Delhi's natural ecology are not evergreen. An environment that has only two months of rain concentrated in one big pulse cannot support evergreen trees. For a tree to survive in a monsoon climate, it has to shut down and become dormant in the long dry season in order to survive. So, in effect, choosing evergreen trees for Delhi is not such a smart idea. **So, what has worked and what hasn't in the many avenues of Central Vista?** This was their biggest mistake — opting for evergreen species, trees like arjun and jamun and so on. Quite apart from the ecological misunderstanding that underlies this thinking, why would you effectively 'cut out' one of the most beautiful events that happen in deciduous forests — the flush of new leaves in spring? I don't deny that many of our avenues in New Delhi look very beautiful. But at some point, I think we're going to have to do an environmental audit of their performance. Are they excessively thirsty? How much water do they consume? Can we afford to go on watering them at that rate? These questions are going to become more and more urgent as time goes on. Which trees have 'worked' in my opinion? I have a favourite tree in Lutyens' Delhi — one that is not very well known. It's called anjan (*Hardwickia binata*) and its home is in rocky hillsides starting with the Satpuras and then going all the way down the Eastern Ghats. The British planted it sparingly in New Delhi, probably because they weren't very sure of how well it would do in Delhi. They hedged their bets by interplanting it with neem on Pandara Road. They planted it on four roundabouts on either side of the Central Vista. It's a beautiful tree, and it's looking particularly lovely at this moment at the start of our rains. Go out and look at it now. [What have been the consequences of the British curating our jungles?](#) When the British decided to 'manage' India's forests in the mid-19th century, they had no schools of scientific forestry in Britain. France and Germany were the pioneers in Europe, and you wouldn't catch the English asking the French for a favour. So they brought in German foresters to teach the Indian Forest Service how to manage our forests. The Germans believed in a kind of forest management that foregrounded human needs. All the trees that were of no direct use as timber were regarded as rubbish to be removed. Their ideal forest was serried ranks of even-aged trees of a single species, harvested at regular intervals. I was surprised to discover that German forestry still works on similar principles. Ninety per cent of Germany's forests today is made up of only 11 tree species. Some of them are exotic. They tried to do this in India, too. When I was writing my book on central Indian jungles, I'd follow a trail that I'd have read about from an account in, say, the 1880s. I was looking for the richest, most diverse patches of forest in the region. All gone. All planted up with teak. And it's still happening. We have upwards of 2,600 species of native trees in our country. We use — in our planted landscapes — maybe 50 or 60 of these species. That's about two per cent of our natural biodiversity in trees. Don't you think that's shocking?

First published by

The Indian Express

on 26 Jul. 2020