



■ The Central Public Works Department maintains the greenery at Rajghat. HT ARCHIVE

Rajghat: A story of wilted saplings

TREES PLANTED BY VVIPs Between Aug 1950 and Feb 2016, dignitaries have planted at least 188 saplings at the memorial. But a document accessed by HT shows more than half the saplings are dead

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NEW DELHI: A slew of personalities, as diverse as Queen Elizabeth II and Dwight D Eisenhower to Margaret Thatcher and Yasser Arafat, and from Robert Mugabe to Leonid Brezhnev, have planted saplings as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi at the Rajghat. While the records of the plantations remain a testament to the unique tradition, the saplings, themselves, have since perished. A document accessed by HT reveals that at least 188 saplings were planted by foreign dignitaries and VVIPs during their visits to Rajghat between August 1, 1950 and February 11, 2016. Only 80 have survived and 108 died.

The Central Public Works Department (CPWD) had in 2018 submitted the list to the Delhi high court.

The saplings that have survived and grown into full-fledged trees include those planted by Marshal Josip Broz Tito, former president of the erstwhile Yugoslavia; Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese revolutionary and politician; Francois Mitterrand, former president of France; and Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid hero and former president of South Africa.

"The False Ashok tree (*Polyalthia longifolia*), close to the Samadhi of Bapu, is one of the biggest trees we have in the garden now. It was planted almost 70 years ago," said a gardener at Rajghat. Documents show that it was planted by Marshal Tito during his visit on December 18, 1954.

Some former officers of the horticulture wing of the CPWD, the agency which is responsible for maintaining the greenery at Rajghat, said most of the trees died after having lived their full life.

"I was told that floodwaters from the

Yamuna had entered Rajghat during the 1978 floods. The area remained inundated for several days taking a heavy toll on the trees. Rajghat is a VVIP area which is visited by foreign dignitaries. The department takes good care of the trees and lawns," said BN Srivastava, deputy director-general (horticulture) of CPWD.

According to a former protocol officer with the ministry of external affairs, once the visit of a foreign dignitary is fixed, the information is then sent to the CPWD and the Rajghat Samadhi Committee. Even though the CPWD's list includes the list of foreign dignitaries who planted tree saplings until February 2016, members of the Rajghat Samadhi Committee said that a few other VVIPs have visited the Rajghat after that date. The list includes Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's state counsellor; John Key, former Prime Minister of New Zealand; and Joko Widodo, president of Indonesia, among others. But not all of them planted saplings.

"There are three kinds of visits when a foreign dignitary is coming to India—a state visit, official visit and informal visit. A dignitary coming on a state visit

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is escorted to Rajghat where he plants a sapling," said Jagat Sethi, former chief of protocol at the ministry of external affairs (MEA).

The CPWD selects the site and species of the tree sapling which is to be planted there. A pit is also dug before the dignitary arrives, escorted by a protocol officer from the MEA. The dignitary has to symbolically dig out some soil, plant a sapling and cover it with soil again. He then waters the plant before leaving Rajghat.

"Usually we go for native and indigenous species such as Amaltas, Mango, False Ashok, Him Champa, Kadam and Pipal trees, among others. Sometimes, the MEA used to suggest the species. Once a dignitary planted bamboo trees," said a former director of the CPWD's horticulture wing. The dignitary he is talking about was Pham Van Dong, then Prime Minister of Vietnam, during his visit on April 8, 1980.

According to the list, the first sapling planted in Rajghat was on July 1, 1950. At least 13 VVIPs and dignitaries, both Indian and foreign, had planted saplings that day including country's first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, former PM Gulzarilal Nanda and US ambassador Loy W Henderson.

Except for the mango sapling planted by Nehru, all others have survived.

The list also reveals that the last tree was planted on February 11, 2016 by Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces. "Even though many other VVIPs have visited the Rajghat, I don't remember anyone planting a sapling after that (February 2016). There is a lack of space in Rajghat. Also we have not received any proposal from the MEA after that," said a CPWD official requesting anonymity.

WORLD LEADERS AT RAJGHAT

Saplings planted there since 1950



How plants have fared

The leaders whose saplings have now died

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: Prime Minister of India July 1, 1950

DWIGHT D EISENHOWER: President of USA December 10, 1959

QUEEN ELIZABETH II: January 21, 1961

MARGARET THATCHER: Prime Minister of Britain and Northern Ireland April 15, 1981

ROBERT GABRIEL MUGABE: Prime Minister of Zimbabwe May 22, 1981

YASSER ARAFAT: President of Palestine May 21, 1982

LEE KUAN YEW: September 2, 1966

Saplings that still survive

MARSHAL JOSIP BROZ TITO: President of Yugoslavia December 18, 1954

HO CHI MINH: President of Vietnam – February 5, 1958

HAFEZ AL ASSAD: President of Syria – April 19, 1978

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND: President of France – November 27, 1982

HUSSAIN MOHAMMAD ERSHAD: President of Bangladesh – July 15, 1986

NAJIBULLAH AHMADZAI: President of Afghanistan – May 5, 1988

BOUTROS BOUTROS-GHALI: Secretary General, UN – April 22, 1992

LECH WAŁĘSA: President of Poland – March 31, 1994

ALBERTO FUJIMORI: President of Peru May 26, 1997

BARACK OBAMA: President of USA – January 25, 2015



■ April 15, 1981 - Then Prime Minister of UK Margaret Thatcher. HT ARCHIVES



■ March 3, 1994 - Then President of Poland Lech Wałęsa.



■ January 22, 1961 - Queen Elizabeth II at Rajghat.



■ October 3, 2000 - President of Russia Vladimir Putin.



■ May 18, 1991 - Ali Nasir Muhammad, then President of South Yemen.



■ July 31, 1969 - Then US President Richard Nixon.



■ November 27, 1986 - Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.



■ December 18, 1954 - Then President of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito.



■ November 29, 1996 - Then Chinese President Jiang Zemin.



■ March 21, 2000 - Then US President Bill Clinton.

MOST COMMON SPECIES PLANTED



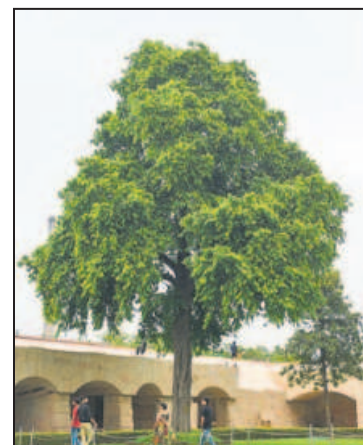
■ Cassia Fistula (Amaltas) tree. VIPIN KUMAR/HT PHOTOS



■ Mangifera Indica (Mango).



■ Magnolia Grandiflora (Him Champa).



■ Polyalthia Longifolia (False Ashok).



■ Anthocephalus Cadamba (Kadam).



■ Mimusops Elengi (Morshali).