

## Experts divided on lakhs of trees along floodplains

29 May 2022

Fiercely guarded from grazing cattle on the Yamuna's floodplains in Northeast Delhi's Garhi Mandu are lakhs of saplings and trees planted there in lieu of those felled for infrastructure projects. Sections of the floodplain near the Signature Bridge are visibly green, even from a distance.

Such dense plantations on the active floodplains are not desirable, said A K Gosain, professor emeritus at IIT-Delhi, who is a member of the expert committee constituted on orders of the NGT to monitor rejuvenation of the river and its floodplains. "This is the active floodplain, which means it gets inundated every year. Anything that you put here is a resistance to the flow. Plantations should be as far from the floodplain as possible," he said.

Repeated flooding also means it is difficult to protect saplings. Several hectares of the floodplains where saplings have been planted is low-lying land that is flooded in the monsoon. The last time the area witnessed major flooding was in 2019, said a forest department staffer in charge of the plantation sites at Garhi Mandu. If the water recedes quickly, there is no damage to trees, he said. But in some parts of the floodplains, like a patch at Shastri Park, saplings were destroyed by water that remained stagnant for a long while. Around 16,000 saplings will be planted in the area this year, said Aditya Madanpotra, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Central Division, adding that suitable species like sheesham, that can withstand flooding, would be planted.

To illustrate, large swathes of a 19-hectare patch used for compensatory afforestation of an NHA project are densely covered in trees planted in the 2019-20 financial year. But small patches were incongruously empty — the saplings have been planted, but have not quite made it. "The trees that survived are on higher land," the forest department official said.

In the Central Forest Division, within which much of the floodplain falls, compensatory plantation has been carried out on 245 hectares, with 2,97,789 saplings, as per records.

Additionally, around 357.6 hectares was handed over by DDA to the Forest department for plantation activity from 1975 onwards. Around 1,63,000 saplings were planted here. At Garhi Mandu, a total of 42.1 acres of land is now a 'city forest', where there's a mud track for walks.

In January, at a meeting of the expert committee, Gosain noted, as per the minutes: "Delhi government should be directed that such compensatory activities should be prevented in the floodplain and if required, be only carried out in the outermost area of the floodplain, where floodwater reaches only in 1 in 50 year or so."

However, Shashank Shekhar, professor, Department of Geology, Delhi University, said, "If it's a native species which is suitable for the river banks, then it's good." The plantations must be done in a scientific manner, with the correct species, and must not be monoculture plantations, he added.

Faiyaz Khudsar, scientist in-charge of the Biodiversity Parks Programme and the Yamuna Biodiversity Park, identified species that are suitable for the floodplains — trees like kadamb, sheesham, arjun,

semal and jamun for the top storey, and others like amla, bael and doodhi for the middle storey. While the forest department has planted some of these species, it has also used some that are not usually found in such areas. Neem, pilkhan and jungle jalebi, for instance, are not suitable species for the floodplains, Khudsar said.

At a plantation site near the Shastri Park Metro station, out of 3,244 trees planted, 850 were jungle jalebi, 560 were pilkhan trees and more than 180 were neem trees.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/experts-divided-on-lakhs-of-trees-along-floodplains-7941885/>