

The Tribune

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Finding the 'missing' oak tree

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In the 1950s, the implications of climate change were unknown and still decades away, yet we had launched a nationwide campaign for tree plantation known as Vanamahotsava. This was thinking far ahead of its time, the credit for which goes almost entirely to KM Munshi.

He was a freedom fighter, a politician, a scholar, and above all, a visionary. As a member of the drafting committee of the Constitution, Munshi had played an important role in the Constituent Assembly. It was during his tenure as agriculture minister that the proposal for a tree plantation drive was taken up. Initially, saplings were planted at Raj Ghat in New Delhi, but later it was decided to make it a countrywide mission. July 1, 1950, was the date chosen so as to get the benefit of the monsoon. GB Pant, then CM of UP, had invited Munshi to make a beginning from the Kumaon hills. The first sapling under Vanamahotsava was planted by Munshi at Nainital, outside Raj Bhavan.

After the creation of Uttarakhand in 2000, Raj Bhavan became the property of the newly created state and the abode of its Governor. Even though the headquarters was at Dehradun, I regularly visited Nainital to meet people from the Kumaon region. It was in 2015, while going for a walk, that I mentioned to my ADC that the first tree planted by Munshi could not be located. This brought the forest department as well as the PWD into the picture, as they were responsible for the upkeep of the premises. This was also the beginning of the search for the lost tree.

Any interdepartmental activity in the government tends to generate correspondence, which lands in some file or other. A beginning was made. It was understood that when the assets and records were being divided between Uttarakhand and UP, a large number of papers had been weeded out. The records of Raj Bhavan were of little help. Similar was the fate of the forest department and PWD records.

The next step was to survey the area for trees of around 65 years of standing and make physical enquiries. Old residents of attached quarters and their children, who were now grown up, were made to jog their memories for some clue about the location. After considerable effort, the general location of the site could be narrowed down to a pathway leading towards the golf course. Though there was an abundance of cedar deodar pines as well as oak in this area, for ceremonial occasions it was considered auspicious to plant only the stately Himalayan oak (banj). Thereafter, locating a 65-year-old oak tree in a limited area was a simple affair for forest experts. Finally, after the identification of the celebrated tree, the search was discontinued. Now, a commemorative plaque stands displayed alongside this lush-green Himalayan oak. This majestic tree, flourishing in its full glory, had always been there. It is, in fact, we who were actually lost.

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