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## Green space in UP is shrinking despite significant tree planting campaigns each year

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Come July, all government departments in the state will go full steam launching pompous plantation drives, but the net result hints at an alarming reduction in green cover across Uttar Pradesh. This year, more than 35 crore saplings are to be planted in different areas of the state involving as many as 30 government departments.

To set a new Guinness World Record, UP's deputy chief minister has announced opening of 150 new high tech nurseries, two in each district. An amount of Rs 150 crore has been earmarked.

Taj city, Agra has been given a target of planting 51 lakh saplings. In 2018, the city planted 20 lakh, in 2019 the number was 28 lakh, in 2020 they planted 38 lakh, and in 2021, 45 lakh saplings were planted. DFO Akhilesh Pandey claims 70 per cent plants have survived.

Interestingly, Agra mayor Navin Jain had planted some 12,000 saplings on the Yamuna river bed, which were all washed away when the water level rose in August last year. An inquiry is still going on.

In the past years, huge plantation drives have been ordered by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and also by his predecessor Akhilesh Yadav. However, the green activists remarked that these are "paper trees to be found only in government files."

In the last year of his term in office, former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav set a Guinness World Record for planting 50 million saplings in a day. Next year Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath set a target of nine crore saplings.

"Trees rich in medicinal properties and of religious significance will be planted across the state," it was claimed.

Despite such herculean efforts, the green cover in Uttar Pradesh remains a dismal 9 per cent, against the national target of 33 per cent.

Green activists in Agra doubt the government claims. "These are paper trees to be found only in government files. The ground reality is different," said activist Harendra Gupta of River Connect Campaign.

"For 90 million saplings, we need 2,25,000 hectares of land, if the distance between two saplings is kept 5 metres. The Akhilesh Yadav government planted 50 million. So now where's the space," wonders Pandit Jugal Kishor.

If so many trees have been planted over the years, why are they not visible? Environmentalist Dr Devashish Bhattacharya explains, "The eco-sensitive Taj Trapezium Zone, spread over 10,400 sq km, has seen continuous denudation of forest cover due to massive construction activity. The Yamuna and Agra-Lucknow expressways, dozens of flyovers, the inner city ring road and widening of the national highway to Delhi have gobbled up acres of green cover, exposing the Taj Mahal to dust-laden winds from Rajasthan desert."

The Supreme Court had directed that a green buffer be created to insulate the historical monuments from air pollution. "But there has been no significant improvement in the conditions around the Taj Trapezium Zone. Even the area around the protected Soor Sarovar Bird Sanctuary is being gobbled up by colonisers and business interests. The dense cover at Keitham Lake is continuously being reduced," Bhattacharya added.

Green activists in Agra have warned of a steadily diminishing green cover in the Taj city, with one expert blaming monkeys for it.

The Supreme Court has been repeatedly asking the authorities since 1996 to intensify efforts to develop a green belt to contain air pollution in Agra, India's most popular tourist destination. Green activists have expressed concern over the latest trend of developing concrete jungles where once green forests had existed.

"From Vrindavan to Agra, there were 12 big forests in the Braj area. But now only their names remain. The green patches have turned brown, yellow and grey," says Vrindavan activist, Jagan Nath Poddar, convener of Friends of Vrindavan.

The activist said, "the builders and corrupt government officials had colluded to gobble up huge chunks of forest land. Illegal felling of trees continues along the Yamuna. Also, the continuous construction of roads, expressways, flyovers and other projects has taken a heavy toll on green cover, specially trees."

Eco Club president, Pradip, noted that instead of increasing the forest cover area, the percentage had fallen to around 7 per cent against the national standard of 33 per cent. "The loss of green cover had affected the rainfall pattern, reducing the number of rainy days in the whole Braj Mandal. Agra was being ruined by so-called development. The alarming fall in the green cover due to negligence and corrupt ways of the bureaucracy will prove suicidal and hasten the ecological apocalypse," he said.

Most green activists of Braj Mandal said monkeys too were to blame. "The monkeys are a big nuisance. We keep planting saplings all over but find the next day that the monkeys have uprooted them all. To promote green culture in the city, we will need to contain the monkey population," they stated.

"Every year, just before the monsoon sets in, all the state government agencies, NGOs, green-warrior outfits and nature lovers join the ritualistic tree plantation drive with tall claims about the number of saplings planted. They just get photographed and then forget about the saplings totally," the activists said.

"If you add up all the claims of tree plantation work each year since 1990 by successive state governments, there would be hardly an inch of space left for planting new saplings. UP's green cover is hardly 10 percent and with new mega projects coming up everywhere, film city, international airport, expressways, residential urban clusters, shopping complexes, the space for extending green cover is severely limited," they claimed.

A group of green activists in Agra has demanded an independent audit of the green work done so far.

"The real problem with such over-hyped campaigns is that these are not backed by adequate support services that can take care of the plants for three years at least," says green activist, Padmini Iyer from River Connect Campaign.

Source: <https://www.businessinsider.in/sustainability/news/green-space-in-the-up-is-decreasing-despite-significant-tree-planting-campaigns-each-year/articleshow/92717213.cms>