



Central Vista Redevelopment: Vanity Project Amidst the Pandemic

As India is being ravaged by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, scarce government resources are still being drained for the Modi government's vanity project, the redevelopment of the Central Vista, which includes a new Parliament building and a new house for the PM among other changes. This note captures the major financial, environmental and ethical objections to the project.

- I. **Choosing Vanity over People's Lives:** The overall cost of the Central Vista redevelopment project is estimated at Rs. 20,000 crore. As per Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, the cost is Rs 20,000 crore "over several years".¹ While the country battles the COVID-19 pandemic, initial construction worth Rs. 13,540 crore has been approved. These funds could have been diverted to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic:
 - a. Each dose of both Covishield and Covaxin vaccines costs the central government Rs 150. That would mean 89 crore doses could have been bought and nearly 45 crore people could have been vaccinated with the same amount.²
 - b. About 14 lakh ventilators could have been bought.³
 - c. 2 crore families could have received Rs 6,000 through the NYAY scheme.⁴
 - d. 1 crore oxygen cylinders could have been purchased.⁵
 - e. It costs Rs 1,000-1,200 crore to set up an AIIMs -- about 12 new AIIMS could have been set up in the last one year, including those already underway but which have made no progress in the last 6 years such as AIIMS Madurai.⁶



Image Source: The Print⁷

¹ <https://twitter.com/HardeepSPuri/status/1390602824740921346>

² Calculations based on estimate of Rs 13450 crore.

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/central-vista-project-shows-govts-warped-priorities-congress/article31483505.ece>

⁴ <https://in.news.yahoo.com/central-vista-criminal-wastage-rahul-054936181.html>

⁵ <https://in.news.yahoo.com/central-vista-criminal-wastage-rahul-054936181.html>

⁶ <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-central-vista-project-needless-no-moral-ground/653826/>

⁷ <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-central-vista-project-needless-no-moral-ground/653826/>

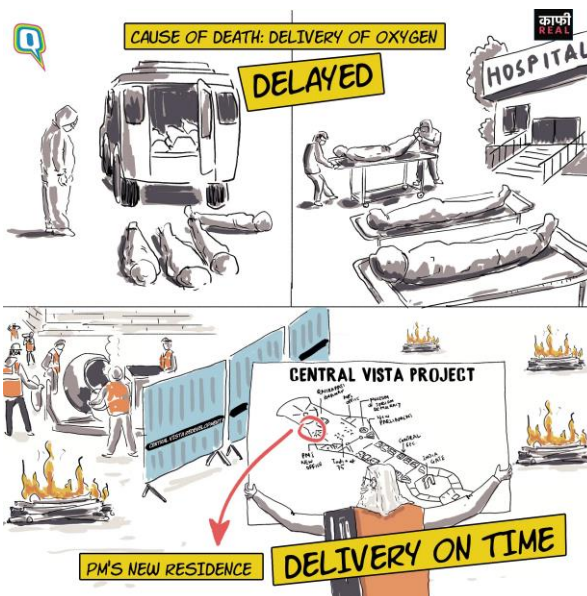


Image Source: The Quint

2. Environmental Damage:

- a. 400 heritage trees, including jamun trees, are being removed and replanted at a different location in the Badarpur Ecopark.⁸
- b. In total, 3,230 trees are being uprooted and transferred to an unknown location. Moreover, the trees being transplanted will not be replaced by new plantings within the redeveloped areas, leading to a reduced green cover.⁹
- c. The removal of such a large number of mature trees will affect the central vista adversely as these trees help in regulating the temperature, reduce air and noise pollution, remove dust, and are home to urban wildlife including squirrels and birds.¹⁰
- d. The buildings currently lining Janpath and adjoining roads, which currently house various Ministries, will be demolished. It is evident that the massive quantity of debris and dust generated by these demolitions will pose extraordinary environmental damage and immense practical challenges. The manner of disposal of these debris is also not clear. The Central Public Works Department is yet to submit a “detailed demolition plan along with mitigative measures”, including details of the strategy for management of demolition waste.¹¹

⁸ <https://science.thewire.in/environment/central-vista-project-delhi-jamun-trees-ecology/>

⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/central-vista-project-new-pm-residence-to-be-ready-by-dec-2022-7300872/>

¹⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/why-the-central-vista-trees-arent-happy-about-being-cut-and-moved-7093223/>

¹¹ <https://thewire.in/government/central-vista-project-demolition>



Image Source: The Indian Express

- 3. Central Vista Project designated as Essential Service:** Despite the lockdown restrictions in New Delhi, the Central Vista Project was declared as an “essential service” with construction continuing on site. Such a move not only questions the need and urgency of the government in completing the project but also puts at risk the health of the labourers, engineers, contractors and other personnel employed at the site. Despite clear guidelines that permit construction only where workers live on-site, reports indicate that most workers still commute to the site daily by bus.¹² There are also reports that workers have not been paid their wages since March 2021, and delays in payments have worsened during the lockdown.¹³



Image Source: India Today

¹²<https://scroll.in/article/993385/as-covid-19-devastates-delhi-central-vista-project-declared-an-essential-service-work-continues>

¹³<https://scroll.in/article/993385/as-covid-19-devastates-delhi-central-vista-project-declared-an-essential-service-work-continues>



4. Lack of public discourse on the project

- a. The project was introduced by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on September 13, 2019, and a petition was filed in the Supreme Court in April 2020 challenging it.¹⁴
- b. From the beginning, there has been an attempt to dilute public engagement. In February, 2020, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) provided only two days to hear people's objections to the changes in land use patterns that would be brought about due to the project.¹⁵
- c. Unsurprisingly, the timing of the project announcement meant that there has been little time, and little opportunity for public debate or even protests, because of the pandemic and lockdowns that followed.
- d. Lt Col Anuj Srivastava (Retd), an architect and an activist from LokPATH and one of the petitioners in the case, believes that more deliberation and public consultation was required in the project before it could be approved.¹⁶
- e. Moreover, the lockdowns imposed in several states including Delhi since April 19 have effectively ensured that in-person mass protests against the project are reduced to a bare minimum.

5. Impact on architectural heritage:

- a. The Central Vista Redevelopment project will obliterate the history and character of the area. In spite of the fact that the central vista is protected as a Heritage Zone in Delhi's Master Plan, is protected by the National Capital Region Planning Board Act of 1985 (which prohibits the further construction of government buildings in Delhi) and was even put forward in 2013 by the UPA government as a contender as a World Heritage Site, the BJP government has nullified these protections.
- b. Raksha Bhavan which houses the National Defence College (NDC), Transport Bhavan, Shram Shakti Bhavan and the recently constructed Jawaharlal Nehru Bhavan are a few of the identified buildings for demolition.¹⁷¹⁸
- c. According to Kanchi Kohli, a senior researcher at the Centre for Policy Research "The Central Vista is significant for historical, lived and architectural heritage. Equally importantly, it is a public-use area for tourists and residents, and a green area, the redevelopment represents a form of 'government sprawl' where powerful offices appropriate urban space with little concern for planning or socio-ecological consequences."¹⁹

¹⁴<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/central-vista-project-approved-supreme-court-verdict-explained-7133395/>

¹⁵ <https://thewire.in/urban/dda-consultation-on-central-vista>

¹⁶<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/jan/05/activists-disappointed-by-supreme-courts-approval-to-central-vista-project-2245891.html>

¹⁷<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/centre-to-demolish-jawaharlal-nehru-bhavan-building-near-india-gate-under-central-vista-plan-923510.html>

¹⁸<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-city-planning-trfn-idUSKBN21J3OQndia/191020/delhis-iconic-buildings-to-be-demolished-for-central-vista-project.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-city-planning-trfn-idUSKBN21J3OQ>



6. **Conversion of public space into government use:** Urban planners and conservationists have pointed out that by changing the use of large tracts of land, the government is making an undemocratic move and denying the public access to land for recreation. Instead, it is turning the area into a citadel for the elite. At least 80 acres of land used by the general public previously will now be lost.²⁰
7. **Potential Super-Spreader Activity:** A plea filed in the Delhi High Court asserted that the construction workers are working without any proper protection²¹ and are susceptible to the virulent spread of the virus. Contending that the project has no feature of essentiality of service to the public at large, the plea²² sought the suspension of the ongoing construction work of the Central Vista Project.
8. **New House for PM:** A significant part of the vanity project is the construction of a new residence for the PM even though the PM already has a sprawling 5-bungalow residence on Lok Kalyan Marg. This is on top of the Rs 8400 crore spent on new luxurious airplanes for Modi's travels²³



Image Source: Twitter²⁴

9. **India's Image on the Global Stage:** The international media, too, has called out Modi for his blatant disregard of the pandemic and for continuing with the vanity project.

Modi presses ahead with \$1.8 billion parliament renovation even as Covid-19 ravages India

Image Source: CNN (USA)²⁵

²⁰<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/national/loss-of-80-acre-land-for-public-in-central-vista-development-architects-body-to-dda>

²¹<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/delhi-hc-defers-hearing-on-plea-seeking-suspension-of-central-vista-project-work-101620112151586.html>

²²<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/plea-in-delhi-high-court-seeks-suspension-of-central-vista-redevelopment-project-173560>

²³ <https://www.gqindia.com/get-smart/content/pm-narendra-modi-new-rs-8458-cr-custom-b777-planes-all-you-need-to-know>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/caricatured/status/1389841905320484868?s=08>

²⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/06/india/india-modi-parliament-intl-hnk/index.html>



The monstrous monument to Narendra Modi's ego: As millions suffer in pandemic, India's narcissistic Prime Minister is building a vast folly at a cost that could fund 40 major hospitals. Now his nation is in uproar

Image Source: The Daily Mail (UK)