Work at furious pace for Sanjay memorial

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A memorial for Sanjay Gandhi is coming up fast at Shantivana, about 100 yards from the samadhi of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Labourers, technicians, engineers and landscape artists are working round the clock. The red-sandstone platform is expected to be completed by May 25 and the memorial will be ready before Sanjay's first death anniversary on June 23.

The platform is expected to cost Rs 2.5 lakhs. It is believed the Cabinet has yet to sanction the amount. A four-square-foot area has been left in the middle of the platform. What will be the final shape of the memorial is being kept a secret. No information is given by technicians and engineers working at Shantivana.

It is believed that Mrs Gandhi, accompanied by Mr Bhishma Narain Singh, Union Minister for Works and Housing, and Dhirendra Brahmchari, visited Shantivana on Friday to have a look at the work in progress.

On June 24 last year a site was selected for the cremation of Sanjay. This was a few feet from Nehru's samadhi. When Mr Rajiv Gandhi visited the place he suggested that it should be moved further towards east. But by then a structure was already up. It had to be demolished and a new brick platform was put up at the present site.

After the cremation, the platform remained there for more than a month. On September 16, the structure was demolished. The ground was not only levelled but fresh grass was planted to remove every sign of it.

A Government spokesman then denied that the samadhi had been demolished. He said artists and experts were giving thought to a suitable memorial to Sanjay.

It was said that the suggestion for the removal of the platform came from Mrs Gandhi as she passed Shantivana on her way to Red Fort on Independence Day.

The then Lt-Governor, Mr Jagmohan, thought that she wanted the platform lowered and this was done. When he came to know that she wanted the removal of the platform, work was started immediately and by the night of September 16 the ground was levelled.

The removal of the platform became a subject of controversy. Youth Congress (I) activists belonging to the Sanjay Vichar Manch started a dharna on October 24 at the site. After the dharna came a fast. They redecorated the place and cordoned it off with a nylon rope. The agitation was called off on November 6.

Since then different sites were named for a memorial to Sanjay, including a fountain at the turning of Patel Road on Willingdon Crescent. It was also argued that Shantivana could not be used for a Sanjay memorial since it was a national monument. On December 3 the Union Education Minister, Mr S. B. Chavan, told the Rajya Sabha that Shantivana could not be called a monument of national importance as it was less than 100 years old.

The Congress (I) set up a committee to prepare plans for a Sanjay memorial. It is believed the present memorial was approved by the committee.