



Behind the Garden Gate

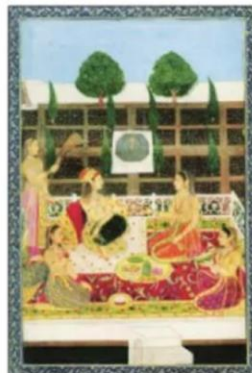
A first-ever travelling exhibition on the story of landscapes in India makes a stop in Delhi

SHINY VARGHESE

THE CREATION story known to all cultures begins with the earth, the idea of paradise as a garden, the making of sky, land, and water. And in them rests the seed of all humanity. In the garden is where man and woman first sinned, where the gods were exiled and from where deliverance will come. A somewhat similar story plays out at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi, on orange scaffolding which panels the story of gardens in India. Called "Tracing Narratives: Indian Landscape Design", the exhibition takes you forward and back in time, going beyond Mughal gardens, reading through old lenses in new way.

One confronts ancient classification of plants from Vedic times, the anatomy of trees from seed to stem, the division of leaves, their texture and taste, to gardens in cemeteries that acknowledge heroes and homegardens of today, where amateur gardeners let their passion speak. It's under the native Acacia tree, where the children play in a Delhi house; within the curlicues of Mandu's tanks; and across the mood map of Nek Chand's Rock Garden that one sees the narrative of the exhibition, where paradigms of convention, patronage, and social codes play out.

"It all began in September 2013, during our Million Gardens project. The Mughal gardens are of course, well known, but we knew these could not be the only legacy of Indian gardens. The domestic garden, or the fruit garden was never celebrated nor documented. We attempted to define what a garden is, and we felt it had to have a circumscribed territory, which allowed for infinite views. And within it, would be the ritual of man and nature. With this, we could include the step wells of Rajasthan, gardens within a temple, and those that were fleshed out through folklore. The exhibition is a way to show the con-



(Clockwise from above) Kirkee cemetery in Pune; a garden showcased in a miniature; Madhu Shankar's garden which is featured in the exhibition

nections in art, literature, popular culture and the practice itself — it all started with the garden, and we seem to have forgotten that," says architect Aniket Bhagwat. The exhibition is curated by LEAF (Landscape and Environment Advancement Foundation) the research arm of Ahmedabad-based landscape design firm M/s Prabhakar B Bhagwat. Architects, scholars and researchers at LEAF, mentored and guided by Bhagwat, have brought together this travelling exhibition that moves to Kochi and Mumbai next.

Through multiple lenses — writing, recording, nurturing, reading, anchoring — the exhibition opens itself to discovery. Be it against the backdrop of paintings, drawings or Hindi cinema. "The garden is the 'other'

place that we aspire for, the place to be when all else is over," says Bhagwat. "We felt the need to go back to the basics and understand what the meaning of the garden is. A garden is the last of the space in our lives that is not political as yet. It's almost an apparatus by which one can navigate the world, enact life and examine self. Landscape architects today are engaged with large challenges of sustainability and ecology; but some where along the way they seem to have forgotten the potency of a garden: a place from where larger forays can be learnt about and launched. The appreciation and the need to relook at the idea of the garden is key, and without that understanding, the many voyages that the discipline undertakes are hol-

low. That's the professional schism," he says.

In the exhibition is an interview with Agra-based nursery man Ishwar Singh, a descendant of the nurseries of the Mughals, who rues, "Standard Rose, no one even knows what that means in India now". There are references to the garden imperialism of the British that "stamped curvilinear and cross" forms in public parks, allowing the mind to forget the vernacular patterns of home gardens from the Chettinad House in Tamil Nadu to the Wada homes of Maharashtra and the Banni Houses of Kutch. It proves how we forgot the etymology of the "bagh", which was walled, a place of perfume, a rose garden, which was different from an "aangan" or a "maidan". Today, our vocabulary doesn't go beyond the "yard" or the "park".

Through the exile and the forgetting, there are references to projects across the country, and outside, that offer a value system, a memory of the past, and a hope for the future. In Kathmandu, there is the Garden of Dreams with its water bodies and fountains; in Timba, Gujarat, the vision of an abandoned quarry transforming into a nature woodland; and in Bhuj, Smriti Van salutes victims of the 2001 earthquake with reservoirs that heal and nourish.

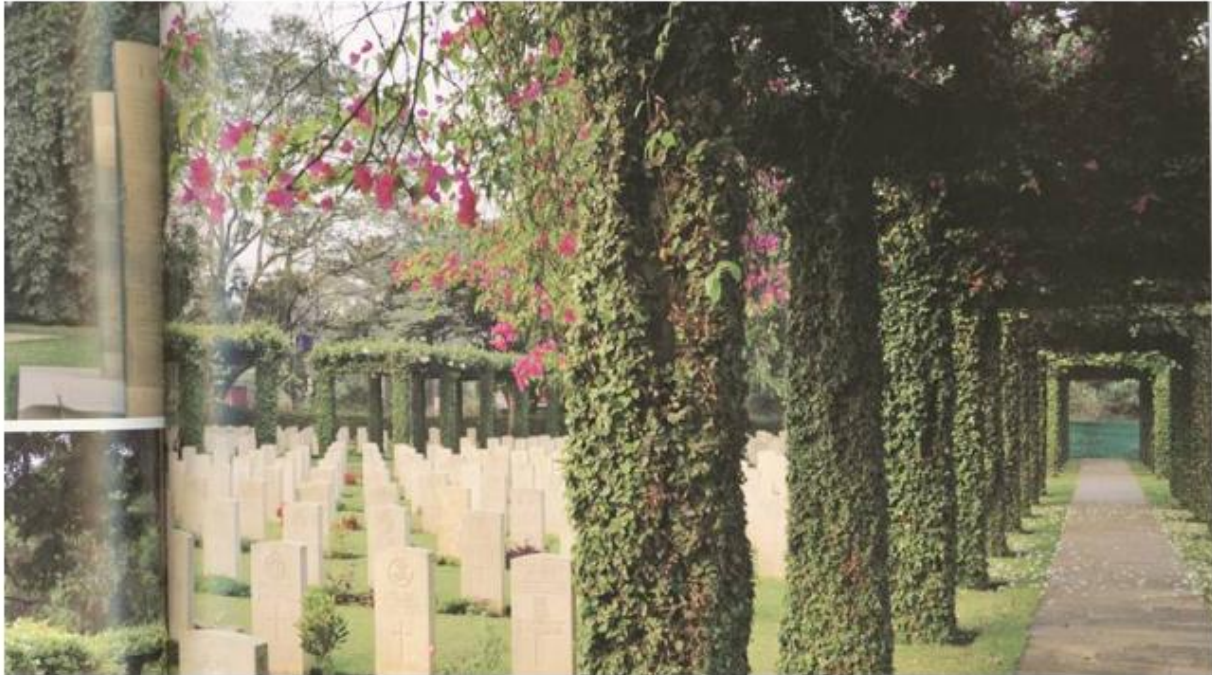
Landscape has always been the Yeatsian line between memory and imagination, and while this exhibition pays tribute to the everyday garden, it shies from the politics of tea estates and opium plantations. If gardens are places of politics, and currently Capital complexes are being built on riverbeds, and riverfronts across the country are the nouveau romantic ideas of nation building, one wishes like graffiti artist Banksy did — show a masked protester throwing not bombs but flowers — the exhibition would have a way to present its case.

The exhibition is at India Habitat Centre till April 24

<http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/behind-the-garden-gate-exhibition-tracing-narratives-indian-landscape-design-4609479/>

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Kirkee cemetery in Pune

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