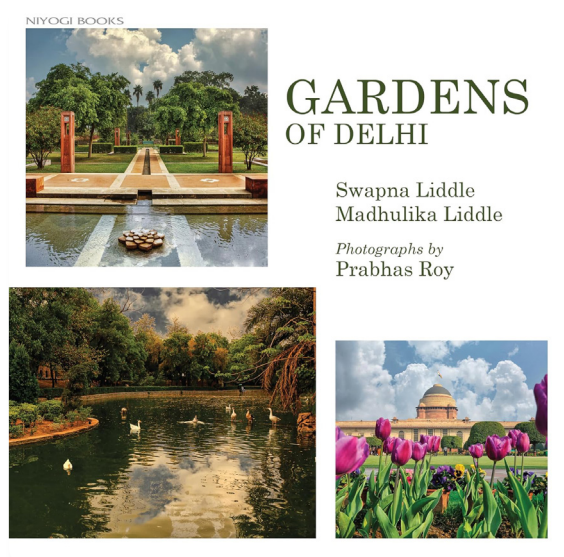


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# A CHRONICLE OF LANDSCAPES

## LOST AND FOUND



### GARDENS OF DELHI

Author: Swapna Liddle and Madhulika Liddle  
Photographs: Prabhas Roy  
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The book offers an engaging exploration of Delhi's historic and contemporary gardens, blending history with present-day observations. While insightful, it lacks comprehensive details, visual aids, and landscape architect's acknowledgments, leaving room for further inquiry and scholarship.

As a resident of Delhi and a frequent visitor to many of the public parks illustrated in the book 'Gardens of Delhi' I was quite astonished to find that it is the first compendium of its kind, particularly that so much of the imagination of the capital is rooted in its antecedents as a 'Garden City'. Covering 14 public gardens, the selection of these is focused, for the most part, on and around built heritage, its history, and present-day plantation.

Chronicling the lost landscapes and the remnants and ruins of gardens across the many cities of Delhi through the ages, the focus of the book commences from the 13th century onwards where more evidentiary knowledge is available. Tomb precincts of Lodi Garden, Mehrauli Archaeological Park, palace and pleasure gardens including Hayat Baksh, Roshanara, Shalimar and Qudsia Bagh, Talkatora and Mughal Gardens (Amrit Udyan) that predate India's independence are documented, with highlights of their historic context, setting and layout, significant plantation and current condition. The book comes alive in descriptions of the origin and context of the parks and their evolution, particularly through the Mughal and British periods. In descriptions of the use of the place, how lives played out, how the space was one of intrigue and adventure, and how the politics of the day shaped its function, it transports the reader to another time and place.

Whereas the historic parks find a continuous narrative that is engaging and compelling, the newer parks - Sunder Nursery, Nehru Park, Garden of Five Senses, and Buddha Jayanti Park are more perfunctorily described and feel incomplete. For, with an emphasis on the flowers over the spatial layout at Mughal Gardens, it raises many questions, one of which is the garden interests of successive presidents, if any. The orientation of Sunder Nursery and Buddha Jayanti Park is not very clear. The inclusion of the India-Africa Friendship and BRICS Rose Garden is puzzling, and Indraprastha Park is more descriptive of structures and places outside the park than within. Nehru Park is missing many of the more recent interventions.



## QUDSIA BAGH

In the decades following the foundation of Shahjahanabad, many gardens were laid out outside the city walls. Usually the patron was the nobility, or members of the royal family, particularly ladies. One such lady was Qudsiya Begum. Known originally as Ultham Bito, she was one of the wives of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah, who ruled between 1719 and 1748. Her influence grew substantially after Muhammad Shah's death, when her son Ahmad Shah ascended the throne. Ahmad Shah largely left affairs of state to his mother and to her confidant, the eunuch Javed Khan, who between them were the real power behind the throne. It was during this time that she supervised the

*Footnote:* The main gateway to Qudsiya Bagh, also called Hazrat Chiragh, is known to be large enough for an elephant to pass through.

*Footnote:* The trees and vegetation have regrown the garden to this point.

title 'Qudsiya Begum', or 'Shante lady'. During the short reign of Ahmad Shah, 1748-54, she commissioned some important construction projects, including a large garden just outside the northern wall of the city.

Qudsiya Bagh originally stood beside a stream and overlooked the river, though the river has now changed course, and the stream, like many others in Delhi, is just a polluted drain. Evidence suggests that the garden was laid out in the form of a charbagh, enclosed by a high wall. The garden was entered through a lofty and unadorned gateway in the middle of the northern wall of the enclosure, and in the middle of the northern and southern sections of the wall, there were pavilions, or *bandabas*. The garden had a large water tank in the centre, and water channels leading in four directions. There were also palace buildings constructed along the eastern wall of the garden, possibly with windows overlooking the street. On this eastern side, immediately outside the wall

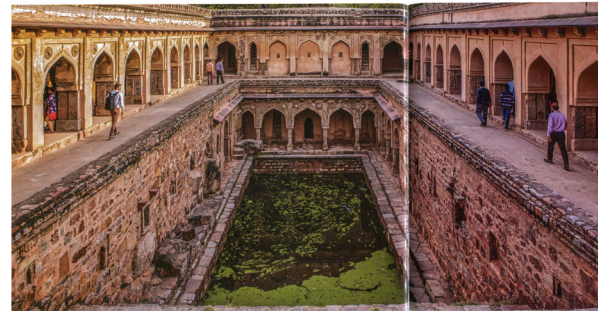


The authors refer to plants and trees, fruiting and flowering more anecdotally than comprehensively, yet paint a picture of their diversity, significance, and connections to the past. Indian and common names of trees are used interchangeably, for familiarity no doubt. A description of the significant species of trees, their associative use, and the wildlife that they house animates the spaces and imbues the narrative with seasonality and life. Reflections on the hierarchy and scale of the plantation would have been welcome too.

For those who know the city, it connects the familiar to an illustrious past with interesting facts through a captivating narrative. It lays out the historical context vividly, particularly of the old buildings, tombs, and other structures, and contextualizes the wider settlement patterns of Delhi's cities vividly through this lens. The photographs showcase the painstaking detailing of many of the buildings and ruins. The easy flow from past to present description, narrative to editorial voice is most engaging but creates a break of sequential understanding between the last historically documented spatial arrangement to the current state.

For those unfamiliar with the city, sans maps, layout plans, sections, sketches, or archival photos, the spatial arrangement of the parks, the experience, and the sense of discovery is a little hard to follow. Many of the descriptions are left without an accompanying visual or photograph. Those of the parks and landscapes, however, depict activities, general ambiance, and seasonal flowering that do not capture the uniqueness of each of these stellar spaces nor its specimen plantation or eminence in the city's imagination.

For the landscape architect, a greater understanding of the siting of gardens, their topography, and the significant natural context of the river, Ridge, and its watersheds, its visual impact, and visitor experience, both historically and in its current avatar would have been enlightening. It would have been interesting to also correlate the parallel landscape concepts and practice across the world at the same time, particularly in similar landscapes of burial, enclosed gardens, and defensive walled gardens. And also, address considerations of legibility, clarity of movement, accessibility and safety, ecological importance, or lack thereof, and materiality.



harised here, but had also lived here for many years. As a result a small settlement had grown in the vicinity of Maulana Jinnah's mosque, the residences of those who presumably had come here attracted by the saint's presence.

This was the beginning of constructions here that went beyond tomb complexes. Mughal period residential buildings can be seen in the western part of the park. Particularly by the 18th century rich people from the capital city, Shahjahanabad, began to come to Mehrauli for short breaks. To make their stay in this walled enclosure, they laid out gardens, the remains of some of which are still to be found. One of the earliest of these actually lies just outside the park, adjoining its south-western boundary. Known as Jinnah, it is an enclosed formal garden, originally laid out around the year 1700 by a nobleman, Chantahidin Khan Feroz Jung. The name Jinnah, or 'walled-in' due to a channel of water that came from the nearby reservoir of Hazrat e Shamsi, and fell in a cascade into the garden, down its western wall.

This garden became a favourite with the later Mughal emperors, who used it when they came to Mehrauli each year in the monsoon. They would camp here for several days, and the royal ladies would enjoy the

*Footnote:* In Delhi, many well-tended parks display the distinctive arched construction of the line.

*Footnote:* The Tomb of Shah Jinnah, Khan-e-Mehrauli



The Mughal dynasty followed the Lodis as the rulers of North India. The second Mughal emperor, Humayun, founded a new city called Dinpanah somewhat to the north-west of High-Jack in a place we now call Purana Qila. Humayun's son Akbar also ruled from there for some years before shifting his capital to Agra. It seems that the Mughals passed through this garden on their way from their capital, when going southwards. This is suggested by the bridge known as Adhpoli, which was built over the stream in Akbar's time, and which still stands. Close to it a formal garden was described as well with a small gateway and a wavy modern attached mosque, both of which still stand. The garden now is a modern one, planted with roses.

With the decline of the Mughal empire in the 18th century, this garden fell into a state of neglect. The wider area, with the Nizam and Lodi tombs, came to be occupied by an agricultural population, forming the village of Khairpur. They not only built their huts here, but began to live in the existing tombs and other buildings. The beautiful Bada Gumbad mosque was used as a cow shed. The part of the garden to the north, where the present day Jor Bagh colony now stands, continued to be a garden for long, and in the 18th and early 19th century was in the possession of the family of Shah Waliullah, a prominent Islamic theologian of Delhi.

The next major change to the place came in the 19th century, when New Delhi, the new capital, began to be built. The village of Khairpur was acquired and the villagers were evacuated. Their huts were removed and the historic buildings were conserved by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). It was decided that this area, with its picturesque and historic monuments, would be landscaped into a garden. This was the beginning of the garden zone or park as we know it today, though in the 1930s, when this work was completed, the garden was named Lady Willington Park, after the wife of the then Viceroy of India, Lord Willington. After Independence the park was renamed Lodi Gardens. It has also seen successive landscaping interventions in succeeding decades, with the addition of several new features.

As 90 years and with a long history as a green space, Lodi Gardens is one of the best gardens in Delhi to see a wide variety of plant and tree species (according to some estimates, around one hundred and thirty tree species, and a little over a hundred species of shrubs). These include everything from exotics like silver oak, red bottle brush, eucalyptus, southern magnolia, Caribbean trumpet tree, African mango tree and Madagascan rosewood, to indigenous trees like the ashok, maharaj, neem, mango, jamun, palash, and so on. Tree-viewing across Lodi Gardens can be deeply satisfying simply because there

From top: Prasad and children watching the game near the Adhpoli (right) gate bridge.  
Pg 90-91: Women observing in Lodi Gardens as family picnic time.

One quibble with the book is the lack of acknowledgment of landscape architects engaged in these gardens, even though architects and sculptors have been.

The book overall is a delightful and engaging read, a welcome addition to the chronicles of Delhi, and especially of its significant parks and gardens. Reading between the lines, even where it feels incomplete makes one think, raising as many questions as it answers. How did the time change the spatial organization? How did historic planting palettes and concepts evolve? The state of such gardens where it leaves the reader represents a generic horticulture department approach to the plantation that represents a stagnation of thinking of landscape design, minimizing the spatial emphasis and suggesting a mundane interchangeableness of spaces, the loss of the very aspects that gave gardens its value, its vocabulary, and uniqueness. Is it then as much a call to rethink historic gardens?

Encouragingly though, this book is a meaningful start to documenting and initiating more inquiry and hopefully continuing discourse into the natural and cultural landscapes of the city. It highlights so much more that needs more investigation and scholarship- how the cities of Delhi developed around or how these spaces developed independently as gardens? The politics of gardens and parks and how they evolved from that of privilege to that of right to open space; the role of whim and desire, that of climate and succor, that of play and also solitude; their relevance in the politics of the time and their thematic appropriateness; their rootedness in a timelessness from the past, and continuum of needs of the day; Ideation on ecologically appropriate interventions to mitigate climate action and the vital role these gardens play in the life and place-making of the city are points of ponder.

A call to authors, perhaps for landscape architects, to add to the scholarship?

