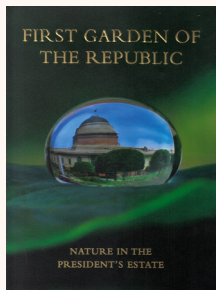


Book review



*First garden of the Republic:
Nature in the President's estate*

A. Baviskar (ed.) 2016

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This lavishly illustrated coffee-table book presents a brief horticultural- and natural history of the grounds of the President of India's official residence, Rashtrapati Bhavan, which sprawls on a 330 acre estate, atop Raisina Hills in Delhi. It is purportedly the largest residence of a head of state anywhere in the world. The built-up areas cover approximately 15 acres; the formal gardens another 15 acres; and the remaining grounds comprise a part of the semi-wilderness area known as the Delhi Ridge, and sundry other natural, or semi-natural, or cultivated open areas.

Reading its history one realises that the estate has suffered the same fate as the forests of the country. How does one grow, or regrow a forest? The dilemma could be solved if the quiddity of the land were studied. But that was not the case. Even 16 years after re-forestation work of the Ridge began, it bore no fruit: all that the protagonists succeeded in doing was plant 'kikar', which was alien, and could not be controlled, and hence became a rampant coloniser of the landscape (pp. 92–93). Just what's happened, by and large, in Indian forests. Re-forestation is a fool's dream. Only monoculture plantations are possible along with some educated inter-cropping—all at an enormous cost. The only way to achieve the former is by providing complete protection to the denuded land, from all and every kind of usage, or exploitation. Natural regeneration is indeed possible, 'from ancient roosts long established in the soil' (pp. 15, 92).

Chapter one (Amita Baviskar) is an overview of the estate, touching upon the planning of its layout, its landscaping, a brief history of the choices of trees foresters had, the mix of cultivated areas, and the wilderness of the Ridge. It is about the helpless foisting of the tenacious and pernicious 'vilaiti kikar' *Proposis juliflora* to afforest the Ridge; and of the various pet projects of the erstwhile Presidents of India, e.g., President Kalam's 'Spiritual Garden.' That the 'natural' Ridge on the estate is as much a worked area as the Mughal Gardens is invisible and unknown to most people.

Chapter two (Amita Baviskar) deals with the horticultural aspects of the gardens, the lives of the gardeners, and their daily sweat for the maintenance of the various arboretums: the splendid, showpiece Mughal Garden, the Long Garden, and the Circular Garden.

Chapter three, by that botanising gentleman, Pradip Kishen, assesses the various schemes of tree-plantings on the estate. The which, the why, the what, the where, and the when of all the 14 species that were chosen for avenues and groves. Kishen tries to unravel the mysteries behind the choices of trees, foresters made, for this area. There is a beautiful section on the estate's relict forest, and a photo essay on the notable trees growing here. Kishen's angst bursts through in places, '...the axe has always fallen on a patch of "forest". This is because the forest is not valued in itself, is regarded as dispensable, and this has to do with the fact that the character of the forest has changed for the worse...' Yet his hope for the estate shines through when he

reassures, 'we have a wonderful opportunity today to undo some of these mistakes and create a new plan that is every bit as grand as the conception Lutyens brought to the building.'

Chapter four (Baviskar) is dedicated to the life of the gardeners. We learn that recruiting new permanent staff may be the easier task, rather than training them, for the land's quiddity seeps into the person at its own pace, like the growth of trees, and cannot be hurried under any circumstances; that mechanisation has reduced manual, back-breaking, bloodying-palm labour; and about the pride of the gardeners when they are applauded by the public that streams in annually to admire the Mughal Garden.

In chapter five, Ghazala Shahbuddin introduces the reader to the butterflies, dragonflies, insects, moths, spiders, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals of the estate. Brief topical insights, into important issues like habitat fragmentation, pollinators that are in danger, camouflage and mimicry, and keystone species of Delhi's flora punctuate this essay. This format, followed throughout the book, does not restrict itself to species descriptions, like a field guide would, but engages the reader with relevant issues, presenting a comprehensive picture of the environment.

Chapter six is on the estate's birdlife wherein Shahbuddin and Baviskar lead the reader on a walk through the various human-made and natural habitats—the gardens, the golf course and lawns, the forecourt and buildings, the Dalikhana and surrounds, and the jungle and wooded areas—which overlap into myriads of edge-habitats, all harbouring a rich avian diversity of at least 121 species. The authors touch upon various pertinent aspects of birdlife: birds and seeds, hunters and scavengers, passers-by (migrants), insectivores, etc. This is a fascinating essay for birders, for it largely deals with the ecology of birds in this restricted, multi-habitat urban-rural landscape.

The natural world comes together in the fascinating seventh chapter, where Shahbuddin takes the reader through the annual cycle of seasons, and how life transforms, or deals with, the trials and tribulations that seasonality catalyzes. The resulting narrative of the ecology of the place is gripping and clearly the sign of long, and careful study.

Five appendices at the end comprise lists of plants, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, and insects.

Urban ecology is a new concept in India, with very few long-term studies having been published—if at all. Even the scientific documentation of urban natural history is in a nascent stage. In this relatively barren landscape, this work stands out like a beacon, a hotspot. It brings together a robust mix of social- and natural history, ecological issues, species' biology, and photographs of such high quality that once drawn into its pages, a reader will emerge after several hours of joyous immersion, enriched in knowledge, excited about the dynamic natural history surrounding her, and enthused, more than ever, to explore.

I dream of a day in the future when the First Citizen of India is also her First Citizen Scientist. This work demands a person who engages with Her estate not just on a diplomatic level, but also on a more earthly one; who records nature's changing face, the dramas of her arrivals and departures, and enters such observations into the grid of information knitting the country together; who squats amongst the gardeners and worms the soil through Her fingers, airing it, allowing some dirt to pack into Her nails. I dream of Her leading a nature trail through the property, as familiar with nature, as politics. At least part of the way to such an eventuality is cleared, the documentation done; only the protagonist is awaited. What a day that will be when it finally arrives! 🌱

— Aasheesh Pittie

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