



BY RANJIT SABIKHI

Harnessing India's geology to honor a slain leader □ Sandwiched between monuments to Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru lies Shakti Sthal—literally, “Abode of Energy”—a new memorial to Indira Gandhi forged from rock, water, earth and trees. Especially rock. The 75-acre memorial contains nearly 1,000 rocks weighing from six to 30 tons, culled from

ravines and mountaintops throughout India. They are placed like jewels in a naturalistic setting. The cynosure of this geological park is a 50-ton chunk of iron ore, the so-called Sentinel Rock, marking the spot where Mrs. Gandhi was cremated. “The rock symbolizes her courage, fortitude and strength of purpose,” says landscape architect Ravindra Bhan of New Delhi.

Once a flat, featureless floodplain, the site between a New Delhi highway and the Yamuna River has been transformed into gently rolling topography hospitable to birds and aquatic life. Bhan, who has practiced in London, the United States and Finland, and who won an Aga Khan Award for the Mogul Sheraton Hotel project in India in 1980, attempted to evoke the interplay of meadows, woods and water found in Kashmir, the land of Indira Gandhi's ancestors. He developed the design in close accordance with Mrs. Gandhi's tastes, which he gauged

from conversations with her friends and relatives.

The \$1.8-million project, undertaken by the Central Public Works Division of Delhi, required moving vast quantities of earth to create undulating mounds, secluding the monument from traffic noise. The entrance will eventually be dominated by a large banyan tree (*Ficus mysorensis*) forming a natural gateway. From here a winding path, paved in granite from Rajasthan, leads past the mounds to a central enclosed space. Another path paved with wood blocks made from irul trees (*Xylia xylocarpa*) leads to the Sentinel Rock—an upright slab of banded hematite jasper, 20 feet high. By felicity, this natural block of iron ore resembles an upright hand, the symbol of Mrs. Gandhi's political party.

The search for the perfect rock took Bhan from the town of Ladakh in Kashmir to the Lakshadweep Islands. He found it in Bhillai, in the state of Orissa. “When we visited the site, we



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saw four or five specimens," he said. "We finally found this rock, which was lying in a ditch—probably lying there for millions of years. And we liked it. The texture, color and form were just right. There was no need for blasting. This was ideal, as the rock would look natural and not have jagged edges. It was only later that we noticed its symbolism, the white streaks, the red streaks symbolizing sacrifice, and that it was shaped just like the Congress hand."

The quest led Bhan to discover and collect natural rocks of different shapes, sizes, color and texture. "These rocks were to represent the geological crust of India," Bhan says. "Installing them was not easy. We had to use cranes and 15 people working with crowbars and pulleys." The rocks will form a type of geological museum, ranging from fossilized trees millions of years old to the comparatively younger rocks of the Himalayas. They have been set in chronological order among lawns, shrubs, trees and flowers.

Well known for his ecological projects, Bhan has paid strict attention to problems of drainage on this low-lying and flood-prone site. Water flow is funneled into a man-made lake, also

studded with rocks, created in a second enclosed space beyond the monument. A strip along the lake's edge will soon be planted with cassia trees, magnolia-like shrubs and wildflowers. Already, snake birds are nesting on the rocks while cattle egrets, herons and kingfishers are commonly seen overhead.

The few buildings on the site, such as souvenir shops and rest rooms, have been integrated into the landscape and are hardly noticeable. The memorial park has already become a popular space for morning and evening walks for residents from the adjoining walled city of Old Delhi. When compared with the formal order of Raighat and the dense forest of Shantivama flanking it on either side, Shakti Sthal provides an attractive natural setting. "As Indira Gandhi loved nature," says Bhan, "this is an appropriate and fitting tribute to her memory." ■

*Ranjit Sabikhi is an architect in New Delhi. He has been a visiting critic at Harvard University and Washington University in St. Louis.*