

PERSONALITY

Ravindra Bhan

Landscape Architect

Peer in the profession and pioneer of landscape development in India, **Prof. Ravindra Bhan** talks to *Landscape Architect Savita Punde* about his experiences and expertise in the field.

Q. What made you become a Landscape Architect ?

Right from the beginning I was very interested in Landscape Architecture. Being born in that type of an environment in Kashmir where you have springs, mountains & greenery all around, I was inspired by the surroundings. I also had a very keen interest in gardening, right from early childhood. Finally when I joined Architecture, the person who was responsible was our Head of Department in the School of Planning & Architecture, Mrs. Elizabeth Ghuman. I think it is because of her encouragement that I got interested in Landscape Architecture.

Q. Can you tell us something about your professional days abroad. How many years did you spend there ?

I have spent considerable time abroad, almost eighteen years. I was in London for about seven years, in Finland for about a year and a half, then about seven to eight years in the U.S.A. I did my graduation in Landscape Architecture in the U.S. at Pennsylvania. After graduation I worked for Mr. Ian Mcharg who is considered to be the father of Landscape Architecture in the United States. I was also teaching at the University of Pennsylvania.

Q. Why did you come back to India & how did you decide to settle down here after so many years abroad ?

Well, I was actually more or less settled in the U.S., when the Ford Foundation approached me to come to India for a limited period to establish the Department of Landscape Architecture here. As I did want to come back, I thought that this was a good opportunity. So I came to India for a period of three years. Though I was with the Ford Foundation, I had to spend a lot of time at the School of Planning and Architecture. I then got an extension with the school. In the meantime I got married and then we decided to settle down here.

Q. So you were responsible for setting up the Landscape Department at the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi ?

Yes. We got the faculty together, formulated the courses, etc. The whole orientation of the course was changed from primary design to more comprehensive understanding of landscape, where ecology played a major role. We had various specialists teaching the natural sciences. At one time we had as many as 25 visiting faculty members in the department, like soil science, geology & other natural processes.

Q. Is your practice in India different from what it was in the U.S.?

Well, yes, in the sense that the awareness there was much more. The trade is more established. There are contractors &

"It is always a learning process. We are still developing details which keep pace with materials and skills"

equipment. Contractors who can read your drawings. In India we had to start right from scratch. Several times your technical drawings like grading etc. are not really understood, and it seems a waste of time to make elaborate drawings. So it is very different. What you can achieve there in terms of design and quality is very difficult to achieve here. Its not that the workmanship is any lesser here, but it is just a question of getting proper workers who understand drawings.

Q. Which year did you start your practice here?

It was in 1974, when I was still with the School of Planning and Architecture.

Q. Is there any significant change in your work in the last 20 years?

There is a change in the sense that every project is an improvement on the previous one. It is always a learning process. We are still developing details which keep pace with materials and skills.

Q. There have been major shifts in Architecture-for example the modern movement, the post modern movement etc. Is there a similar change in landscape architecture as well?

Yes, there is a reflection of all these movements in landscape architecture. But somehow in my work, I won't say I subscribe to these things; may be I am old fashioned. I don't think we can really change nature. There are certain fundamental things that have to be respected. So we can't really make a drastic change in landscape architecture. There can be formal or informal in nature, you may not have the paving straight, you may tilt it at an angle, you may have different patterns, yet there are certain fundamental things which basically remain the same.

Q. How does landscape development differ from place to place and client to client?

Basically the landscape belongs to a place; to a region. Every region has its own plant material, and if you are working in a particular region you have to use the plant material best suited for that region. That really gives it its own character. You cannot go in a desert & build a lush landscape into it. Isn't a desert itself beautiful? Why not play with that environment and weave it into the design itself. Thus the design will really differ from place to place. Every client also has his own priority and I think it is important, because you are after all building for the client. Well, if the client wants water, he should get it. Then it really depends on you how do you really convince him or her. They may want a waterfall, which may be totally out of place but its up to you to convince the client and give it in a much more sympathetic way. I don't have any difficulty with my clients. What is important is that the landscape, architecture and the interior really merges together. Unfortunately what happens here is that the landscape architect does not get involved in the project right from the beginning with an architect. He is called at later stage when every thing is set. So the role of a landscape architect is really reduced to sort of adding feathers in old ladies hats, and embellishments. So he is only infilling the

spaces, and the integration of space does not really start at all. You have to really create a space to receive landscape. You can't create a space if the format is given to you.

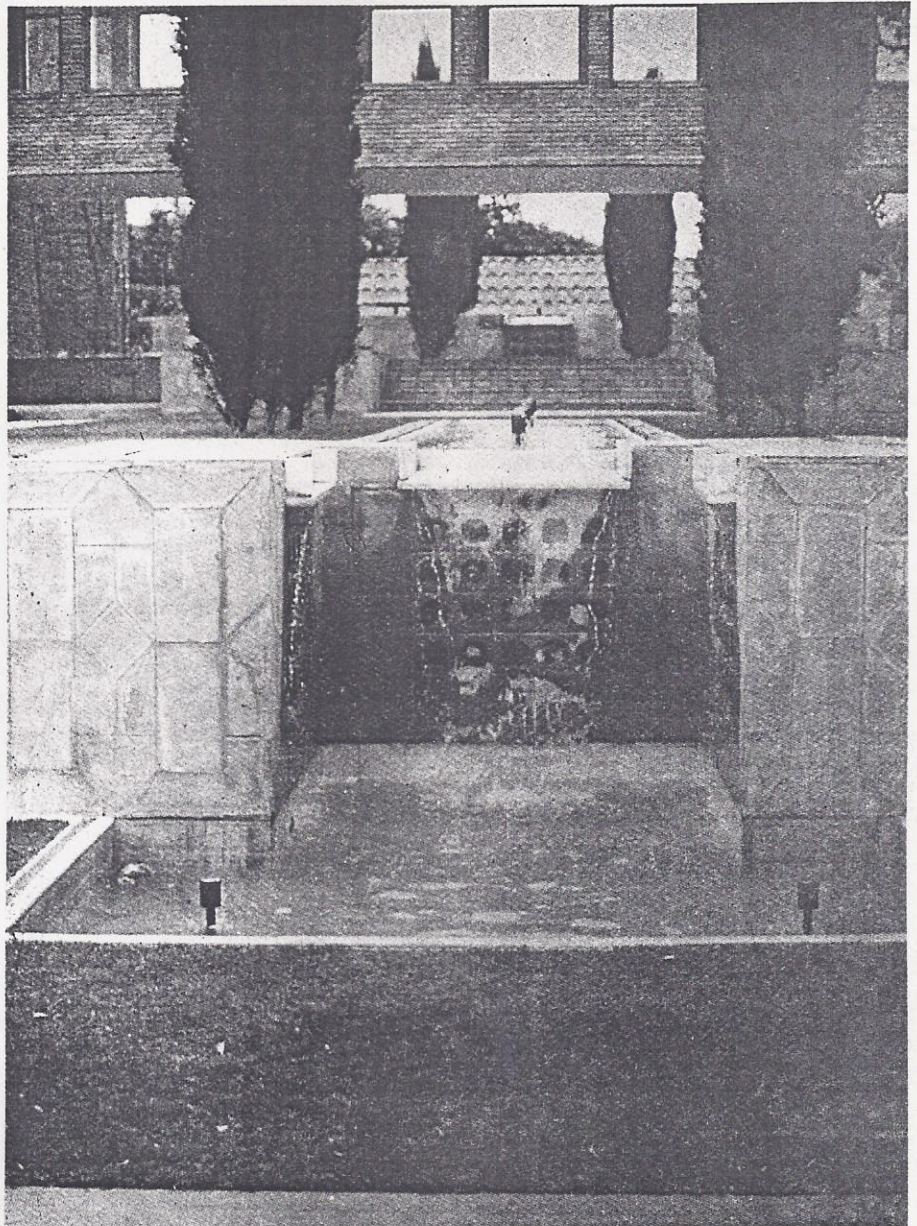
Q. So when should the role of the Landscape Architect start?

It should be right at the beginning, when the client gives the first brief to the Architect. The Architect and the landscape architect should work together on the siting of the building. The siting of the building is very important, the way the building sits on the ground, its orientation, how the edges meet the ground; where the window sills should come, what you view from the windows. You may do a lot of things in the landscape but is it really visible from the building?

Q. About the role of Built elements in Landscape Architecture with a special reference to "Mughal Sheraton". With so much structurization what is your experience in the quality of maintenance of built elements and especially the water features?

The planters in Mughal Sheraton are really an integral part of the whole building. The building is sunk in the ground by one floor. Thus the relationship with the ground is very different. The transition could have been bridged in different ways. It could be done by tapering the ground. To bridge a height of seven feet you would need 28 feet. Therefore we thought that the best way would be to do it with a series of planters which would step down. These planters also gave us the opportunity to route services, that is the pipes from roof tops, sanitary pipes, electrical fittings, manholes, gully traps, fountain pipes etc. As a result you don't see any manholes outside. Also, this built-in system gave us

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Waterfall in terraced garden, Mughal Sheraton Hotel, Agra

the flexibility of concealing all the pipes, yet keeping them approachable. The planters also helped us create a three level landscape, relating intimately to different parts of the buildings. The Courtyards are sunken down by 2 mtrs, so that from the rooms you don't need to draw the curtains. You can see the courtyard, but people from the courtyard cannot see you. So there is a hierarchy in the system. The maintenance in the courtyard is virtually nil. The fountains are all gravity fountains and the water used is all chlorinated to avoid algae formation and also to keep it clean. There are no fine fountains used as they get clogged & need high maintenance. The grass area is also kept to a minimum. Most of the planting is of permanent ground covers, shrubs, trees which do not need much maintenance. All rainwater from the courtyards, roof tops etc. is collected in a drain & diverted to a small pond wherefrom

it is recirculated into the garden. The water from the toilets etc. is also recycled & used for irrigation.

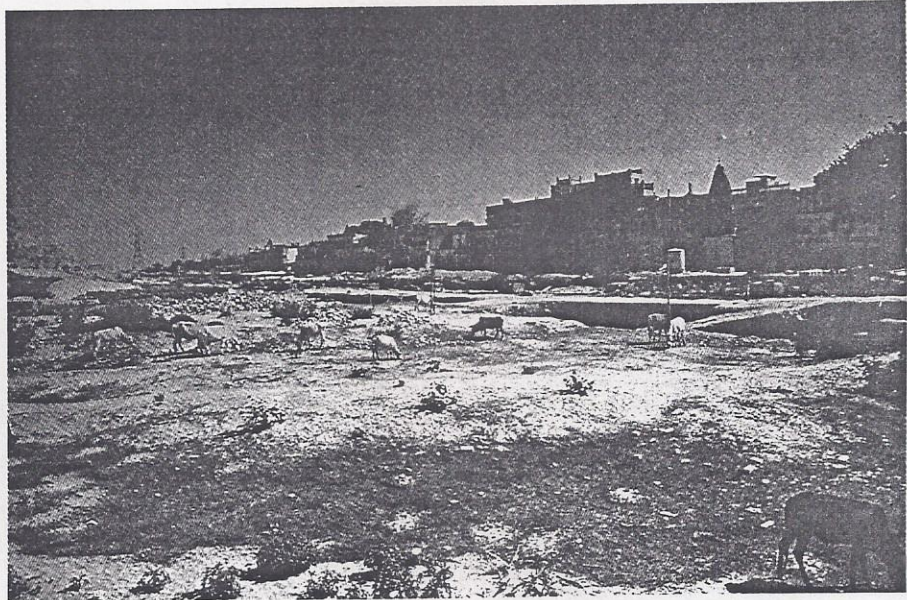
Q. What is the relevance of an environmental approach when dealing with building projects?

It is very relevant especially in terms of siting the building, orientation of the openings, shading with trees, etc. With simple and inexpensive devices like trellises you can exclude the sun in summer, and get it in winters.

You can effectively control the microclimate by the use of water. So there are a lot of things a landscape architect can do in terms of making the environment comfortable, especially if he works hand-in-hand with the Architect right from the initial stages.

Q. How do you ensure the continuity of landscape design vis a vis the plant material after the exit of the consultant from the project? If change is needed how do you bring it in, especially with reference to historical gardens in India, France, England and the effort to stick faithfully to the original schemes in these countries?

It is difficult to control the continuity of plant material and it is very sad that once the plant material changes, the character of the landscape really changes; unless the people for whom you have designed are perceptive enough to understand. A layman thinks that whether a plant is six inches tall or two feet tall it is really the same thing. Whereas actually, the right scale is very important. Controlling the planting is one area where we have not really been very successful, especially in small projects where maintenance is important. It doesn't matter in very large projects where the emphasis is on trees, and not on small shrubs and ground cover. Where historical gardens are concerned if you want to preserve your heritage, no matter what style it is or if change is needed or not, you should be true to the original. For example in Fatehpur Sikri the large courtyards are stone paved, and though shade may be desirable, you cannot really plant trees there without altering the very nature, the



Ayodhya Ghats - the existing site : then

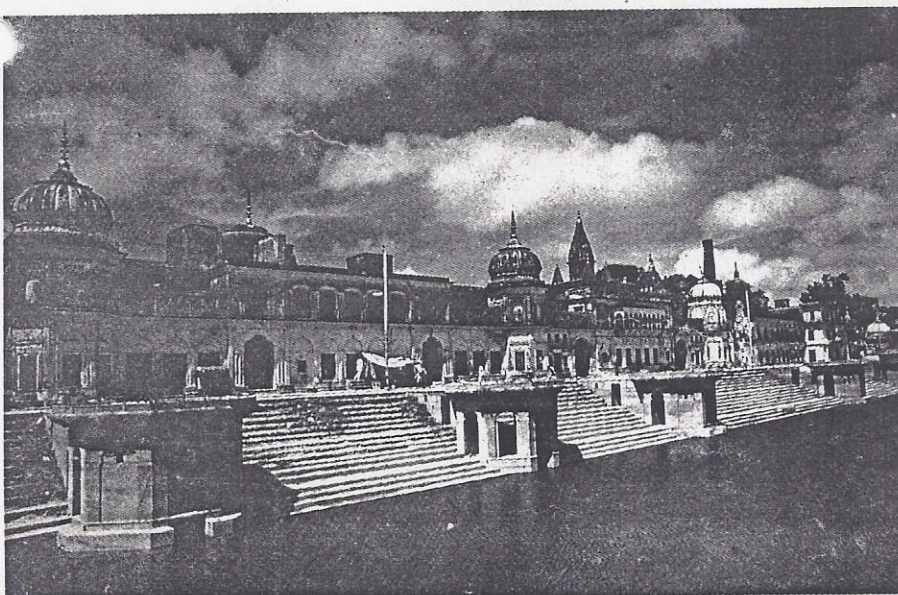
very essence of the courtyard. So I don't really suggest that you should modernise and change the character. You can imagine what would happen if in the Taj Mahal you were to replace the avenues of cypress with peepul trees to shade the walkways!

Q. What is the importance of urban and rural green spaces and what is the involvement of the Landscape Architect in their design?

We don't have very large scale urban green spaces in India in proportion to the population, or even if we have them, they have not been fully exploited. For example, the Buddha Jayanti park or the Ridge in Delhi. The idea of going to an open space is that you don't want to see crowds. You don't want to go to a 'Mela'. You want to be secluded in trees & nature. You go to Buddha Jayanti garden on a Sunday and it is full of people. We have tremendous potential to develop these large open places. Where do we have a place like Central Park in New York? In our country the Landscape Architect virtually does not play any role in the design of rural open spaces. The profession of Landscape Architecture does not extend to the regional planning process in India at all - It does not happen due to a lack of awareness and our government machinery which does not understand the need. Of course now after a lot of struggle there are Landscape Architects in the C.P.W.D., D.D.A., Archeological departments. But unfortunately these people are not given their due; they are always under horticulturists.

Q. So you think where rural landscape is concerned it should start at the Govt. Level?

Yes, Yes it should start from there.



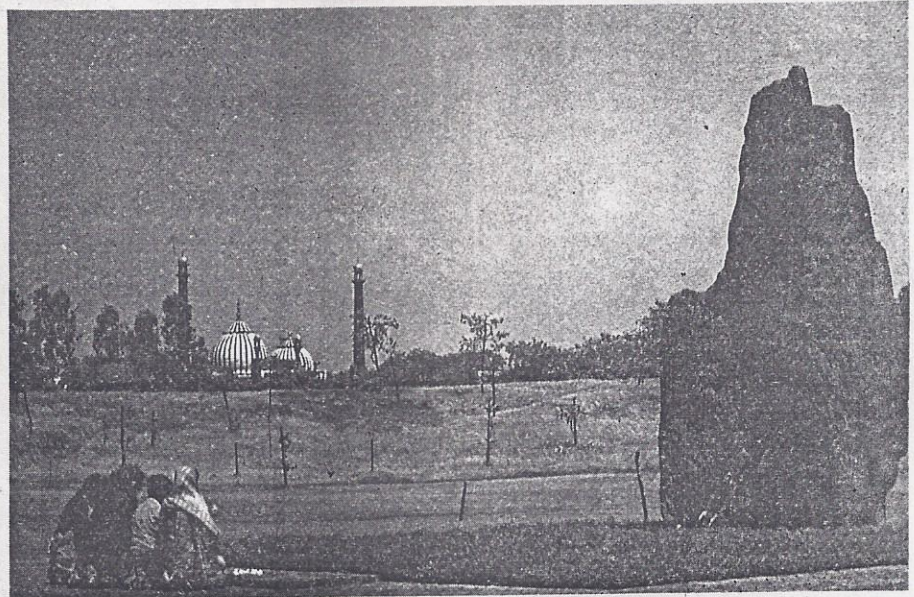
Ayodhya Ghats - now

Q. What has been your most memorable contribution to the design of Urban Green spaces ?

One project that I would like to mention is the Indira Gandhi Memorial; where I was fortunate to have the patronage of the Late P.M. Shri. Rajiv Gandhi. We had the idea that the Samadhi should not be just a sacred space. It should really be open to the public at large. We had thus started working on the entire belt of Shantivan, Raj Ghat, Shakti Sthal etc. which was to be internally combined without any demarcation, whereas earlier they were separate compartments. So with one ticket you could visit all the samadhis.

The Indira Gandhi Samadhi is essentially different in design as it has an educational tilt. It is the world's first geological museum. There are about a thousand rocks which represent each and every state of India and most of them are labelled. I wanted to drastically cut down on the lawn areas to minimize maintenance. I had also recommended a sprinkler system which would be keyed to the Lake, which they did not do initially but have done it now, though it is not yet a fool proof system.

Another project which we initiated with the help of HUDCO was the HUDCO Place at Andrews Gunj in Delhi. The C.P.W.D. was putting up multi-storeyed housing, about eight storeys high. This scheme was shown to me by Mr. S.K. Sharma of HUDCO. In the master plan there was a compulsory green of eighteen acres. While the total site was over 30 acres, they had eaten up these eighteen acres also with roads and other infrastructure. I felt after looking at the scheme that it would be possible to put up four storeyed structures only and leave the entire eighteen acres green belt in the park untouched. We also suggested that we should invite eight to nine architects, control the urban design and site development landscape, and demonstrate that it is possible with the norms of the C.P.W.D. to get a coherent scheme. Mr. S.K. Sharma liked the idea and asked us to work out a cost analysis and see if we could accommodate all the units. We did a scheme with only one multi-storeyed



Shakti Sthal - Indira Gandhi Samadhi at Delhi

block to accommodate the players and keep the rest of the housing in four storeyed blocks, leaving the eighteen acres untouched. We took the C.P.W.D. norms for costing and would you believe what the saving in cost was? It was forty-two percent which worked out to twenty crores. Everybody was flabbergasted. They accepted our scheme. Mr. Jasbir Sawhney and myself developed the urban design and there are six architects working there. We have put the whole thing together as a package, and yet maintained the

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identity of each architect. When this project is completed it is going to be a real eye opener, that you can build within the C.P.W.D. norms, and not only that, but with major savings.

Q. What is the future of the profession of Landscape Architecture in India ?

I think the future is very bright. There are tremendous possibilities. I don't think

any other country needs landscape Architecture more than what some of our metropolitan areas would need because of our unsympathetic climate, pollution and population and all the environmental degradation in our cities. Unfortunately however, awareness is absent, Government will is not there and the Architects are not very sympathetic to the profession. We do not even have an under-graduate course in Landscape Architecture. Also, our one and a half year post-graduate course is just not enough. There should be a series of short term courses that will give awareness. Whatever I could do, I have done extensively when I was with Ford Foundation. I used to tour India, speak in the school, in Government departments etc. Yet it is not enough, a lot has yet to be done in this direction.

Q. What is your advice to young people who would like to take up this profession ?

I think it is a wonderful and a very rewarding profession. But there is not much money, a lot of hard work and some times it is frustrating. An Architect gets to see his ideas translated into building in two to three years. But, as they say, a Landscape Architect doesn't see his creation in his life time. It needs great dedication.