

Recreating nature

Ella Datta profiles the first geological park in the country aesthetically laid out by the landscape designer Ravinder Bhan

A red-vested bulbul sits puffed-up and contented on a menhir-like stone flanked by a crop of banded gneiss rocks from Wangtu Hills in Himachal Pradesh. Close by yellow-bellied wagtails flirt around a group of quartz steles from Mungher district in Bihar. Interesting formations of limestone from Madhya Pradesh can be seen scattered around the verdant slopes.

This is the geological park, probably the first in the country, that has been created around Shakti Sthal, the samadhi of Mrs Indira Gandhi in New Delhi. Completed towards the end of last year, the park has been designed by Ravinder Bhan, the well-known landscape designer and urban planner. It took three years to complete and cost the exchequer Rs 3 crore. Some 1000 rock formations considered to be the most representative of the geological crust of this country have been quarried and brought to Delhi from every part of the country. In conceptualising the park, Bhan has not only kept the aesthetic considerations in mind but the scientific and educational aspects as well.

The result is a delightful natural setting created out of 70 acres of what was once flat and derelict land and now stretches out through gently rising inclines into interesting layouts of clumps of wild plants and hundreds of indigenous trees. Some are still slim saplings, others are sturdy young trees creating inviting pools of shade.

The rocks have been very cleverly placed, some embedded close to ground level, others jutting up. All the rocks are clearly identified. While retaining their natural shapes and character, they do show signs of the most subtle interventions which heighten the plastic beauty of their forms. Comments Bhan, "I have tried to recreate nature with pathways, vistas, rock formations."

Compared to the post-independence scenario of the '50s and the

'60s when open spaces were created with stodgy, PWD brand of unimaginativeness, the work that Bhan has been doing since the '70s is in many ways a pathfinding one. Ruefully he observes, "There

Architecture in Delhi started a school of landscape architecture at the initiative of Bhan. Over the years, other landscape designers have come into the scene like Hattangady and Bhagwat in



The geological park: keeping the aesthetic, educational and scientific aspects in mind

is not really any awareness of the possibilities of landscaping. The commissions are small and are, generally, few and far between."

AND how right he is. Even today, the concept of landscaping public spaces stops with the planting of a whole lot of exotica or creating a kitschy ambience. At most, a whiff of Anglo-Indiana in the best manner of neat, railway platform gardens is evoked as the height of style, or even better, a bastardised Japanese ambience.

More than 15 years ago, in 1973, the School of Planning and

Bombay. But even so, landscaping remains an obscure terrain.

Even the architects do not recognise the role of landscaping, grumbles Bhan. They think of it as just planting, in other words a horticulturist's job, whereas, it is basically environmental design.

This is true to a certain extent. Many architects acknowledge that landscaping is not given sufficient attention. One is not sure whether it is a lack of awareness or the pressure on space that has led to such a state of affairs. But the confusion with a horticulturist's role creates its own problems. A spokesman of a leading architect-

tural consultancy firm had once recounted how after they had carefully landscaped the Indian Institute of Management in Joka, Calcutta, a voluntary organisation concerned with the greening of Calcutta came around and disturbed the harmony between building and environment with random plantings.

The tragedy of this unconcern about landscaping strikes home all the more when one realises that India has had a long standing tradition in landscape design. In classical literature, one finds ample references to temple gardens, secular pleasure gardens, special environments created in

the ashrams of the sages. Unfortunately, little evidence remains of the ancient Indian concepts of landscape either in the way of texts or archaeological remains, states Bhan. At least some traces of the Islamic styles of landscaping brought in by the great Mughals continue to exist, even if in a highly degraded state. It is only now that mediocrity has become the order of the day.

It is against such a background that works of Bhan and others like him acquire added significance. What it requires, details Bhan, is an understanding of climate, culture, material and function. "Ultimately, there is nothing like a truthful expression," concludes the country's leading landscape designer.