A Fitting Tribute

Shakti Sthal, one of Ravindra Bhan's most ambitious projects, promises to be more than just a tribute to a departed leader.

Covering acres of undulating land, the site is dominated by a massive 10-metre tall, hand-shaped rock, especially selected for its 'strength', forming an appropriate backdrop to the samadhi carpetted with flowers. Rocks, dating back several thousand millenia, sit on the lush lawns and earthen mounds specially sculpted from the once flat earth. A centralized artificial lake has been planned to solve the area's chronic drainage problems, while select trees and shrubs, which would attract the bird life of the area, are to be grown, so that the entire site would be one vast Eden-like expanse, in which the visitor could not only pay homage to a patriot but also feel one with nature.

Ravindra Bhan elucidates.

Several major problems had to be tackled while planning the landscaping of the Shakti Sthal. To begin with, the land was extremely flat, and the noise level very high, as the site is adjacent to the highway, next to the Raj Ghat and Shanti Van.

To resolve these problems, we thought of creating large earthen mounds, so converting this flat area into an undulating landscape of hills and downs. Before one reaches the actual samadhi, two earthen mounds and a belt of trees would effectively block out sound, so that in the samadhi area the noise from the highway is minimal. Once the dense tree belt is fully grown, the noise level will be even lower, as the noise on the highway will have to filter through the dense belt of trees. Besides keeping the noise level down, the trees would also form the barrier needed for security reasons.

The lake

Planning an effective drainage system was an uphill task, as this is a flood-prone area, perennially soggy and damp, with salts having accumulated on the low-lying areas, over the years.

So we designed a lake in the area as a solution to the drainage problem. As the region is low-lying, natural drainage was not possible and artificial drainage would have proved too

expensive. We resolved this by locating the lake at the lowest level and allowed the natural depressed landforms to serve as drains, collecting water from the higher areas. The water would then flow down to the lower areas and eventually find its way to the lake.

Attracting wild life

The lake would also have water plants and fish so as to attract the wild life, and in particular the birds of the region. So we selected certain species of trees and shrubs from various areas which would provide a natural habitat for the birds. In order to plan this, we needed a knowledge of the eating and living habits of the birds – whether they live on insects, berries or a combination of both, or on nectar and flowers, so that the area would be a natural food source. This would attract birds not normally seen in the region.

The Sentinel Rock

We wanted the Shakti Sthal to be more than just another samadhi – something unique and unusual. So we thought of the idea of having an imposing rock symbolising the strength and power of Mrs. Gandhi's personality. At first we felt a huge, natural crystal, seated on a mound, would be most suitable. This crystal would act as a mirror reflecting the moods of the seasons, the times of the day, the flowers, fruits and trees. But the crystals available in India were not large enough – merely a foot wide. The crystal we visualised would have to be 8 to 10 feet wide and around 10 feet high. We then explored the possibility of importing a crystal of these dimensions from South America, but this proved frightfully expensive. Czechoslovakia offered to cast, free of cost, an artificial crystal of that size, for us. But the idea was mooted out by the Prime Minister who wanted something natural.

So the search for the right rock began. We wanted a rock that would have a certain character. After visiting various sites, we were told that a rock fitting our specifications had been found at Bhillai, Orissa. So then we visited the site and saw 4 or 5 specimens. We finally found this rock which was lying in a ditch – probably lying there for millions of years. And we liked it! The texture, colour and form were just right; there was no need for blasting. This was ideal as then 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 symbolising sacrifice, and that it was shaped just like the Congress (I) hand!

At first, we thought we would polish it to give it a neater finish. But then we decided to leave it looking natural. Named the 'Sentinel Rock', this 10 metre tall, 50 tonne, hand-shaped rock – banded hematite jasper – forms an effective backdrop to the samadhi, represented by a flower bed.

Supporting and erecting it was another major feat. Since the rock was conical and we didn't want it to loose its height, we chopped off the base. We then devised a system by which we made a shallow raft foundation, with a ringbeam around the foundation slab, which was tied

up with steel rings. The whole thing was then grouted with epoxy resin, so that it became a monolith.

Geological rock garden

To make a visit to the Shakti Sthal an educative experience, we have placed rocks, representing the major rock formations, all over the area. We plan to place 500 such rocks ranging from the oldest rock formations to the youngest, in chronological order. The rock garden we plan will be unlike miniature Japanese rock gardens, since here the challenge was to make a large scientifically important rock garden. The large dimensions pose its own problems: where to place the rocks, how to place them and in what setting to place them. Transporting these rocks, which weighed from 6 to 7 tonnes to 15, 20 or 30 tonnes was another problem: some had to be lifted by cranes, others pulled out of ravines, and still others rolled down from mountain tops. These rocks were to represent the geological crust of India; major rock formations of every region would be represented. These specimens were not only to be geologically unique – having scientific value in terms of geological content – but be aesthetically pleasing as well. Rocks from all over the country – right from Ladakh, to the Andamans and Lakshwadeep Islands – have been selected, according to their form, colour, texture and shape, and placed in a geological time-scale.

At present, we have placed about 160 such rocks. As most of these rocks are extremely heavy, installing them was not easy. We had to use cranes and 15 people working with crow bars and pulleys finally set the rocks in place. We later want to intersperse the rocks with trees and plants. Once complete, the Shakti Sthal will be a scientific revelation, especially for the younger generation. As Indira Gandhi loved nature, this would be an appropriate and fitting tribute to her memory. ▭