



TRADITIONAL INDIAN GARDENS

Want to recreate lost old concepts like the garden of meditation and the scented pleasure garden? Read on!

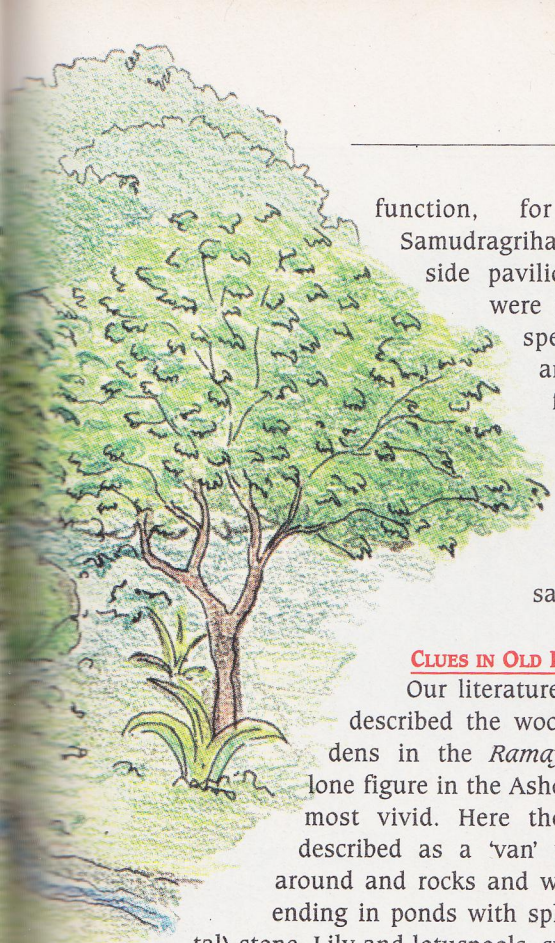
Landscape gardening in India has almost entirely been associated with Mughal and Persian traditions and later with the English style of cottage gardens. Few amongst us have attempted to peek beyond those times to rediscover the gardening practices prevalent in ancient India.

This could partly be due to the complete lack of sur-

living examples of such gardens. But we do know that our culture assumes each living being, whether an animal or a tree, to be possessed of a divinity, thus lending a religious tinge to Nature.

Old texts tell us that traditional Indian gardens were an exercise in precision where each tree, plant and decorative object had a specific place. Our ancestors creatively used elements of nature like land, water and vegetation, moulding their environment to suit their vision of the garden's function.

The gardens were even named after their specific



function, for instance, Samudragrihakam or sea-side pavilion. Or they were named after special plants and trees that formed the focus of that space, like Chandangriha, or bower of sandalwood.

CLUES IN OLD BOOKS

Our literature has vividly described the woods and gardens in the *Ramayana*, Sita's lone figure in the Ashoka Vatika is most vivid. Here the garden is described as a 'van' with a wall around and rocks and water courses ending in ponds with sphatika (crystal) stone. Lily and lotuspools, sweet-scented climbers, flowering, shady trees, songbirds, iridescent fish in clear ponds on which swans swam, and herds of spotted deer roaming freely were the romantically beautiful essentials of such a garden.

In the time of the Buddha (6th century BC), it was believed that wherever his teaching spread, flowers, trees and water courses became prominent in people's lives as it was here that they could seek peace and happiness. Perhaps this has to do with the deeply poetic association with the Buddha's first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath and his parinirvana in a grove of sal trees.

In his drama *Mrichchakatika*, Shudraka describes a grove-garden as the grihodyana – the 'house garden', which featured 'surprising flowers', ascharya kusuma, and many trees, wells, fountains and swings. He lists the lotus and several varieties of the jasmine for flowering shrubs – youthika, shefalika, malati or chameli and mallika.

Kalidasa's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* describes a typical garden as udayan,

upavan or pushpakarandaka with bowers of flowers, climbers covering marble seats (shila pattakam) conveniently placed in nooks and corners. Trees were planted in rows, forming long shady avenues.

Orchards of mango, plantain and coconuts were laid out. The keeper of the garden was usually a woman who also raised birds and pets, especially deer.

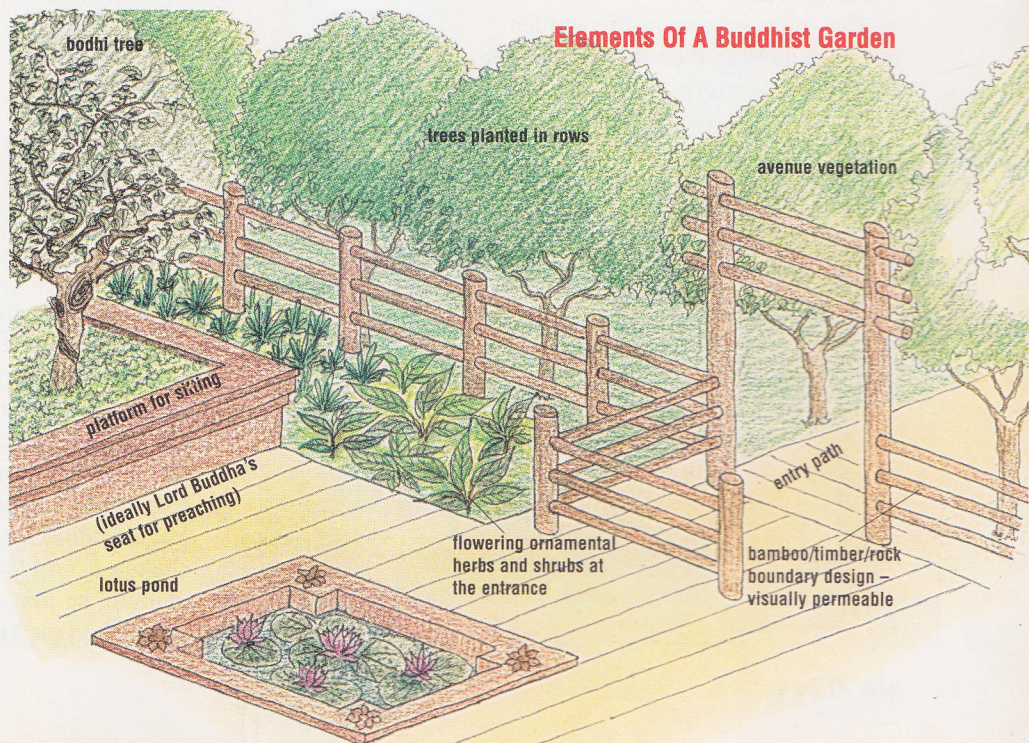
Bana Bhatt (6th to 7th century AD) mentions rockeries, artificial water courses, even revolving peacock fountains! He describes the construction of shower pavilions and ice houses, the krida parvat or pleasure mountain with muktashilpatta sayana (a marble bed), heemagriha, the cool conservatory with sprays of water; khela dreghika, the sporting pool or well; bala giri or artificial mountain with rows of mechanical swans; jalyantra, the fountain (that was easy!); kritimavanani or artificial forests and plenty more, each with a long poetic name! Let's look at some of these notions:

THE GARDEN OF PLEASURE

Remember how Radha and Krishna stand in miniature paintings, locked in an embrace under the golden kadamba tree in a vast undulating garden? Well, here's a modern take on the medieval gardens shown in miniatures!

The central idea of this garden is to retain an element of surprise while trying to squeeze in all the elements of a traditional udayan into your own tiny corner of a garden, expandable of course, for a larger space.

You can see the ota with the swing from inside the house, without knowing what's beyond. Similarly, a



The Pleasure Garden

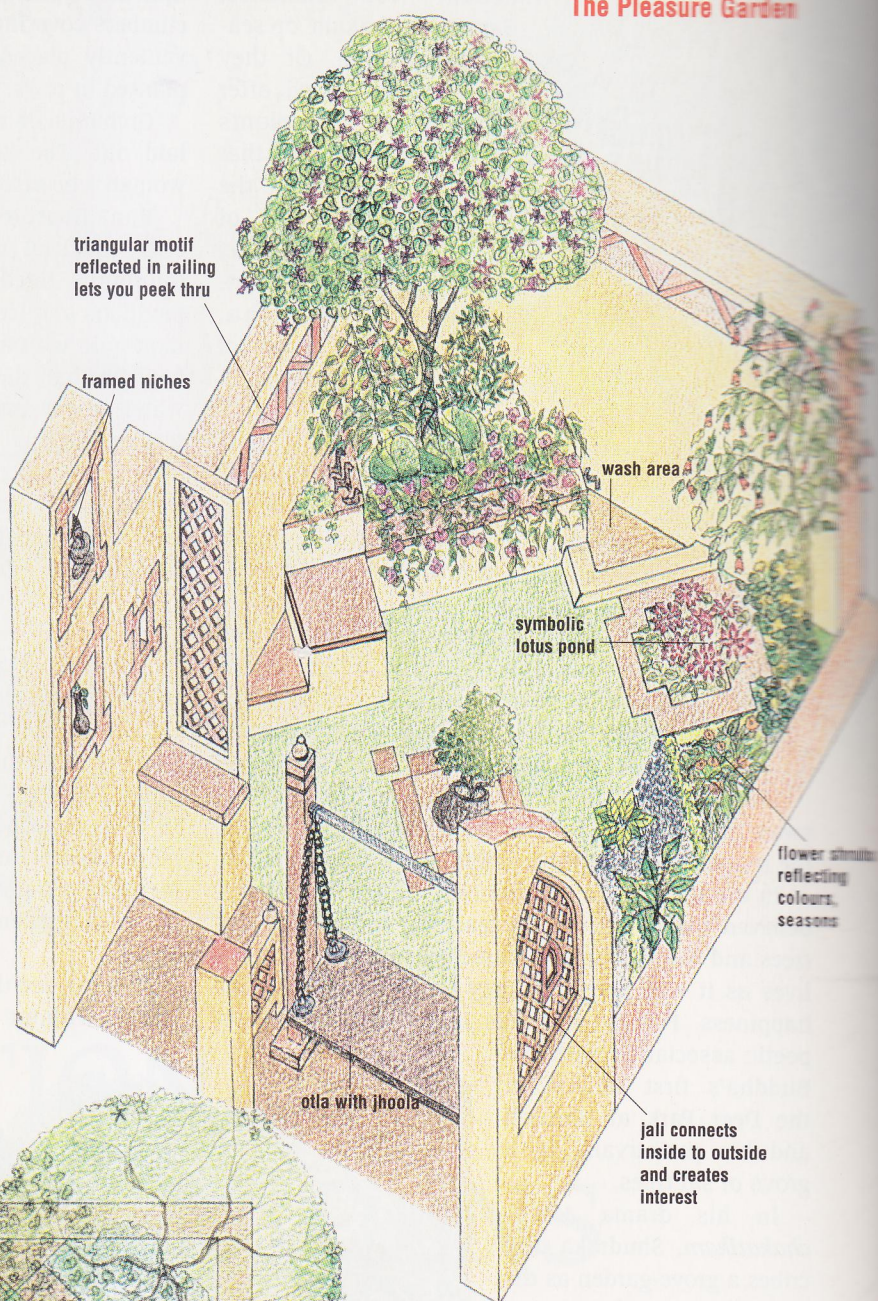
narrow vertical jali on the wall with ornamental niches conceals the actual garden.

A traditional swing or pattadola can adorn one corner. Provide an open functional area in the centre with interesting plants, bits of sculpture or mica-flecked rocks mixed with white Ganga pebbles tucked away in each corner. The whole scheme is held in place by the bindu – a central paved area for festival rangolis or to park your tulsi in.

You can make a symbolic lotus pond in another corner in such a way that it can be seen from the entrance and from the paved area. Indispensable to traditional gardens, the pond may be modified to suit our times: maybe a shrub bed with dense, low-trimmed pink and white oleanders to suggest the lotus. Or a platform paved with lotus motifs.

The other available corner can be designed around a tree. Pink kachnar that flowers during spring is one option. The base of the tree can be covered with dense plants like *Hamelia patens* and jasmine. Sandwich a small water basin between the lotus pond and the tree: it can be used as an outdoor washing area.

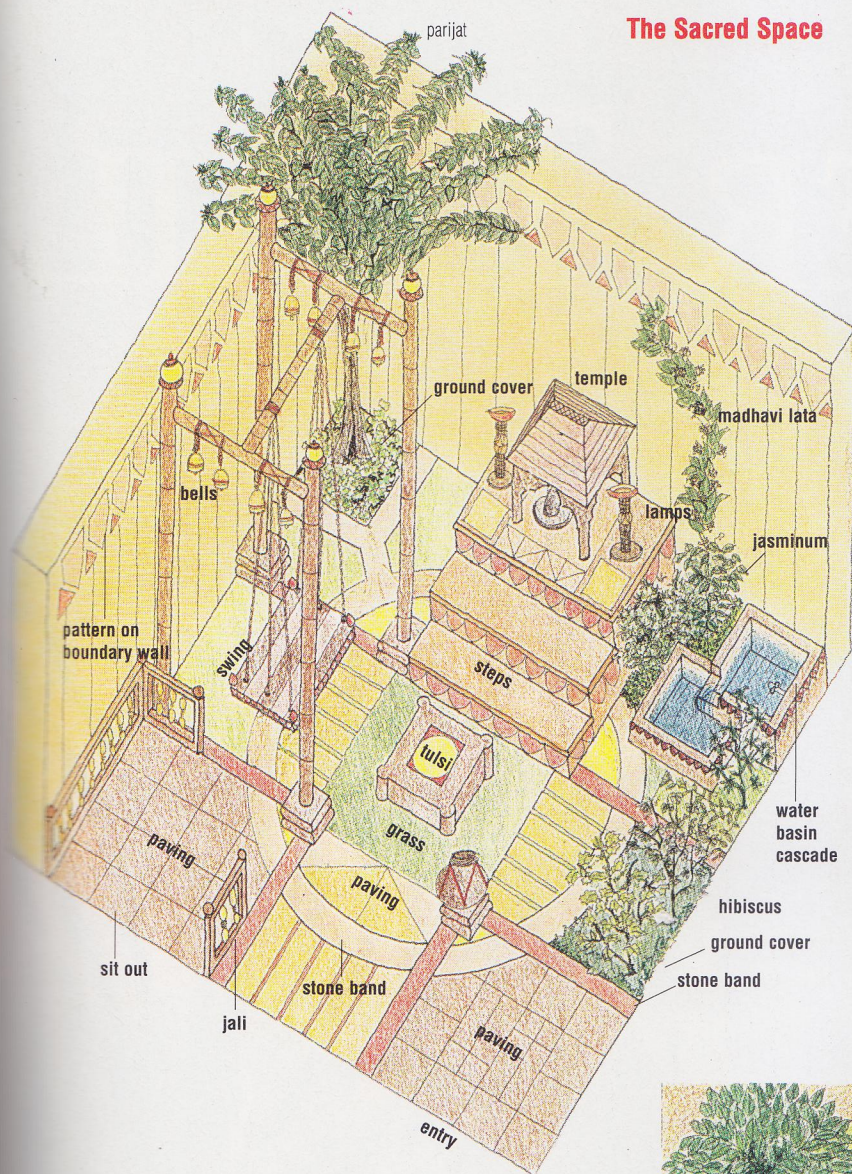
The entire scheme of this garden has been developed on the lines of a traditional pattern. Any rangoli



design that you particularly like may also be incorporated in tiles or painting.

The shrubbery can be an exceedingly pleasant jumble of colourful flowers like hibiscus (which looks fabulous in double, variegated-leaf varieties, and comes in pink, white, yellow and red), marigold, roses, jasmine, champa, tuberose (rajnigandha), and aboli or kanakambaram (the clustered coral flower worn in the hair). Vary the planting so that something is always in bloom round the year. The boundary wall has been pro-

The Sacred Space



cles or triangles and each division is the centre of a particular activity. The traditional tulsi acts as the bindu or the focus.

Due to its perfect shape, a square is traditionally considered most sacred. Tying these nine squares together is a circular band of stone symbolising time. The tulsi platform reflects this concept.

Along the main axis of the garden is a little temple perched atop three steps. Next to it is a parijata or harsingar tree, sacred to all Hindus. Grass the area below the tree for the flowers to carpet each night.

Also use other traditional flowering plants like motia and juhi. You can even make a mini waterfall between the shrubs: just place two water basins one above the other with a concealed connecting pipe and a submersible pump below.

If you have a rectangular space, delineate the square and leave the remaining area paved or planted. If your garden space is small, use one or two of these elements. You can get the nine square pattern by dividing the paved area with nine stones. ❁

The authors are professional landscape architects.

vided with perforations in order to give visual penetrability, and unobstructed mind flow.

A series of creepers like our beloved jasmine, flamboyant red ixora or maddeningly sweet raat ki mani can be trained along the boundary wall to enhance the sensual quality of your pleasure garden.

THE SACRED SPACE

Designed to provide privacy, this enclosed garden also serves as a multi-functional area which can be used by everyone in the family.

This particular design focuses on a religious theme, based on Mansara's nine-square mandala. (The old city of Jaipur is apparently designed this way.)

The available space is divided into squares, cir-

