

Urban Jungles

Wilderness, Parks and Their Publics in Delhi

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In an exploration of the processes through which urban India acquires or loses green spaces, this article examines how parks and urban publics are mutually constituted in Delhi. Social change has led to a re-imagining of cultural meanings and modes of ecological management. Ecological change, in turn, has created new social relations around the use and protection of nature. Analysing Mangarbani, a sacred grove on the edge of the metropolis, and the Delhi Ridge, a “wilderness” domesticated for recreational use, the author argues that the creation and preservation of certain forms of urban nature relate to the shifting sensibilities of elites, especially the section that acts as a self-appointed vanguard of environmental causes. However, other users of public green areas challenge the far-reaching effects of this “bourgeois environmentalism.” The contested meanings and practices around urban natures create new alliances and understandings that may promote ecology and justice.

The Cultural Politics of ‘Socio-nature’

The relationship between nature and society has been a focus of attention in the social sciences and humanities since their inception. In this article, however, I follow only one thread of a complex skein of theories, starting with Raymond Williams’s (1972) seminal essay “Ideas of Nature.” Williams argued that nature was a cultural artefact: not only was the natural world physically transformed by human actions, our very perception of it was shaped by socially produced ideas and sentiments. Referring to this material and imaginative work, Williams (1972: 83) wrote: “We have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to separate each other out.” His classic, *The Country and the City* shows how an urbanising society, with its “historically varied experience” of the Industrial Revolution, came to change its view of rural life and the countryside, a shift reflected in the literature of the period (Williams 1973: 2).

Williams’s work precedes a more recent surge of writing in political ecology that tries to transcend dualistic conceptions of nature–society relations by tracking how nature is socially constructed and culturally produced in the past and present (Cronon 1996; Peet and Watts 1996; Castree and Braun 2001). One strand of this research explores cities, and how their apparently artefactual character is, in fact, based on material and discursive transformations of nature (Cronon 1991; Gandy 2002; Heynen et al 2006). This literature is also influenced by Bruno Latour’s (1987, 1993), Actor–Network Theory, the notion that complex networks of human and non-human “actants” combine in hybrid forms that defy the nature–culture divide. While Latour’s work pushes the boundaries of how “socio-nature” may be conceived, it tends to ignore the power relations that permeate such networks. As Williams (1972: 84) says, “If we say only that we have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces, we are stopping short of the truth that we have done this unequally.” Understanding processes of “socio-nature” demands keeping in mind social inequality as well as natural variability. Location matters: the cultural geography of class, caste, nation and gender and the materiality of biophysical processes in specific places are equally consequential. Studying environmental conflict and collective action requires relating human actors and their habitus to habitats that alter and exert power. This article approaches the contentions around Delhi’s green spaces from this analytical perspective.

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Mangarbani: Sacred Grove and Developers' Dream

Nothing prepares you for the first view of Mangarbani. There is the Gurgaon–Faridabad toll road, your standard highway on Delhi's outskirts, rolling through a landscape where dusty scrub vegetation is being rapidly replaced by dustier high-rise construction sites. There is an eyesore called the Gurgaon–Faridabad Combined Solid Waste Management Facility, acres of open garbage through which forage scrawny cows and flapping crows. Besides the *kutch* (unpaved) road along the dump's broken boundary wall, there are deep, jagged-edged craters, relicts from the stone quarrying practised here until 15 years ago. The land is rocky and open, dotted with trees and shrubs.

In the middle of this nowhere, Pradip Krishen, author of *Trees of Delhi* (2006) who I am accompanying, stops the car. We walk for about 10 minutes, winding our way past rocks hugged by stunted plants, between trees twisted by hot dry winds. It is 8 o'clock in the morning in late March and it already feels like summer. Then, suddenly, we arrive at the lip of a cliff. The ground drops away and so does my jaw. Spread out below us is a deep wooded valley, densely yet delicately green, the expanse of its tree canopy broken only by the whitewashed domed tower of a small shrine in the distance. Besides the shrine, the only other sign of human presence is a boundary pillar on the far end of the valley. The rest is undisturbed forest. The only sound is the plaintive call of peafowl, the only movement their ponderous glide from one tree to another. Now and then, the silence is punctuated by the racket of parakeets arrowing across the sky. A breeze briefly ruffles the grasses by the outcrop of rocks below our feet. Everything else is still. We could be 200 kilometre (km) away in the middle of Sariska National Park, except that we are not. We are in Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), 20 minutes away from the wall-to-wall carpeting of tarmac–glass–concrete–stone, 20 minutes from traffic jams, crowds, noise, dust and smoke. Yet it feels like we have landed on a different planet.

What is so special about Mangarbani? It is not as if Delhi lacks large green spaces. Besides numerous parks and gardens, there is the densely wooded expanse of the ridge, the northernmost spur of the Aravalli range that stretches all the way to Rajasthan. However, from the ecological point of view, the ridge is seriously compromised. A lot of it has been spruced up for human use, the undergrowth cleared and exotic species planted. Among these imports, the most pernicious has been *vilyati kinar* (*Prosopis juliflora*) which has established itself by suppressing indigenous plant species and the life forms they support.¹ Since it is hardy and propagates easily, *Prosopis juliflora* has been a favourite of forest departments looking for a quick-fix for greening India since colonial times. So, in most large green areas in Delhi and its environs today, *Prosopis juliflora* is an invasive alien species, dominating native flora, to the detriment of local biodiversity.

Mangarbani has managed to remain remarkably free of the *vilyati kinar* curse. Even more miraculous, it has undergone virtually no human interference or exploitation for several hundred years. The surrounding villages have protected the grove as sacred to the memory of Gudariya Baba, a hermit

whose shrine stands at the base of the valley. They believe that anyone who cuts wood or grazes their animals in this 100 hectare forest invites the Baba's wrath and retribution. Mangarbani therefore stands out in the Delhi region as an unspoiled old-growth forest of a kind unique to the Aravalli range, a startling vision of what these ancient hills would look like if they were protected from biotic pressure.

And what a vision it is! The top of the valley and its steep sides are thickly covered with *dhau*, a medium-sized tree with delicate leaves that go from pale green to purple brown. Such a profusion of *dhau* is typical of the climax vegetation of some tropical dry deciduous forests. According to Krishen, whose book brought Mangarbani to the notice of a wider public, the tree used to be found all over the ridge but is now in danger of disappearing in Delhi. Two other trees found in such forests that have vanished from the ridge—*kala siris* and *salai* with its fragrant resin—survive only in Mangarbani in the Delhi region. The valley includes some dry and sandy patches where plants typical of arid regions—trees like *kareel*, the *kair* of the famous Rajasthani vegetable dish *kair-sangri*, and *roheda* with its flamboyant orange flowers—can be found. The moist valley floor is shadowed by tall *kaim*—the original *kadamba* of Krishna's Vrindavan²—and *kanju*, with its seeds encased in translucent papery discs. Along with these are the more common trees of the ridge: *ronjh*, *bistendu*, *hingot* and *doodhi*. In this season, *doodhi ki bel* is laden with sweet-smelling creamy flowers; its perfume escorts us down to Baba's shrine.³

On the path to the shrine is a nasty surprise. There is a temple, a large building with a courtyard and pond, which is being expanded to double its size. The land has already been cleared of its vegetation. The temple is the site of an annual fair and other religious events, and the crowds that descended on it most recently have left behind smelly heaps of dirty styrofoam plates. The temple's growing precincts pose a problem in this pristine area, but an even bigger issue is at stake, one that threatens the very existence of Mangarbani.

Mangarbani⁴ and its surrounding land used to be the *shamilat deh* (commons) of Mangar, Bandhwari and Baliawas villages, settlements dominated by the Gujjar caste, with about 3,000 landowning households. Since precolonial times, the *malikan deh* (proprietary body of a village) which consisted of all landowning households represented through village panchayats (local councils), controlled these forests, grazing lands and ponds. In revenue records, the commons were classified as *ghair mumkin pahaad* (uncultivable hills) and therefore exempt from agricultural tax. Landless households in the village belonging to the Scheduled Castes (scs) had rights to collect firewood and fodder from these commons only at the pleasure of their upper-caste landowning patrons, as did agricultural tenants. In the late 1970s, the Governments of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi began carving out plots of the land in the commons to give to landless sc households for cultivation. This was ostensibly a relatively painless programme of "land reforms" since it did not expropriate any existing landowners of their cultivable land, only allocating a portion of their shared "uncultivable" commons. However, the landowners

were not willing to allow even this limited curtailment of their rights and managed to block it.⁵

Fearing that the government would try again to wrest control of their commons, landowning villagers across Haryana mobilised politically to get the Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act of 1961 amended. From being collectively owned by the village panchayat, the commons were partitioned such that individual owners of agricultural land received titles to common lands in proportion to the size of their private holdings. This partition remained notional until 1986, when individual claims were demarcated on the ground. This privatisation of the commons facilitated their commodification. Several villagers sold their titles to real estate developers and speculators who have fenced and walled in their plots, preparatory to clearing and building on them. This activity is so far confined to the area surrounding Mangarbani, but may soon encroach into the forest if the real estate lobby in the Haryana government has its way. Many individual titles have been sold and resold to a “powerful business–politico–bureaucratic–police nexus with ostensibly no interest in agricultural activities.”⁶

Tide of Real Estate Development

The actors who collaborate in this nexus include influential local men who persuade their fellow villagers to sell their land; some of them have set up small offices along the main road advertising their business as property brokers.⁷ They get financial backing and enforcement muscle from local politicians who bribe and intimidate lower level officials to legitimise and expedite transactions. Bigger real estate firms either buy land through these brokers or appoint them as their agents on the ground, getting capital from investors who include not only people seeking homes and offices for their own use, but also speculators looking to gain from the rise in property prices. For owners of unaccounted wealth, real estate—with its large gap between the declared and actual value of property and its undocumented cash transactions—is a convenient way to invest black money. Corrupt politicians and bureaucrats are an essential part of this real estate economy. They help developers negotiate the regulatory hurdles required to secure building permissions, in return for a share in the profits. The glue of kinship holds this tight-knit network together: several leading politicians have immediate relatives in the real estate business.

This political economy of land transformation, extending from the village to the state’s topmost leaders, led in 2011 to the Draft Development Plan, 2031 for Mangar, which zoned the area for commercial and residential use, a designation that is a death sentence for Mangarbani. From 1991 onwards, developers started using the Consolidation Act, a law meant to redress the fragmentation of agricultural fields and village commons, to accumulate landholdings in violation of the Land Ceiling Act. Since the holdings are *benami* (under fictitious or other names), it is difficult to track and prosecute the actual owners. With the help of political leaders, corrupt revenue department officials, land brokers and complicit villagers, Mangarbani is on the verge of going the same way as the rest

of the Aravalli landscape—denuded, buried under concrete, an ancient forest gone forever.

One would think that it would have required a sea change in values for villagers who have protected Mangarbani for centuries to be willing to see it destroyed. However, this change did not occur overnight. Quartzite quarrying in the Aravalli hills in Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan accelerated in the 1980s when Delhi underwent a construction boom before the Asian Games of 1982. Miners struck deeper and wider over the next two decades as the NCR witnessed unprecedented growth. Some quarries were on private lands, but most were on village commons, and panchayat leaders were quick to seize the chance to make money, even though farmers reported that the blasting and removal of rocks was affecting groundwater. In places, the landscape was visibly altered, with entire hills gouged out over the course of months. It was only in 2002 that, acting on a public interest petition, the Supreme Court ordered a ban on mining in the entire Aravalli range. By this time, however, farming and livestock-rearing in this semi-arid terrain were already dwindling as remunerative livelihoods. Once the money from mining stopped, villagers were left high and dry, and altogether willing to consider other options for their land. The Mangarbani forest, however, remained intact over the last three decades even as the surrounding landscape and people’s relationships to land were changing rapidly.

What tipped the scales against the collective protection of Mangarbani as a sacred grove was the tide of real estate development sweeping in from Gurgaon and Faridabad. These two “satellite towns,” planned as magnets to reduce congestion in Delhi, and unencumbered by the Urban Land Ceiling Act that prohibited private firms from undertaking large-scale projects in the capital city, offered rich pickings to real estate developers. Selling to developers made many landowners cash-rich beyond their imagination. Farming was a subsistence activity at best, so these villagers were only too willing to give it up. Land in the area around Mangarbani remained low-value until about six years ago when the road connecting Gurgaon and Faridabad was upgraded in anticipation of the eventual merging of the boundaries of these two expanding cities. The villagers who sold their lands, including their claim to the Mangarbani forest, were only doing what most of Haryana’s villagers have done or are waiting to do.⁸

What of the religious significance of Mangarbani, however? How could Baba’s prohibition be defied? When asked about this, some villagers reiterated their commitment to him. “Baba ne kaha ki yahaan koi lakdi nahin kaatega, pashu nahin charayega. Hum barson se unke kahe ko maante aa rahen hain” (Baba said that no one will cut wood or graze animals here. We have been abiding by his words for ages), said Jairam Harsana of Mangar village. He also described what happened to those who violated the Baba’s injunction: livestock dying, wooden beams in houses bursting into flame. By selling his title to the forest, however, he is at a remove from these acts of retribution since he will not be the one actually cutting the trees. He has regrets, however, about selling the sacred grove and, in 2011, signed a petition along with other elderly villagers,

asking the government to protect the forest. Asked how that would affect the rights of those who had purchased the titles to Mangarbani's land intending to develop it, he expressed his helplessness, "It was 30 years ago. We did not know. It was only on paper. No one knew who owned which piece of land. We didn't think it would come to this."

If there is regret in some quarters about losing the forest, other villagers seem to be taking Baba's legacy in a different direction altogether. Near the Baba's simple whitewashed shrine is a newly-built temple, painted stand-out saffron and all set to expand its precincts, adding area as well as deities to the Shiva-led pantheon currently installed for worship. With the temple attracting more devotees and visitors, Mangarbani's spiritual centre seems to be shifting away from Baba to the standard Hindu multi-god, multipurpose buffet, bringing in a commercial element that was earlier absent from the forest. The temple is both a salve to the conscience that rues selling out the Baba—"Hum is dharmik sthal ko sudhaar rahein hain" (We are improving this religious place)—and a sign that the Baba's spirit may soon be superseded by the all-too-familiar process of temple-led land grab.⁹

Perhaps villagers would have had a clearer consensus about protecting Mangarbani if the forest had remained a common. If individual titles had not been allotted to landowners, it would have been harder to sell the undivided land. This is speculation, however. What is evident is that, although the village no longer functions as a collective body in deciding the fate of the forest, another collective entity has stepped in to save Mangarbani. A group of environmentalists, most of them upper-middle class residents of Gurgaon with an interest in water conservation,¹⁰ started a campaign by publicising Mangarbani's ecological richness and calling upon the government to fulfil its environmental mandate. The campaigners point out that changing land use in Mangarbani would violate a 1996 Supreme Court order that densely wooded areas, regardless of ownership, be legally notified as forests, and protected accordingly. They demand the scrapping of the Draft Development Plan of Mangar, which zones the area for residential and commercial use.

Guardians of the Forest?

The campaign received sustained media coverage and, in January 2013, succeeded in getting the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to order the Haryana government to stop all non-forest activities in the forests around Mangar village.¹¹ In May 2014, it received a further boost when the National Capital Region Planning Board decided that Mangarbani, and a 500 metre-wide ring around it, would be earmarked a "no-construction zone."¹² After delaying for almost two years, the Haryana Forest Department finally demarcated 677 acres in Mangarbani and 1,200 acres of the buffer zone in February 2016.¹³ The move should deter construction and water-intensive land use in an area that is the watershed of a seasonal stream that runs through Mangarbani, recharging groundwater and feeding nearby Dhauj Lake, important functions in a region where water resources are severely depleted.

Water conservation is only one of the ecological benefits of the area around Mangarbani. Most of the buffer zone has scattered and stunted trees that are indigenous to the Aravalli hills. Although the invasive *Prosopis juliflora* has spread here, native species such as dhau, ronjh, the flame-flowered *palash* and blazing yellow-blossomed *amaltas* still predominate.¹⁴ Conservationists argue that restoring the forest will recreate a habitat for indigenous fauna such as nilgai and jackals. Mangarbani could be integrated into a continuous biodiversity corridor in the Aravalli hills, stretching from Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary in Delhi to Kot in Rajasthan. The campaign demands that the Haryana government not only comply with the Supreme Court and NGT's orders but also take steps to protect the larger landscape. However, given the state government's complicity in dubious land deals, it is unlikely to sort out and settle tangled property rights or make villagers partners in future conservation. Despite the official demarcation of the forest, there are periodic reports of fully-grown trees being cut in the area.¹⁵ Only continued pressure from the conservationists, working through the courts and media, might compel the government to protect Mangarbani.

Although Mangarbani is in some ways a special case—a sacred grove on the periphery of a modern metropolis—it highlights the processes through which urban India acquires or loses green spaces, the political economy of landownership and use. It also delineates the social transformations that reconfigure the cultural meanings that inhere in green spaces. The Mangarbani forest came out of obscurity in the last decade because it featured in the handbook of a naturalist (Krishen 2006), who also guided walks in the area. The weekend visitors it attracted were wilderness lovers, affluent residents of Delhi and Gurgaon, many of whom became homeowners thanks to real estate development facilitated by the "political-bureaucratic nexus" that took over village lands. Now that this process threatens Mangarbani, in an ironic twist, some beneficiaries of land commodification have become "environmentalists," ranging themselves against the "builder mafia" from whom they bought their luxury apartments and bungalows, seeking to protect a green space that is not only perceived to be ecologically valuable but also an enhancement of their own quality of life. From a mutually advantageous relationship with builders, sections of the elite have shifted their allegiance to a new axis, aligning with the older generation of Mangar villagers.

Thus, even as the corporate identity and power of the village is broken down into individual fragments that hasten the commodification of land, another collective group constitutes itself as the guardian of the forest. The environmentalists do not replace the villagers, nor are they in conflict with all of them. In fact, by talking to villagers about the biodiversity of the forest, reminding them that it is their protection that has sustained this grove over the centuries, the environmentalists hope to revive a collective sentiment that will enable them to fight together for the future of Mangarbani. Even as the Baba's spiritual hold on the villagers seems to be eroding, environmentalists have stepped in with ecological arguments about

respecting all life forms, the interconnectedness of trees, soil, water and air, and living in harmony with nature, arguments that at times resemble a secular religion.

The Delhi Ridge

The sensibility that underlies the environmentalists' efforts—their appreciation of Mangarbani as an original ecological place worthy of protection—is both modern and recent. Although many of the cities that flourished at the site of present-day Delhi over the last two millennia had established systems to harness water and source timber and fuel from the hinterland, and had also designated land use based on topography and soil, they did not set aside any area for its ecological importance. Delhi's two major natural features—the river Yamuna and the hilly ridge—went virtually ignored until the 1970s, even though they together defined the catchment that watered the wells and ponds crucial for the city's existence.¹⁶ The idea that these landscapes are valuable and worthy of special attention emerged only when Delhi's expansion had decimated them, or severely damaged their ecological integrity. Ironically, as is often the case, the champions of these beleaguered urban ecologies emerged from the very middle classes that were the beneficiaries of urban growth.¹⁷ That is, the changing ridge and the burgeoning middle classes evolved together, each giving shape to the other.

"The Ridge" is the colonial term for the area locally known as *pahaadi* (hilly land), a series of undulations that begin close to the river in north Delhi and stretch to the south-west, increasingly distant from the river. Images from the 19th century depict the ridge as an open, unpopulated wilderness, with barely a tree in sight. Perhaps this was a matter of perspective: British and Indian eyes would have passed over the thorny scrub forest as a wasteland because it lacked useful or imposing trees. The ridge may also have been laid bare over the years as trees were cut to provide city-dwellers with fuel, the land grazed by livestock.¹⁸ However, its barren contours were to turn green in the next century.

When New Delhi, the imperial capital, was being built (1911–31) at the foot of what is now known as the Central Ridge, the viceroy, Lord Hardinge, initiated plans for extensive afforestation. He imagined a dense evergreen curtain behind a "splendid ... Government House" placed at the top of Raisina Hill,

commanding the most lovely views over the city of Delhi and over the whole plain, ... dominating the whole of the country round, while the slope down to the plain would be covered with terraces and fountains like a miniature Versailles.¹⁹

To create this arboreal backdrop for the principal seat of imperial government, Hardinge drew upon the expertise of P H Clutterbuck, a forester from the United Provinces, who suggested several indigenous trees from the drier parts of the Himalayan foothills. W M Hailey, who inspected the early experimental plantings in 1916, endorsed his advice: "I would not extend the plantation of exotics. They should only come after we have established indigenous trees."²⁰ Planting proceeded slowly and on a small scale, limited by wartime budget constraints. The results were not satisfactory. Trees died as

soon as watering was stopped; few species could withstand the rigours of the ridge, its thin soils and exposure to extreme summer and winter temperatures. Over the next 20 years, the government struggled with this uphill task. Though some native trees such as *ronjh*, *palash* and *siris* managed to survive,²¹ it was *vilayati kikar* (*Prosopis juliflora*) that proved to be the most tenacious. As the *Annual Report for Government Gardens 1935–36* noted, "*Prosopis juliflora*, one of the hardiest of drought resisting trees, forms the main base of useful, evergreen vegetation; and trees raised from seed a few years ago are now well developed and gradually extending in to fresh ground."²² This exotic had a strong champion in William Mustoe, Director of Horticulture, who reportedly personally tucked individual seedlings into the ground.²³ Mustoe's diligence and *Prosopis juliflora*'s persistence left a lasting legacy. The "useful evergreen" tree became an invasive species, crowding out the natives. *Prosopis juliflora* now rules the ridge, as it does much of the subcontinent's drylands.

Although the ridge was designated "Reserve Forest" by the colonial government in 1933,²⁴ its legal status did not offer watertight protection. When land was needed for other purposes, portions of the wooded ridge were made available. As the Delhi Improvement Trust expanded the city to the west to accommodate the "Depressed Castes" from the congested Walled City and those displaced by the construction of New Delhi (Hosagrahar 2005; Legg 2007), the central section of the ridge around Jhandewalan was cleared and levelled, widening the gap between the northern and southern parts. Independence and the partition of India in 1947 brought half a million Hindu and Sikh refugees to the city, and many of them were resettled by clearing the central and southern part of the ridge. The Southern Ridge was further eaten into to establish the sprawling campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru University and other institutional and residential areas in the 1950s. At around the same time, a section of the wooded parts along the hilly spine of the Central Ridge was transferred to the army, which later illegally expanded its territory; in the 1980s, the ashram of Asaram Bapu, a popular sant (holy man), grabbed another chunk.²⁵ Numerous other encroachments over the last three decades have nibbled away at the ridge until its death by a thousand cuts seems imminent.²⁶

Not only did the forested area of the ridge shrink because of land diversion and encroachment, from the 1980s, the character of the forest also began to change. Until then, the wooded ridge was regarded as a wilderness and duly ignored. No one trespassed upon it, except for poor women and men who collected wood from the area for cooking and heating, cajoling or bribing the occasional chowkidar to look the other way. In 1978, however, the Central Ridge was the scene of a gruesome crime, filed in popular memory as the Billa–Ranga case.²⁷ Geeta and Sanjay Chopra, the teenage daughter and son of a naval officer, were abducted when they hitched a ride on the ridge road. The car was driven into the woods; Geeta Chopra was raped; she and her brother were murdered. The incident shook middle class newspaper-reading Delhi: Geeta and Sanjay could have been their children. As the hunt for the

culprits began, the ridge came into focus as a place of danger, the locus of criminal activities. Efforts to bring law and order to the ridge took a physical form: from being an overlooked, overgrown space, the unruly ridge was to be disciplined.

On the Northern Ridge, the domestication of the wilderness took the form of clearing the dense understorey of shrubs and creepers such as *bansa*, *heens*, *gondni*, *jangli karaunda*, *bilan-gada* and *kankera* and replacing it with grass.²⁸ Ornamental plants and shrubs were planted in neat beds. Gravelled walking paths were cut through the forest. A small pond was spanned by a bridge, reeds planted along its banks, and benches placed so that visitors could enjoy the pretty scene. A badminton court was created in a depression near the Flagstaff Tower built by the British in 1828. The ruins of Pir Ghaib, a 14th-century Tughlaq hunting lodge, and Chauburja, a mausoleum from the same period, were spruced up. The ridge was now accessible and inviting to middle-class citizens.²⁹

Once manicured, sections of the ridge were enthusiastically incorporated into the social geography of residents of well-to-do neighbourhoods in its vicinity. Morning walks—the quintessential quotidian practice of urban Indians with sedentary lifestyles—bring cars to the gates of the ridge, from which middle-aged men (and some women) alight, all wearing the sports shoes that declare their commitment to their fitness regimen. They stride briskly along the paths, swinging their arms, breathing deeply to fill their lungs with the clean morning air. Some stop to stretch, a few jog; groups do yoga and laughter therapy. Others carry packets of grain, which they scatter at designated spots to feed flocks of parakeets and pigeons. Still others buy bananas to feed the Rhesus Macaques that infest the ridge, their numbers proliferating thanks to Hindus who revere them as a *swaroop* (incarnate form) of the god Hanuman. After their vigorous exercise, many morning walkers head for the fruit vendors outside, to drink coconut water, and eat papaya and other nutritious fruits. Then they get back into their cars and drive home to bathe, and start the workday.

While the crowds of morning walkers attest to the success of the project of taming the ridge and incorporating it into the ordered realm of urban rhythms, a different facet of this accessibility becomes apparent later in the day. By late morning, well after the fitness enthusiasts have departed, motorcycles replace the rows of parked cars outside the gates. Walking up the now-deserted paths, one only encounters hopeful families of macaques looking for handouts. However, on the lawns, under shady trees and behind sheltering shrubs, there is a discreet but nonetheless palpable buzz of activity. Each semi-concealed spot that offers some privacy harbours a pair of young lovers looking for solitude. In a city where young women are subject to family surveillance, and escaping the censorious public eye is difficult for romancing couples, the gardens of the ridge offer refuge. As Radhika Chandiramani (2001: 197–98) writes:

There's safety in the park. The park sets limits.³⁰ They hold hands, press palms together, play with each other's fingers ... Privacy lurks in public spaces; pleasure lies in the palm of a hand.³¹

Paradoxically, the public park, where visibility is coupled with anonymity, allows a retreat from the public into a realm of

privacy for partners of various sexual persuasions. Rendering the ridge safer for citizens by converting the forest into a wooded park created a space that enables romantic and sexual practices that would otherwise have been stifled; it allows youth to express themselves as lovers, desiring and desired subjects who can more fully participate in the increasingly influential discourse of romantic love and courtship.

The domestication of the ridge thus not only created new bourgeois forms of recreation and caring for the self, but also enabled romantic and sexual practices in public spaces, pushing against the limits of what is considered culturally tolerable, and gradually widening them. Making the ridge safer for ordinary and elite citizens had another unintended effect. Some of those who came to the park for morning walks were drawn to the area that was still wilderness. Sanjeev Khanna³² remembers when his dog darted into the undergrowth, chasing a Grey Francolin or some exciting scent. “When I followed him, pushing through the bushes, I found myself alone. It was gorgeous. Really wild. Other people would not go into this part of the ridge, but I loved it.” Khanna was a teenager in the late 1970s when he literally stumbled into a fascination for the wilderness of the ridge. Later, he met a few other school and college students who were interested in birdwatching and began to go on nature rambles with them, learning about the flora and fauna of the ridge and coming to understand the ecological importance of the forest. In 1979, on reading that a section of the Central Ridge had been demarcated for constructing schools, the students organised a protest rally in which they were joined by the residents of Rajendra Nagar, the neighbourhood next to the proposed clearance. A year later, the students formed Kalpavriksh, an “environmental action group” that campaigned against the diversion of the forest to other land use and the conversion of wilderness into parks.³³

Ridge Management Board

Over the next two decades, Kalpavriksh continued to monitor the ridge's biodiversity by conducting annual bird counts and mapping the vegetation. Hoping to ignite the same spark of appreciation of the wilderness in others, members guided school and college students on “nature walks.”³⁴ The group published a booklet about the ridge and its threatened status (Kalpavriksh 1991). It petitioned the lieutenant governor of Delhi and other officials to prevent the destruction of the ridge. These efforts, supported by directions from the Supreme Court, led to the constitution of a Ridge Management Board in 1995, which included government officials and NGO representatives (Sinha 2014). Even as Kalpavriksh went on to study and campaign about a range of emerging conflicts between ecology and economic development, travelling further afield into rural India, the organisation's early involvement with the ridge remained a defining moment in its biography, when Khanna and others realised that it was wilderness that they loved, not parks. How this sensibility set them apart from other upper-middle class people, and how it evolved into a critique of industrial capitalism and its consumerist culture, leading to a stand against “destructive development” in rural India, is a

complex story.³⁵ Central to this story is the sensual experience of the ridge in the early morning, its tangled wildness a contrast to the ordered, populated park.

Since the 1980s, the ridge has faced new threats and recruited new champions. Kalpavriksh has shifted base from Delhi to Pune, but other organisations and alliances, formal as well as impromptu, have taken up the cause, primarily focusing on preventing further construction on the Southern Ridge, an area now surrounded by affluent neighbourhoods, where residents have become concerned about dwindling greenery and aquifers.³⁶ One such campaign highlights the unintended ironies of the situation. During the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games in 2010, the Delhi government planned to expand the sports facilities in Siri Fort Auditorium that it had constructed for the Asian Games in 1982 by clearing an adjacent section of the ridge. They encountered vehement opposition, including a public interest petition filed in court, from residents of nearby Siri Fort village, a low-key yet luxurious haven in a prestigious location, inhabited by members of the elite. As the residents denounced the Delhi government for its callous destruction of greenery, they chose to forget that the spacious bungalows in which they lived had been built less than 20 years ago by exactly the same process—clearing the ridge (Baviskar 2010). Siri Fort village was carved out of the Southern Ridge to house visiting athletes and sports officials during the Asian Games of 1982. After the games were over, the houses were sold at subsidised prices to senior bureaucrats, their cronies and relatives. Beneficiaries of that process now reinvented themselves as saviours of the city's green areas.

Conclusions

As Mangarbani and the Delhi Ridge change, and are threatened with change, they bring into being new allegiances and alliances.³⁷ These green spaces and the urban publics who cohere around them have shaped and transformed each other. Reconfigured relations in the ecological and social landscape have had uneven effects. The domestication of the wilderness of the Northern Ridge for recreational use has squeezed out the native flora and fauna—jackals, hares and monitor lizards have now disappeared. Poor people who collect firewood and grass find it much harder to do so; vigilant middle-class walkers and patrolling chowkidars are quick to pounce on them. The ridge is now closed off as an urban common that provisions people who live by the sweat of their brow; those who sweat in order to keep their bodies fit have replaced them. Yet, the concerns of the labouring classes have not figured in the debate on urban conservation.

In other parts of the city, the conflict over urban nature has been even more violent. Early one morning in January 1995, residents of the well-to-do neighbourhood of Ashok Vihar caught and beat young Dilip to death for defecating in the open area that they regarded as their “park.” The opposition between different views of urban nature and its commons could not be starker. Dilip was from an adjoining *jhuggi basti* (squatter settlement) where more than ten thousand households

had only 24 latrines between them, forcing people to use any open space, under cover of dark, to defecate. The affluent residents of the area tried to foil this by building a wall between the basti and their own homes, but the wall was soon broken to allow the daily traffic of domestic workers, those who lived in the *jhuggis* but worked in the *kothis* (mansions) of the rich. “Dilip’s death was thus the culmination of a long-standing battle over a contested space that, to one set of residents, embodied their sense of gracious urban living, a place of trees and grass devoted to leisure and recreation, and that to another set of residents, was the only available space that could be used as a toilet. When a group of people from the *jhuggis* gathered to protest against this killing, the police opened fire and killed four more people” (Baviskar 2003).³⁸

The social geography of urban nature in Delhi is a deeply riven, shifting landscape. As the villagers of Mangarbani showed by their alacrity to sell their share of a sacred forest, green spaces can become taken for granted and traded for more tangible gains. Yet, other social groups have intervened to evoke a sense of loss and a renewed appreciation of the forest, leading to a new determination to save it from developers. The domesticated sections of the Delhi Ridge now accommodate morning walkers and trysting couples, members of the middle-aged middle classes as well as their subversive offspring. At the same time, for a handful of people, the park opened up a path into the wilderness as an aesthetically and ecologically superior form of urban nature.

While these are unexpected twists produced by the coming together of disparate elements and contingencies, there are expected patterns and continuities as well. More than 60 years after independence, viceroy Lord Hardinge’s urban forests command the higher ground close to the centres of power; the Versailles-style gardens—that he envisaged—grace affluent parts of the city. Greenery is a good index of a neighbourhood’s prestige and wealth, its lack a sign of social exclusion and impoverishment (Nagendra 2016). Most poor, working class areas of Delhi are massed boxes of brick and cement broken only by narrow streets. There are no trees to sit under, no grass on which to run or play, or take a nap in the winter sun. The government’s proud slogan of a “clean and green” city fades away once one leaves elite and middle-class areas. When green is confined to the solitary tree that has survived in a wasteland or a densely-packed settlement, or the *tulsi* (sacred basil) plant growing in a recycled tin, urban nature is conspicuous by its absence.

As Matthew Gandy (2006: 63) observes, “The production of urban nature is a simultaneous process of social and bio-physical change in which new kinds of spaces are created and destroyed.” To do justice to this process, we need analyses that “place greater emphasis on the malleable, indeterminate and historically specific dimensions to the urban experience” (Gandy 2006: 64). Malleable yet persistent, indeterminate yet structured, green spaces in Delhi—parks, wilderness, wasteland—are deeply streaked by social character, by ways of knowing and valuing nature that reflect the city’s sharp hierarchies and shifting alliances.

NOTES

- 1 Gold and Gujar (2002) have analysed how villagers in Rajasthan differently value *vilayati* (foreign or imported) *keekar*—*Prosopis juliflora* (mesquite) is a native of Mexico—and *desi* (native or indigenous) *keekar* (*Acacia nilotica*), also called *babool*. *Prosopis juliflora*'s thorns and inedible leaves keep browsing animals away, making it useless for pastoralists seeking fodder, whereas *Acacia nilotica* yields fodder as well as an edible gum. Gold and Gujar argue that *desi* and *vilayati*—native and foreign—are binary categories that organise perceptions of modernity in rural India, especially with respect to agrarian environments and species.
- 2 Vrindavan, also known as Braj, is an area in present-day Mathura district, Uttar Pradesh, sacred to the Hindu deity Krishna. In legend, Vrindavan was an ancient forest on the banks of the river Yamuna, where the young Krishna lived, grazed cows, sported with village maids, and fought demons. It became a place of pilgrimage for Hindus of the Vaishnava sects from the 17th century onwards, and several temples were built here. The forest was gradually destroyed over the last two centuries. The *kadamba* tree is associated with Krishna's life in Vrindavan: in an episode made famous in songs and paintings, Krishna stole the clothes of bathing *gopis* (girl cow-herds) and hid them in a *kadamba* tree.
- 3 The scientific name of *dhau* is *Anogeissus pendula*. *Kala siris* is *Albizia odoratissima* and *salai* is *Boswellia serrata*. *Kareel* is *Capparis decidua*; *rohed* is *Tecomella undulata*; *kaim* is *Mitragyna parvifolia*; and *kanju* is *Holoptelea integrifolia*. *Ronjh* is *Acacia leucophloea*; *bistendu* is *Diospyros cordifolia*; *hingot* is *Balanites roxburghi* and *doodhi* is *Wrightia tinctoria*. *Doodhi ki bel* is *Vallisneria spiralis*. For a complete list of the flora of Mangarbani, see Shahabuddin et al (2013).
- 4 "Bani" means "little forest."
- 5 See Chakravarty-Kaul (1996) for a finely observed account of a similar conflict over the commons in north-west Delhi. Her analysis includes a detailed examination of the case law on disputes around rights to the commons from the colonial period onwards.
- 6 This description was used by Ashok Khemka, former Director General of Consolidation of Land Holdings in Haryana, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer turned whistleblower, who was soon transferred out of this post. See <http://www.thehindu.com/news/how-village-common-property-along-the-Aravallis-is-gone/article394445.ece>.
- 7 For a detailed account of this process, see Levien (forthcoming).
- 8 This is not to suggest that there has been no farmers' opposition to land acquisition for real estate development in Haryana. In 2008, a *maha panchayat* of several villages declared that it would not allow the government to acquire 25,000 acres of land from 22 villages in Jhajjar district and 18 villages in Gurgaon district for a special economic zone to be set up by Reliance Industries (see http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-05-12/chandigarh/27778469_1_sez-policy-sez-issue-pelpa). However, such instances of resistance in Haryana and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh are primarily tactics for negotiating better terms, not stopping land transactions. Landowners are not unwilling to sell; they just do not want to get a pittance from the government which then hands over the land to a private company which makes a killing from the rise in its value. Michael Levien's research on land acquisition in Rajasthan (2012, 2013) shows that land prices rose eight to 12 times after such a transfer, an escalation that the original landowners did not benefit from.
- 9 Temples sprout almost overnight on city pavements, in the crevices of *peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) trees, as kiosks set into walls, on abandoned plots of land, in squatter settlements, as a bid to stake claim to land which a state soft on "hurting religious sentiments" is reluctant to act against. From a small icon, to tiled and cemented surrounds, to concrete canopies and domes, is usually a series of quick steps, as is the emergence of a thriving spiritual economy of patrons, priests, vendors of ritual offerings and worshippers. However recent their vintage, temples tend to announce themselves as *pracheen* (ancient).
- 10 Gurgaon has been styled as a "Millennium City," a destination for corporate offices and high-end residential projects with names like Belvedere Towers and Malibu Towne, but first among the basic infrastructural amenities absent in the city is water. Over-exploitation has depleted the aquifer; groundwater is brackish. The more Gurgaon's affluent population grows, the worse its water problems (Soni 2000). Environmentalists have so far not been successful in either regulating groundwater extraction in Gurgaon or instituting rainwater harvesting on a significant scale. For an account of unregulated urbanisation and the creation of landscapes of inequality on Delhi's periphery, see Soni (2000) and Chatterji (2013).
- 11 <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/green-tribunal-orders-halt-all-non-forest-activities-aravallis-faridabad>.
- 12 <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/no-tourism-activity-construction-in-mangar-bani/article6014393.ece>.
- 13 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/haryana-demarcates-mangar-bani-forest-area/article8196063.ece>.
- 14 *Palash* is *Butea monosperma*; *amaltas* is *Cassia fistula*.
- 15 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/Mangar-Bani-loses-300-trees-in-3-months/articleshow/55989198.cms>.
- 16 For an account of the changing place of the Yamuna floodplain in urban political economy and ecology, see Baviskar (2011a).
- 17 Cf Raymond Williams (1972).
- 18 According to forester R N Parker, this is likely to have occurred after the 1857 Mutiny because, at that time, the vegetation was thick enough for "the attacking [British] force [to] advance concealed in the brushwood stretching up to within musket shot of the walls [of the Mughal city of Shahjahanabad]" (Parker 1920: 25). It is also reported that Firoz Shah Tughlaq, Sultan of Delhi from 1351 to 1388, planted trees on the northern ridge, using the area for hunting.
- 19 Letter from Hardinge to Edwin Lutyens, 19 August 1912, quoted in Krishen (2006: 37).
- 20 Letter from Hailey, Secretary, Notified Area Committee, 13 January 1916. Hailey went on to become the Chief Commissioner of Delhi (1918–24).
- 21 The scientific name of *siris* is *Albizia lebbek*.
- 22 Punctuation added.
- 23 George (1958). For a more detailed account of the afforestation of the ridge, see Baviskar (2016), especially Chapters 1 and 3.
- 24 It had been fenced off from grazing earlier, in the late 1910s.
- 25 The establishment of the ashram was challenged in a 1985 public interest petition but, in 1996, the Supreme Court allowed it to be regularised, despite opposition from forest officials. However, the recent fall from grace of Asaram Bapu, now facing trial for raping a minor at his Jodhpur ashram, may mean that action will finally be taken to close the ashram. See <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/probe-likely-into-land-encroachment-complaint-against-asaram-bapu>.
- 26 For details of the area of the ridge and its current land status, see http://www.delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/doi_forest/Forest/Home/Forests+of+Delhi/Recorded+Forest. Also see Kothari (1988).
- 27 Billa and Ranga were the two men who were eventually convicted of the crime.
- 28 *Bansa* is *Adathoda vasica*; *heens* is *Capparis sepriaria*; *gondni* is *Grewia tenax*; *jangli karaunda* is *Carissa spinarum*; *bilangada* is *Flacourtia indica* and *kankera* is *Maytenus senegalensis*.
- 29 The process of "beautifying" the ridge in the 1970s and 1980s was less pronounced in the Central Ridge (where a large section had already been carved out as the Buddha Jayanti Park in the 1960s) and the Southern Ridge (which was not yet surrounded by the upper-middle class residential neighbourhoods that came up in the late 1980s).
- 30 Here, Chandiramani is referring to young women who, while willing to engage romantically with their partners, want to be able to control what they do. Sexual coercion, including rape, by one's companion is less likely when there are other people around and where a chowkidar or itinerant vendor is a shout away. The "wild" part of the ridge would not be safe (or comfortable) in this respect.
- 31 The discussion of contestations over public spaces focuses mainly on the tensions between bourgeois notions of spatial order and public conduct and their defiance by the poor (cf Kaviraj 1997) and, to a lesser extent, on how this patriarchal spatial order marginalises women (cf Ranade 2007). The use of public parks by young men and women seeking privacy, and the social disapproval they face, which can even take the form of humiliating remarks and physical harassment by Hindu nationalist "moral police" vigilante groups, suggests that age-based discrimination is as much a part of the conflict over parks as are class- and gender-based orientations.
- 32 Name changed.
- 33 Kalpavriksh has gone on to become a well-known research and advocacy NGO, working on issues of ecological sustainability and social equity. It was a pioneer in developing a broad-based critique of large dams, and has worked extensively to promote community-based natural resource management.
- 34 For a survey of Kalpavriksh's engagement with the ridge by one of the organisation's founders, narrated as the account of a nature walk, see Kothari (1988). For an analysis of how activities such as hiking foster a "love for nature" among students in Indonesia, see Tsing (2005).
- 35 The history of the wilderness movement in India has been sketched by Ramachandra Guha (1989) and Mahesh Rangarajan. Their analysis has focused on the ideological strands of the movement which range from the socially conservative, demanding "inviolate areas" for mega-fauna, to the more human rights-oriented "community-based management." However, a social history that examines the class background of "wilderness lovers" and relates it to their ways of being in the world and "structures of feeling" remains to be done (Bourdieu 1984). A small beginning has been made by Mawdsley (2004) and Baviskar (2011b).
- 36 See Ghertner (2011) for a discussion of one such controversy near Vasant Kunj, where the Delhi Development Authority violated its own Master Plan to allow the construction of shopping malls and a luxury hotel on a remaining section of the ridge, a move that was retrospectively legalised by the court.
- 37 Walker (2007) provides a richly detailed account of this process in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

38 See Baviskar (2003) for other instances of bourgeois environmentalist campaigns to create a “clean and green Delhi” that target the city’s working-class occupations and neighbourhoods as prime offenders.

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