

Fragrance, Symmetry and Light: The History of Gardens and Garden Culture in the Deccan

Conference Report

The international conference on the History of Gardens and Garden Culture in the Deccan was held on January 22-25 2007, hosted by the Department of History at the Central University of Hyderabad, and co-organised by the Society of Deccan Studies and the School of Oriental and African Studies. The conference was supported generously by the Society for South Asian Studies and the University of Hyderabad, with smaller contributions from two private donors who wish to remain anonymous. Twenty-six scholars from the India, the United Kingdom, Europe, the Middle East and the United States who work on various aspects of the history, architecture, environment and culture of the Deccan participated in the four day event. The papers, divided into five sessions, were followed by individual discussion. The conference, the first academic event focusing on the history of gardens and garden culture in the Deccan, raised an unanticipated level of interest among both academics and students alike. In addition to our paper sessions, all participants were accompanied on site visits to various local monuments and gardens. In addition, several conference attendees undertook a six day expedition to Bijapur, Bidar, Holkonda, Gulbarga, and Firozabad following the conference to explore garden and monument remains in light of discussions at the conference. The purpose of the conference was twofold: first, to shed light on the little studied tradition of gardens and garden culture in the Deccan; and second, to rethink a number of conceptual issues around landscape and garden culture from an interdisciplinary perspectives. In both goals the conference was by all accounts a complete success. New materials were brought to light, but perhaps more importantly, a variety of new interpretations and perspectives significantly extended discussion and debate.

The first day, focused on 'Typology, Nomenclature and Structure' included papers by Aloka Parasher Sen on forest and garden landscapes in Sanskrit literature, John Fritz on evidence for gardens in Vijayanagara and Helen Philon on funerary water gardens at Bahmani tombs. Pushkar Sohoni spoke on the architectural history of the Farah Bakhsh garden in Ahmadnagar, Omar Khalidi discussed the influences of Mughal and Deccani garden traditions on Deccani and Mughal gardens, and Abdul Gani Imratwale gave a detailed overview of the types and functions of gardens found in Bijapur. On the second day, Ronald Inden initiated a series of papers on the theme of 'Representation and Practice' with a general lecture on gardens as worldly paradises. This was followed by Emma Flatt on the connection of garden culture with other knowledges at court like astrology and magic. Ali Akbar Husain presented a paper on the representation of gardens in Deccani *masnavis*, particularly the *Gulshan-e Ishq*. Daud Ali spoke on the directions for constructing and enjoying gardens in Somesvara's twelfth-century *Manasollasa* and Laura Parodi on the representation of flora in Deccani bidriware and decorative arts. The third day focused on the theme of 'Water Technologies'. Dhirendranath Varma presented a paper on the general topic of water management in Qutb Shahi times and Sanjay Subodh more specifically on the waterworks and hamams of the tomb-garden complex in Golconda. Klaus Rotzer treated the canals and irrigation techniques of the gardens at Bidar. This was followed by a more general introduction to Qutb Shahi gardens by M.A. Nayeem in preparation for a conference site visit to Golconda fort in the afternoon of that day. The final day of the conference began with papers on the theme of 'Landscape and Space'. Kathleen Morrison presented a paper on agriculture and landscape around Vijayanagara, and Deborah Hutton on the representation of landscapes in Deccani painting. George Michell showed pictures of the nineteenth-century Faluknuma palace complex and its landscaped gardens and Mark Brand spoke on landscape in royal audiences in Bijapur. Yuthika Sharma concluded with a paper on English landscapes and the remaking of medieval gardens under colonial rule. In the evening participants joined local scholars at the Public Gardens in Nampalli for a public session chaired by Dr Kedareshwari, director of Andhra Pradesh State Department of Archaeology and Dr Vasant Bawa of the Society of Deccan Studies. On January 26, a number of conference participants embarked on a six day tour of garden sites across the Deccan.

The conference was conceived of as the first of a two part series, and the organisers encouraged provisional interpretations and work in progress. A small number of papers have been now published in a special issue of the journal *Deccan Studies* (volume 5, no. 2, July-Dec 2007) edited by Daud Ali. The organisers will soon be making another funding application to hold the final session of the conference with a view to a putting together a groundbreaking publication shortly thereafter.

Daud Ali
March, 2007