



INTRODUCTION

Landscape Heritage

A LONG LINE OF PILGRIMS WINDS ITS WAY through the streets of Ayodhya to visit Ramjanamsthal, the place of Lord Rama's birth. They go single file through multiple checkpoints in a cagelike narrow corridor to glimpse the deities placed in a makeshift structure in the few seconds they have before being hustled forward by the guards. On this contested site, a mosque had stood for 365 years before being demolished in 1992 by a mob to make way for a Hindu temple. The spot where the deities have been installed was left untouched to respect the place's sanctity when the area was excavated by Archaeological Survey of India in 2003 to ascertain whether the mosque was built at the site of a destroyed temple. Hindu devotees see the place in the image of Lord Rama, Muslims claim it as their place of worship, and to the archaeologist the site is an archive of material remains from the past.

The banks of the River Yamuna are imagined by the devout Hindu as a sylvan landscape and the playground of young Krishna, and Yamuna is seen as a beautiful goddess and his lover. As a symbol of purity, the river is the subject and settings for life cycle rituals. Devotees throng the *ghats* (steps and landings) in the pilgrim towns of Mathura and Vrindavan to bathe in her waters and worship her and other gods. About forty kilometers downstream, the Yamuna riverfront was a garden district in Agra, the historic capital of Mughal India in the early seventeenth century. The Mughals viewed the riverfront landscape from their

airy pavilions on the highest terraces of their pleasure gardens and enjoyed it for its scenic views and cool breezes. The Yamuna Riverfront in Mathura and Agra is produced by two different visualities—the Mughal period eye seeking a salubrious view of nature versus a Hindu way of visualizing the divine in nature and landscape.¹

The hilltop palace-fort Amber, seat of the kingdom of Kacchwaha Rajputs from 1097 to 1727, is on the Aravalli Ridge in Rajasthan, and towers over the town in the valley below. This cultural landscape was shaped by the gaze of surveillance demonstrated in the defensive layout of forts; reverence directed toward the gods and their representative on earth, the king, who resided in the visibly commanding palace; and pleasure in the framing of gardens from palace windows. The hilltop fort, in its opulence, grandeur, and monumental scale, legitimized the power of the ruler. Today as a designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is the focus of tourist gaze in search of the picturesque. Visitors perceive it as scenery and staged spectacle with little understanding of how nature was improved to make the site habitable and the meanings it held for the historic communities. Their aesthetic experience is based upon visual edification provided by the scenic and the spectacular.² The historic and modern ways of seeing the Amber landscape are two examples of the period eye.

When modern institutions for preserving India's past were first established in the colonial era, antiquarian remains were deemed worthy of preservation, as guided by a romantic sensibility and the eighteenth-century European fascination with the cult of ruins. Indic cultures, in contrast, valued material artifacts for their symbolic meanings and use in everyday life. Ruins, or *khandar*, were seen as waste and had no value. Buildings, particularly those for ritual use, were sentient entities that had to be reconsecrated in *jiirnnoddharana*, a process in which the structure was restored or rebuilt. Colonial preservation efforts were centered on the monument and the excavated site, treated as historic document and archive, and opened to view of the tourist in the archaeological park derived from the English landscape garden. Landscape was a picturesque view for the European colonialist while Indic cultures saw nature and landscape as symbolic of cosmogony and a medium for manifestation of divinity.

The case studies in the book are about cultural landscapes in India as shaped by ways of seeing. They reflect and advance the broader global discourse on the

idea of landscape and heritage. The concept of landscape has evolved from a picturesque view to an embodiment of social, economic, and ideological values.³ It is everyday places that evolve and transform over time as a result of cultural practices. Image and event are among the many metaphors for interpreting landscape as a cultural and an ecological construct. In seeing it as an image, its symbolic value is dominant. As a situated event, the landscape is a dynamic ecosystem and a sited microculture. Its reading as a palimpsest with relics and fragments that tell the story of the bygone past has expanded to its understanding as a socially constructed active site of memory.⁴

“Cultural landscapes are at the interface between nature and culture, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity; they represent a tightly woven net of relationships that are the essence of culture and people’s identity.”⁵ This definition by Mechtild Rossler prompts me to ask: How do cultural landscapes embody heritage? Heritage in the broadest sense is what is valued from the past, and its practice rests upon individual and collective understandings of what is worthy of being preserved. The evolving meanings of inheritance, its contested and fragmentary nature, and its links with politics of identity are fruitful topics of inquiry.⁶ The freezing of time implied in preservation of a historic monument is giving way to conservation as the process of managing temporal change.⁷ Heritage is no longer an elitist prerogative but is everyone’s patrimony, and its intangible aspects—knowledge, skills, values, and norms—formative in creating tangible expressions, are as important as material culture.⁸ The focus on monument in a designated heritage site and art in the museum is widening to include ephemeral performances, placemaking, and popular art. The commodification of heritage tourism is being questioned in a new mode of conservation practice in which heritage is a tool for community development.

In context of changing meanings of landscape (from static view to dynamic ecosystem) and heritage (from material culture to living traditions) I bring to light ways in which cultural landscapes embody heritage in thought and practice in India. Conservation of landscapes should be based upon the premise that in reclaiming a cultural landscape, a way of seeing and enacting is also reclaimed. This would be cultural heritage conserved in placemaking in which the landscape is the subject and setting for constructing and enacting collective memory. The complex and subtle links between material and intangible heritage can be thus

preserved. I draw upon scholarship in history, culture, and landscape studies and my own fieldwork in outlining the following themes—imagining, remembering, enacting, perfecting, and improving nature, and reclaiming places—for reconceptualizing the current discourse on landscapes and heritage. Changing paradigms in scholarship have created a space for finding the overlap between myth and history in construction of collective memory, and in making the transition from milieu to sites of memory. The Indic mode of remembering the past relies on oral narrative traditions, not on reconstruction of the past from material evidence. Myths and legends are place based and relived in landscape experiences, thus bringing the past in the present.

In Part I of this book I compare myths and history of sacred sites in pilgrim cities of Dwarka and Ayodhya as two ways of seeing the landscape. The image of the sacred, believed to spontaneously appear in nature, is a numinous vision, enthralling and majestic. The view of landscape as an archive, on the other hand, demands objective and systematic scrutiny to create a factual record of the past. Part II interprets the imagined landscapes of Govardhan Hill in Braj and the urban structure of medieval Orchha as constituted by mandalas (symbols of the entire universe) and yantras (triangles formed by visual axes). It traces the changing image through time of the Taj Mahal in Agra to reveal the impact of cultural visibility on perception. The archetypal image is reified in the cultural landscape, acquiring substance in material form. The imagined in the landscape or the landscape imagined is not a mere visual or visionary experience but also a somatic one. Part III describes how the Hindu faithful pay obeisance to the sacred landscape in *darshan* (ritual sighting), bathing in the holy rivers, and circumambulating the *kshetra* (region). The landscape is inscribed in their bodies through these ritual enactments and is experienced in time as a situated event, its structure changing as space is generated in movement. Reenacting myths and mimicking the actions of gods and legendary heroes creates spatial memory in the individual and reconstructs collective memory.

Ways of seeing impact the making of cultural landscape by improving and perfecting nature. Part IV describes the medieval hill fortresses and water systems on the Aravalli hill range spanning three states in India. Here physical properties of nature, not symbolic attributes, were keenly observed and exploited to create defensible built environments in harsh terrain and inhospitable

climate. These historic landscapes exemplify traditional wisdom in improving nature for human habitation by working with natural processes and augmenting natural forms. The archetypal image of paradise as a garden was realized in late medieval Indo-Islamic riverfront landscapes. Landscape was a distant framed view, an appealing composition of form and color. Nature was perfected in the image of an aesthetic ideal—the geometric four-square garden form of *charbagh* exemplifying order in symmetry and harmony of proportions. Part V describes how the earthly paradise garden became more of an expression of imperial power and less of divine providence. The loss of imperial power and disappearance of court rituals was accompanied by transformation of its image as a new set of social, political, and economic realities came into existence. The colonial garden derived from the English landscape garden supplanted the royal walled garden. It was a pastoral landscape shaped in the Edenesque image, reflecting a romantic view of nature unlike the transcendental view that inspired the ancient garden grove visualized in medieval illustrated manuscripts.

Museums and memorial parks are part of the ongoing construction and consolidation of national identity. Part VI describes the sites of memory of Rani Lakshmi Bai, who played a pivotal role in the 1857 uprising, considered to be the First War of Independence. Their iconographic program consisting of statuary and dioramas represents the legendary figure of the Rani. However, only a lone portrait exists of Begum Hazrat Mahal, the other heroine of the uprising; her absence in the public realm is poignant, a reminder of the significance of visual culture in the construction of collective memory. The Dalit politician Mayawati built many memorials to herself, other Dalit leaders, and social reformers when she came into power as a chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in independent India. She has sought to reclaim long-suppressed memories of contribution of oppressed caste groups in the national imaginary by visualizing the figure of the subaltern in public spaces.

Loss of royal patronage and community stewardship, pressures of a growing local population and domestic tourism, and significant resource constraints have led to a breakdown of self-organized systems that preserved heritage in the past. The retrieval of the lost landscape knowledge of premodern communities presents a challenge. Contested sites demonstrate different visualities and spatial practices and present the dilemma regarding which image and whose traditions

should be reclaimed. When traditional spatial practices themselves contribute to environmental distress by generating pollution, doubts begin to appear about the very nature of heritage. These conundrums open the space for negotiating conflict by reconciling alternative visualities, recovering traditional wisdom, and changing unhealthy cultural practices. I conclude that the future lies in sustainable planning and design measures that respect site history and genius loci, accommodate deeply rooted cultural practices, and build environmental capital by using local resources and energy. The environmental ethic demonstrated in traditional practices of nature veneration can be practiced in a sustainable approach to heritage conservation and reduce pollution of rivers, promote reforestation of hills, and address climate change in twenty-first-century India.