



# Sunder Nursery: Conservation and Landscape



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### Sunder Nursery Conservation

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Sunder Nursery, earlier known as Azim Bagh or the “great garden”, was established in the twentieth century to experiment and propagate plants for New Delhi during British colonial times. Within Sunder Nursery and its adjoining Batashewala complex stand seven Mughal-era garden-tombs.

The Landscape Master Plan now being implemented at Sunder Nursery aims to link the conservation effort on the standing monuments to create a major landscape space of truly urban scale, deriving inspiration from the traditional Indian concept of congruency between nature, garden and utility, coupled with environmental conservation. In addition to the formal landscape in the setting of the Mughal-era monuments, a biodiversity park is being created for flora that occupies Delhi’s ridge, river edge, plains and other specialized zones such as desert and marshy areas.

#### Sunderwala Burj and Sunderwala Mahal

Two early Mughal-era tombs stand north of Isa Khan’s tomb in the adjoining Sunder Nursery. Archival records reveal that these were, until the early twentieth century, grouped within a single enclosure entered through a lofty gateway on the south. A century later, no evidence of the enclosure walls nor of the gateway have survived.

The larger tomb, known as Sunderwala Mahal, has a central chamber enclosed with eight rooms forming a circumambulatory passage. The structure had largely collapsed and the western facade was reconstructed in 2002–04, but to inappropriate design, with arches built instead of half-domed chambers. In 2008–09, the collapsed portions were reconstructed as per



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[1] Sunderwala Burj in Sunder Nursery, Delhi, India.

[2] Micro-habitat zones at Sunder Nursery showcasing Delhi’s diverse ecology for educational and recreational purposes.

[3] An 1860s view from the roof of Humayun’s Tomb looking towards Sunder Nursery and the Purana Qila.

the original design, matching the northern facade that had remained intact. In 2013 the inappropriately reconstructed western facade was dismantled and rebuilt to its original profile, and conservation works aimed at ensuring long-term preservation through the use of traditional materials continue.

The significance of the adjacent Sunderwala Burj lies in its ornamental ceiling with incised plaster patterns, much of which was intact but subject to deterioration due to water ingress from the roof. The star-pattern ceiling is reminiscent of decorative wood ceilings seen from Iran to Kashmir. The pattern is also a development of the designs seen on the lower arcade at Emperor Humayun's mausoleum.

Cracks in the dome and roof were repaired prior to careful removal of lime-wash layers from the decorative ceiling and restoration of the minor portions of missing incised plaster. Sandstone lattice screens were restored to the arched openings above the doorways and lime plaster to the wall surfaces. The red-white contrast was achieved here by the Mughal builders through the use of polychromy over the lime plaster.

The immediate setting of both Sunderwala Mahal and Sunderwala Burj have been treated as formal gardens – replacing the tarmacked road network that had reduced these monuments to traffic roundabouts. North of the Sunderwala Burj, the

newly created gardens are inspired by the traditional Persian carpet layout.

#### Lakkarwala Burj

To the north-west of Sunderwala Burj stands a contemporary yet much larger mausoleum. It is not known who it was built for and, as with many of the tombs – Nila Gumbad, Sabz Burj and Sunderwala Burj, among others – it is simply known by a local name, Lakkarwala Burj. Strangely, Lakkarwala Burj does not follow the north-south alignment of all the other tombs and is on a slight diagonal, which in view of several earlier structures present in the area is difficult to understand.

Conservation works here were very similar to those undertaken at Sunderwala Burj: removal of inappropriate past layers and replacement with traditional materials prepared by master craftsmen, and sensitive landscaping of the immediate setting. The incised plasterwork in geometric and floral motifs has been restored where this has been lost, thus reviving some of the structure's original grandeur.

#### Batashewala Complex

To the immediate east of the Sunderwala tombs stands another garden-tomb enclosure in which the principal tomb is that of



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- [4] Sunderwala Mahal, a 16th-century tomb structure, required partial reconstruction as portions had collapsed in the late 20th century.
- [5] The ornamental incised plaster ceiling of Sunderwala Burj is unique among Delhi monuments and required careful conservation and protection.



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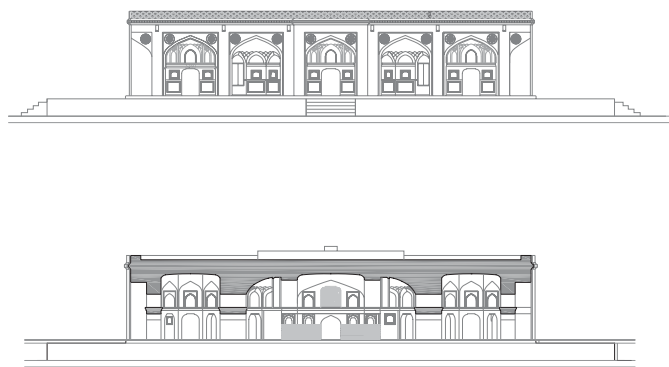


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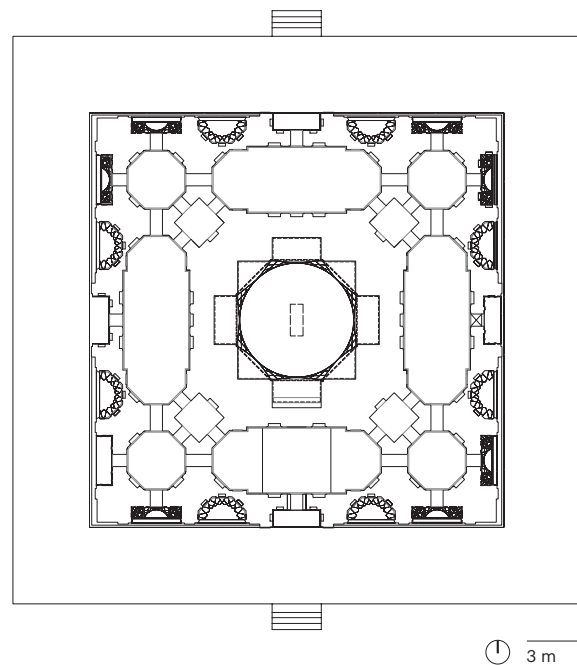
- [6] The central axis of Sunder Nursery, inspired by Persian garden design, will serve as the heart of the new garden.
- [7] The 16th-century Sunderwala Burj is one of several Mughal-era structures standing within Sunder Nursery.
- [8] As with other monuments, the conservation of Lakkarwala Burj was also coupled with the landscaping of its immediate setting.



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- [9] The restored interiors of Mirza Muzaffar Hussain's Tomb, which were found covered in soot, algae and lime wash, thereby disfiguring the historic appearance and accelerating the decay process.
- [10] Architectural documentation of Mirza Muzaffar Hussain's Tomb.
- [11] The architectural integrity of Mirza Muzaffar Hussain's Tomb restored to the original builder's intentions.

Mirza Muzaffar Hussain, who traced his descent from both his father's and his mother's side to Timur and was married to Emperor Akbar's eldest daughter. The tomb is elevated and its interiors profusely ornamented with incised plasterwork as well as the red-white contrast in polychromy.

Only a few metres east and within the walled enclosure stands another tomb structure. Known as Chotta Batashewala, this tomb is an unequal octagon standing on a high plinth. The arcaded enclosure wall of the Batashewala complex tomb had mostly been lost, with large sections demolished in 1989 when temporary geodesic dome structures were built to house groups camping here, destroying the historic landscape of the enclosure as well.

A few metres further east from Chotta Batashewala is another Mughal-era tomb structure, within its own garden enclosure, pre-dating the Batashewala complex and almost in alignment with the northern pavilion of the Humayun's Tomb enclosure. Following the Lodi-era typology of a square domed tomb, this early Mughal structure contains a striking ornamental ceiling and decorative incised plasterwork on its southern facade. The ornamentation on the parapet is similar to Lakkarwala Burj.

Since 1999 the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has made efforts, through regular discussions with government authorities, to restore land to the ownership of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in order to undertake major conservation works on monuments of national importance as well as the sensitive landscaping of the immediate setting of the monuments. These efforts bore fruit when the complex was 'sealed' on orders of the Supreme Court of India for illegal use by the Bharat Scouts and Guides and subsequent to this, in 2009, the land reverted to ASI. Shortly thereafter, funding support from the US

Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation was received and a four-year conservation initiative has thus far been undertaken.

Works commenced with demolition of over a hundred 'temporary' structures that were intended to stand for a six-month period but had remained there for twenty years, during which the metal framework of the geodesic domes had been replaced with reinforced concrete. Clearance of earth revealed the foundations of missing portions of both the walled enclosures, which were then reconstructed as standing portions and over their original foundations, thus restoring the significant garden enclosures. Efforts continue to request ASI to expand protection to the entire enclosed gardens rather than only the monument structures.

All three monuments in this setting required significant conservation, including reconstruction of collapsed portions of the "Batashewala" monuments. As with Sunderwala Mahal, the southern facade of Mirza Hussain's tomb had also been reconstructed to an inappropriate profile in 2003-04, with arches built in lieu of collapsed half-domes. This recent reconstruction was demolished to restore the original profile.

The geometric and floral patterns of the incised plasterwork on the interior surface and the *kangura* patterns on the parapet, including the glazed tiles, were restored where missing.

On the completion of conservation works and the landscape restoration, access will be established from Sunder Nursery, thus integrating six Mughal garden-tombs, all dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

#### Azimganj Serai

The sixteenth-century Grand Trunk Road passed through the Nizamuddin area. Rest houses or serais for pilgrims, travellers







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and traders were built at regular intervals on this medieval road. Here vaulted chambers, surrounding a central open court, provided shelter and spaces to store goods. The large court would often contain a mosque for worshippers as well as a well to provide drinking water. Many serais had attached enclosures where the animals were housed.

To the north of Sunder Nursery stands the now ruined Azimganj Serai. It is possibly on account of the latter that the Sunder Nursery area was formerly known as Azim Bagh or the “great garden”.

The Azimganj Serai encloses a 100-metre-square court with two bay, deep-vaulted passages on all four sides. Built on an elevated platform, the Serai has a fort-like appearance. Recently being protected and acquired by the Delhi Government’s Department of Archaeology, the Serai was neglected for over a century and is today in a state of ruin. Conservation works by AKTC have now commenced with the primary purpose of halting further deterioration. The courtyard of the Serai as well as some of the rooms could provide a unique setting in Delhi for reuse.

### Landscaping the Setting

Mohammad Shaheer

The Landscape Master Plan for Sunder Nursery includes planning and design proposals related to:

- nursery and productive use;
- heritage and cultural activity;
- botanical and ecological experiences and exhibits;
- recreational use;
- services and amenities.

Sensitive site planning and landscape design have been implemented to create spatial identities that overlap and intersect, with the distinctive identity of each component, far from being compromised, contributing vigorously to the whole. Significant Mughal-era monuments stand at the geographical centre of the site; their position suggests the development of a core landscape of which they are the anchors or reference points – a kind of centrepiece from which other landscape experiences emanate.

[12] The 16th-century Azimganj Serai, abutting Sunder Nursery, is presently undergoing major conservation and landscape work.

The idea of a central heritage zone has emerged from the alignment of the existing gate with the centre line of Sunderwala Burj, and the extension of the same line to the significantly large enclosure of the Mughal-era Azimganj Serai just beyond the northern boundary.

The central axis extending from the main entrance to Sunderwala Tomb and further northwards in the direction of Azimganj Serai is an important and extensive formal landscape element of the proposed Sunder Nursery Plan.

The path network is designed as an interpretative representation for developing spatial and movement links connecting the Mughal monuments. The strong visual presence of the protected monuments suggests the delineation of a core zone or heritage axis represented by the central axis. A notional arc of movement falls into place as a secondary route connecting the other archaeological sites.

This 'central axis', inspired by Mughal landscape style, is conceived in three parts as a progression of formally arranged gardens around the heritage structures, and merging at its end with the naturalistic informality of the proposed Forest Arboretum and Water Gardens.

In the first part, stretching from the shared entrance with Humayun's Tomb to the Sunderwala Burj, the existing road has been replaced with a central grass sward, punctuated with small seating and garden areas, anchored to the Tomb itself at its northern end.

Movement takes place along paths on either side of this central garden space, so that, as you enter, the eye catches the axuality of the composition, but, as one moves, one looks past the monument, awareness being diverted to features beyond, and on either side. On the left, in contrast, is the deep and inviting shade of dense trees, and on the right, filtered views to Sunderwala Mahal and the raised landform of the Tree Garden, increasing the likelihood of the visitor's conscious or subliminal engagement with other aspects of this entrance landscape.

The second part of the axis draws the visitor further into the complex, introducing a glimpse of the proposed lake beyond, and the scattered monuments in the arboretum area to the east. The latter are proposed to be approached by means of a path

sweeping in a gentle curve into the forest. This is the 'arc of discovery'. It is a means of expressing in an interesting way how the experience of encountering the group of scattered monuments – discovering them inside a forest – is quite different in comparison to how the other three tombs are seen, visible from quite a distance as prominent objects on a flat landscape, framed rather than surrounded by trees.

#### The Carpet Garden

The space just north of Sunderwala Tomb is designed as an elaborate garden, contemporary in layout but evocative of Mughal geometry, scale and irrigation practices. It is centred on a long water feature slightly elevated from the surroundings, from which on either side flow very narrow water channels, each culminating in a pool at a lower elevation. These pools, which are in the form of Mughal *jalīs*, are the central feature of a miniature orchard. Viewed from the higher plinth of the Sunderwala Burj, with the sun behind the visitor, the garden would appear to be spread like a carpet, a fascinating foreground to the massed vegetation behind.

Though gardens in the Persian and Mughal tradition are characterized by spatial arrangements based on the four-square plan generated by the intersection of two axes perpendicular to each other, there is usually a strong directionality to one of these. The dominant axis stretches from the garden entrance to the central tomb, and from there to the prospect beyond, be it to the river as in Humayun's Tomb or the Taj, or right across Dal Lake to the distant mountains as in the Mughal pleasure gardens in the valley of Kashmir.

Attempting a contemporary expression of the traditional Mughal garden aesthetic, this simple arrangement of a linear water body flanked by areas of planting is adopted as the main motif for organizing the garden spaces of this part of the central axis.

The stylization of garden spaces and garden elements as two-dimensional patterns in the long-established design of garden carpets can serve as the approximation of a template in seeking an appropriate contemporary format to express the essential spirit of the Mughal garden:



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100 m

For refuge and renewal  
a magic space for concourse, music and rejoicing  
for contemplation's lonely spell  
conversation grave or a lover's shy disclosure...<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the garden carpet, with its accurate but graphically stylized depiction of the familiar *chahar-bagh*, establishes an interesting connection between the essentially outdoor practice of horticulture and the craft of indoor furnishing, a relationship which is probably unique among the major gardening traditions

of the world. Poetry about both gardens and carpets speaks of them in the same idiom, imagining the carpet as a garden and vice versa; it suggests a conceptual interweaving of interior and exterior. This is quite different from, and goes beyond the usual interactions between indoor space and outdoor landscape which are confined to literal considerations of physical and visual proximity.

"Like a babbling brook / we dance from one paradise to the next..."<sup>2</sup> Early irrigation practices feature prominently in many Persian and Mughal miniatures of garden scenes: small ponds in

[13] The Landscape Master Plan of Sunder Nursery and the Batashewala complex integrates ecological, heritage and nursery functions in a harmonious manner.

[14] Carpet, c. 1800. Islamic, made in north-western Iran or Kurdistan. Cotton (warp and weft), wool (pile); symmetrically knotted pile. Length 566.4 cm; width 242.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of William R. Pickering, 1967 (67.156).

each garden and water flowing in narrow open runnels from one garden to another.

In the proposed design for the carpet garden of the central axis, the idea of irrigation is suggested by the overflow of water from the long central water element into narrow channels, thence to be conveyed over small changes of level to a grove – a symbolic orchard garden perhaps – at the centre of which is water. Not a pool as one might expect, but a water feature inspired by the intricate geometry of Mughal *jalis* – a little water-parterre, if you will – through which the water runs, then overflows and is recirculated.

Each little garden – there are ten of them – is planted with a variety of citrus and is meant to be symbolic of the orchard planting in Mughal gardens. It has a water-parterre or, more correctly, what may be called a ‘water *jali*’ unique to itself. There are, therefore, ten such different patterns, carved in marble, through which the water trickles. This diversity of patterns echoes appropriately the way *jalis* are found in historical examples – in great variety, with many different patterns in the same panel.

Incorporating these features in contemporary design presents an excellent opportunity to exhibit and promote traditions of craftsmanship that have existed on the subcontinent through millenia.

#### The Water Gardens

The third part of the central axis depends far less on rectilinear alignments; it is dominated by an extensive body of water weaving between existing trees, its shape determined by the need to retain these fine specimens, and guided by the profile of the land. The presence of shady trees at its immediate edge provides the advantage of reducing evaporation losses, and also generating a greater variety of microclimatic conditions for propagation of water-associated plant material. The lake offers

opportunities for the design of a water-side promenade along its northern side, and for locating architecturally experimental nursery structures and a cafeteria at its edge.

#### Post-Project Sustainability

Since 2009 AKTC has been engaged in discussions with the Central Public Works Department, who are responsible for the care and maintenance of Sunder Nursery, to put in place a post-project management system that would utilize funds generated from facilities created by the project to pay for an effective management of the complex as well as infrastructure created in the wider project area, including the proposed Interpretation Centre.

When created, the proposed Trust would be responsible for a calendar of cultural events, site management (including security and horticulture operations), ecological awareness programmes (including nature walks, marketing and coordinating with various government agencies to ensure appropriate transport linkages), licensing and urban planning controls, among others. Market surveys commissioned by AKTC serve as a guide to ensure financial sustainability of the created infrastructure within a ten-year period, during which time AKTC would underwrite shortfall in revenue.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 From “Ode to a Garden Carpet” attributed to an unknown Sufi poet (c. 1500). The complete poem is quoted in the notes to chapter 2 (“The Concept of Traditional Forms”) in Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979.
- 2 Jalaluddin Rumi. The quotation is from the poem “The Birds of Paradise”, in the collection in Jonathan Star, *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved*, Tarcher/Penguin, 2007.

