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Parks in Lucknow: Landscapes of Commemoration and Recreation

Amita Sinha

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an overview of parks in Lucknow as landscapes of commemoration and recreation, themes pertinent to current political agendas and ideas regarding functions of public spaces. It reviews the park building in the city since independence and analyses them in two distinct phases; commenting on the changing ideas about their functions as public places as put in place by different political ideologies in power. The large parks of Lucknow, named after political leaders and memorializing them through statuary and biographical plaques, are primarily spaces of representation. While the size and location of these memorial parks ensures high visibility and a place in the 'must-see' tourist sites, their role as true civic spaces is questionable as is their sustainability. The essay concludes by discussing the appropriate direction, given the looming perils of climate change, for park building in the future.



Amita Sinha is the author of *Cultural Landscapes of India: Imagined, Enacted, and Reclaimed* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020) that won the 2022 J.B. Jackson Book Award and *Landscapes of India: Forms and Meanings* (University Press of Colorado, 2006; reprinted by Gyan Books, 2023). She is the co-editor of *Cultural Landscapes of South Asia: Studies in Heritage Conservation and Management* (Routledge, 2017) that won the 2018 Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) Award. She was a Senior Fulbright Researcher at the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in New Delhi in 2009 and was the recipient of Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Award Fellowship in 2018-19. She received the National Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects for Cultural Heritage Project on Taj Mahal, India, in 2001. A former Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (1989-2018), she has taught in the Department of Architecture and Regional Planning, IIT Kharagpur and in the Humanities and Social Sciences Department at IIT Gandhinagar in India.

amitasinha12@hotmail.com



Figure 1: Buddha Park



Figure 2: Lakshman Park

Introduction

Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh (UP), the largest state in India, has seen a proliferation of parks in the last 75 years since independence. The fabled Nawabi ‘city of gardens’ has transformed into a ‘city of parks’, thus reinventing its image in keeping with the changing times. This article is an overview of parks in Lucknow as landscapes of commemoration and recreation, themes pertinent to current political agendas and ideas regarding functions of public spaces. Park building in Lucknow since independence can be divided into two phases--pre-and post-liberalization eras--the latter beginning in 1990s that brought sweeping changes in the Indian economy with consequent impact on urban life. Parks in the first phase were comparatively smaller in size, concentrated in the older section of Lucknow, commemorated freedom fighters, and typically were designed with lawns, shrubbery, sculptures, and small water bodies. In the last two decades, large parks have been built with museums, gigantic statuary, soaring fountains, large water bodies, and exotic flora in the newer sections of the expanding city. These large parks are opportunities for political parties ruling the state of Uttar Pradesh to commemorate their leaders and showcase their contribution towards enhancing the city’s image, befitting one with such an illustrious past.

Municipal Parks

The core of historic Lucknow evolved on the banks of the River Gomti in the 18th and 19th centuries. Nawabi palaces were located in proximity to the river to take advantage of cool breezes and distant vistas. Gomti was a transportation artery and the primary source of irrigation for the gardens and orchards lining its banks, an elite landscape for the enjoyment of Nawabs and their wealthy courtiers. After the failed Uprising of 1857, the center of power shifted to the colonial landscape of cantonment and civil lines and the city turned its back on the river (Nagpal and Sinha, 2009). Public parks began to be built in the colonial picturesque style, derived from the English landscape garden whose informality



Figure 3: Hazrat Mahal Park



Figure 4: Shaheed Smarak

contrasted with the Indo-Islamic geometric layout of Nawabi *charbaghs* (four square gardens). The colonial imperial tradition of erecting statues in public parks as in Victoria Memorial Park north of the partially demolished last Nawabi palace complex, Kaiserbagh, set a precedent for statuary in the post-colonial park (Sinha, 2010). The colonial municipal park model combining memorialization with recreation continued to persist in the parks built in the city center after 1947. The popular parks in the old core of Lucknow include Haathi and Buddha Parks with statues of Mahavir and Buddha set in lawns with topiary; Buddha Park is popular for its boat rides in winding water channel (Figure 1). Lakshman Park with a statue and bust of Lakshman commemorates the origin of the city to the founding of a settlement on the banks of Gomti by the brother of Lord Rama (Figure 2). Victoria Park was renamed in 1972 after Begum Hazrat Mahal who led the Indian forces during the Uprising (Figure 3). The Uprising itself was commemorated in a marble obelisk placed as the focal point of Shaheed Smarak, a linear park on the banks of the Gomti (Figure 4). The leaders of the independence struggle in the 20th c. are also memorialized in parks--Globe Park has a statue of Rajendra Prasad, the first president of India, although its central feature is a large globe surrounded by a rose garden and lawns. Sarojini Park is named after the first governor of Uttar Pradesh, Sarojini Naidu whose bust stands on a raised terrace overlooking a large lawn with giraffe topiary.

The second phase of park building began with economic liberalization and increased financial resources allocated for city improvement. The late Lalji Tandon, Minister of Urban Development when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first came to power in the early 1990s, began redefining Lucknow's image. His modus operandi was to retrieve derelict spaces on the riverfront and other sites and convert them into parks that celebrate Lucknow's mythic history. Kudiya Park, an old bathing ghat, was renovated with a statue (representing the anthropomorphic form of the river) on a raised brick plaza, *chattris* (kiosks), and newly



Figure 5: Kudiya Ghat Park



Figure 6: Suraj Kund Park

built ghats. This park is a tribute to the Gomti's cultural value and its contribution to the historic urban life of Lucknow (Figure 5). Suraj Kund Park, designed by the late landscape architect Muhammad Shaheer, commemorates the ancient solar cult associated with a water tank. Sited adjacent to the city planetarium, the park celebrates the stellar world in iconography, inscriptions, and landscape design. A plaza with busts of Indian astronomers, mathematicians, and scientists under *chattris* overlooks the ancient tank, Suraj Kund, and a shrine under trees (Figure 6). Stele inscribed with planets' astrological significance and scientific data are located on gardens on the other side of the plaza. Kudiya and Suraj Kund Parks are imaginative exercises in recalling the mythic past, and a departure from the municipal parks of the first phase.

Large Parks

The rise of regional parties—Bahajun Samajwadi Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party (SP)— in Uttar Pradesh and their coming into power through state elections has resulted in large parks being built in the state capital in the last two decades. These parks are ostensibly for providing greenery and recreational opportunities to the citizens of Lucknow; however, their real purpose appears to be memorialization of their party leaders through statuary and museums. The small municipal park has become monumentalized, i.e., grandiose in its conception and lavish in its details and execution. The size and number of statues have proliferated as have buildings and gateways in the ever-increasing park area. BSP and SP have engaged in a contest of who builds a larger park with a taller statue. This has happened in tandem with the city's growth in all directions, but especially along the major transportation corridors. The most spectacular parks are located in the emerging new urban core in the south east close to the Gomti's banks with office buildings, hotels, upscale housing and new parks, and riverfront development.

The BSP leader Ms. Mayawati has single handedly been responsible for making Dalit social reformers and politicians visible in Lucknow's public sphere, highlighting what she has



Figure 7: Kanshi Ram Smarak and Eco Garden **Figure 8:** Ambedkar Sthal

called ‘suppressed history’ (Sinha and Kant, 2015). By claiming public spaces through neo-revivalist Buddhist architecture and iconography, Mayawati has not only asserted Dalit identity tied to religion but also reconstructed their collective memory, instilled pride in their past, and gained self-respect. The memorial parks designed by her architect Jay Kaktikar have emerged as a landscape of empowerment because of their location, visibility, scale, architecture, and statuary. The parks are monumental complexes built of expensive materials such as marble, sandstone, and granite, and are predominantly hardscape with minimal greenery. Their revivalist style is evident in Sanchi stupa-inspired domes, boundary walls designed like Buddhist railings, *chaitya* window openings and relief patterns on walls, *mandap* like pavilions, and freestanding Ashokan pillars. The monumental scale is created through huge plazas, long vistas, and buildings on high plinths with soaring domes, imposing gateways, high boundary walls, and tall fountains and statues. The prominent location of parks—Buddha Vihar, Kanshi Ram Smarak and Eco Garden (**Figure 7**) on the road from the Airport, and Ambedkar Sthal on the banks of Gomti—ensures a wide cone of visibility for domed buildings dominating the skyline. Statues of Gautam Buddha, medieval social reformers, Bhimrao Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and Mayawati abound, inside the buildings, as focal points of plazas and parks, and at urban crossroads, representing the symbolic capital of the imagined Dalit community.

Among all the parks built by Mayawati, Ambedkar Sthal sprawling over 107 acres, is the most spectacular with a domed memorial crowning a cascading building structure rising 34 meters above the street level, and replete with Buddhist imagery. The entire complex is an assortment of domed buildings, grandiose plazas with tall freestanding pillars, arcade of statues, and a gallery of 60 sandstone elephants (**Figure 8**). Across the street Ram Manohar Lohia Park designed by the late landscape architect Muhammad Shaheer, competes with Ambedkar Sthal in its size and embellishment. Spread over 85 acres, it was built in 2004, with Ram Manohar Lohia Smarak Sthal as its central feature containing a 20 feet high statue of the SP leader encircled by four pylons (**Figure 9**). Other mnemonic features include a sandstone wall with metallic plates etched with quotes from Lohia, and six

cylindrical pillars with embedded steel plaques on Samajwadi Party and its predecessor Socialist Party along the walkways. Although with more greenery than Ambedkar Sthal, it is not lacking in hardscape features including five gateways and their plazas, paved paths, and an outdoor amphitheater with a clock tower. In 2016, Jayaprakash Narayan Interpretation Center was built adjacent to Lohia Park, adding nearly 19 acres of public space to the memorialization of SP leadership in this precinct. Designed by Sourabh Gupta of Archohm, it has a Museum of Socialism and an International Convention Center consisting of sports facilities, auditorium, luxury hotel, and a helipad. The museum is a wedge-shaped trapezoidal building, rising out of a water body and seemingly carved out of the façade of the convention center, reputed to be the tallest building in Lucknow. The terracotta clad structures are set within landscaped grounds that include a vast amphitheater. Jayaprakash Narayan's statues grace the cascading steps of the Museum of Socialism and the interior lit by light wells and slit windows celebrates his memory using audio-visual media, archives, and kinetic sculpture.

Not too far from Ambedkar-Lohia park complex, Janeshwar Mishra Park, was built in 2016 during Akhilesh Singh's tenure as Chief Minister of UP. Designed by Surinder Suneja, it is touted to be the largest in Asia, spread over 376 acres, with a 35 feet statue of Janeshwar Mishra, a Samajwadi party leader. Although on the banks of the Gomti, it makes no attempt to engage with the river but has its own two water bodies supposedly recharged through water harvesting (Kant, 2017). It is designed in a naturalistic style with plentiful tree planting (the site is in a green belt zone), and winding pathways around mounded landforms overlooking the curvilinear water bodies. It has a theme park feel to it—models of MIG 21 aircraft, T72 Tank, 207 feet high flagstaff, 125 feet high water jet—plus children's playgrounds, open air gym equipment, and paddle boating in the water bodies. Not to be outdone, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently in power in UP is planning to glorify its leaders—Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in a 65 acres site on the Hardoi road. Each statue will be 101 feet tall with a lotus (BJP's symbol) backdrop.¹ The late Deen Dayal Upadhyaya already has his own park along the road to Rae Bareilly, along the Sharda Canal. A linear park designed by Surinder Suneja and covering 220 acres, it has his statue and of Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, leader of Lok Dal (regional part supporting farmers' interests), thus accommodating two parties whose ideologies are rooted in cultural nationalism. It is an eclectic mélange of features such as a rural diorama, two museums dedicated to irrigation and culture, handicraft plaza, children's playground, and a rose garden.

Riverfront Parks

The dominance of political ideology and symbolism means a lost opportunity to affirm the unique identity of Lucknow as a Nawabi city where gardens, a local variant of the great Mughal gardens, once lined the Gomti. Today, the Gomti Riverfront parks built by BSP and SP governments are inspired by global images of riverfront development, drawing their

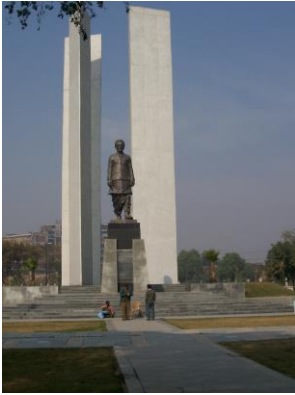


Figure 9: Ram Manohar Lohia Park



Figure 10: Gomti Riverfront Park

inspiration from Seine in Paris and Thames in London. The river stretch near the large parks in the southeast of Lucknow has been straightened and channelized with parks on both banks. Sarada Canal was rerouted to feed the river pinched from 250 meters to 100-125 meters (Yadav, 2022). The 16 meters deep diaphragm wall on both banks has destroyed the fluvial ecology and mobile shores, a natural barrier against flooding and soil erosion (**Figure 10**).² Ambedkar Gomti Vihar is a riverfront landscape of baroque gestures—radiating streets from the monumental 1090 and Samta Mulak *chaurahas* (roundabouts) with statuary and fountains and massive gateways leading to lawns designed in circular, radial, and quadrangular patterns centered on pavilions with statues on the west bank. On the east bank, Gomti Riverfront Park built by Akhilesh Yadav has a riverfront promenade lined with palm trees and *chattris* for views to the Gomti; shaded seating areas, attractive lighting, and a food stalls on Marine Drive above the promenade make it an attractive destination for locals and tourists alike. However, the exclusively visual connection with Gomti has supplanted more active uses of the riverfront as can be seen upstream in the vicinity of the older core of Lucknow where the vernacular landscape of shrines, *maidans*, and *ghats* allows people to physically interact with the river.

Future Direction

The large parks of Lucknow, named after political leaders and memorializing them through statuary and biographical plaques, are primarily spaces of representation. The deification of leaders as *mahapurush* (great spirit) follows the rich iconographic Indic tradition converging with the colonial precedent of erecting statues in parks and urban squares. While the size and location of these memorial parks ensures high visibility and a place in the ‘must-see’ tourist sites, their role as true civic spaces is questionable. Their ticketed entry ensures that the very poor are excluded; as walled precincts with imposing gateways and patrolled by security guards, they represent an elitist attitude in their expansive green

lawns, fountains, and expensive building materials, contrasting with the parties' populist rhetoric of championing the cause of economically weak and socially marginalized low castes. The concept of urban beautification in Lucknow is largely based upon the colonial picturesque tradition in which lawns surround the memorial monument and statuary with shrubbery and flower beds for embellishment. To this is added the amusement park aesthetic evident in features such as musical fountains and water rides. Manicured nature perceived as a visual relief from the heat, dust, and urban congestion precludes indigenous view of nature—the sacred tree as the house for gods and water as purifying. The memorial parks are image driven and lack opportunities for public participation in creating inclusive civic spaces. Programming for cultural events such as open-air concerts, *mushairas* (Urdu poetry recitation), *Ramlila* and other folk dramas is lacking. Public art is confined to memorial statues and does not include work of local artists or temporary art installations.

In 2021, the two local bodies responsible for park building and maintenance --Lucknow Municipal Corporation (LMC) and Lucknow Development Authority (LDA) --received government funds for development and 'beautification' of 1,185 parks.³ LMC maintains around 3000 parks in the city, of which majority are small neighborhood parks. In the comparatively newer sections of the city such as Indiranagar and Gomtinagar laid out on a modified gridiron pattern, a fine grain of built-up structures and open spaces has emerged with small parks as the foci of low-rise housing. The most successful of these parks have an active neighborhood involvement as in the past LMC did not have resources for good maintenance. Small parks have many therapeutic and social benefits—because of their proximity to houses they are semi-public spaces and if well maintained, are intensively used by local residents for walking, doing exercises and yoga, and socializing with neighbors (Sinha, 2005). Children can come on their own and play unsupervised. There are therapeutic benefits of access to 'nearby nature' and seasonal flowering plants make the parks seem like extensions of the front garden of adjoining houses. Festivals such as Holi and Diwali, fetes and family events are celebrated in the park, building local communities. Small parks are a viable alternative to the large gated public park that is designed to keep out the very poor, squatters and homeless.

The question remains--is the recent splurge in large memorial parks sustainable? What is the appropriate direction, given the looming perils of climate change, for park building in the next 75 years? While the built-up area of Lucknow increased from 93 sq. kms to 280 sq. kms between 2000 and 2016, its vegetation cover decreased 23.5% to 8.4%, along with a decrease in water bodies from 0.77% to 0.62% (Verma, Srivastava, and Singh, 2020). This has impacted temperatures (maximum temperature is nearly 50 degrees Centigrade) and water resources with an annual 0.56 meters decrease in groundwater level (Lucknow Master Plan 2031). Large parks built by Mayawati do not have much greenery; the dominance of hardscape creates a heat island effect making their use uncomfortable in summers. Urban green spaces have a significant cooling effect and have been found to be positively correlated with land surface temperature in Lucknow, lowering it by 1.5 degrees

centigrade (Verma and Garg, 2020). For designing sustainable parks, vernacular and historic landscape precedents offer a solution. Nawabi gardens were productive landscapes of mango groves and other fruit orchards and their hydrology a good example of efficient water collection and distribution for garden irrigation. Vernacular landscape of maidans and *upavans* (tree groves) are a useful precedent for sustainable park design, requiring modest resources in their maintenance. Unlike the colonial lawn, they are well suited to the hot dry climate of northern Indian plains. The sustainable park has to be designed with natural processes, not by controlling nature to fit an image. It will use renewable energy, harvest rainwater, and will be planted with native, not exotic, vegetation. Composting, community gardening, and recycling storm and grey water would be salient to its functioning as a healthy ecosystem (Cranz and Boland, 2004). This park model can mitigate climate change and encourage community participation, thus making it environmentally and socially sustainable. ■

Notes:

- ¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/prerna-sthal-statues-to-be-tallest-at-72ft/articleshow/74720638.cms>; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lucknow/atal-prerna-sthal-to-come-up-on-70-acres-on-hardoi-road-in-lucknow/story-els4sTVuFpoJwo8q7fiD2N.html>
- ² <https://ballotboxindia.com/ap/gomti-river-riverfront-lucknow/5182018549/>
- ³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/foundation-stone-of-civil-works-laid-for-857-parks-in-lucknow-101640432245473.html>; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/857-parks-in-city-to-get-makeover-worth-rs-44cr/articleshow/88482626.cms>

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