

Public Spaces Must Bee Interactive and Enriching

What makes Sunder Nursery different from Lodhi Gardens is its engagement with today's issues

Silk Stalkings



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Sunder Nursery is fast shaping up to become the alternative to Lodhi Gardens—especially for those who are distressed by the new elites who are now treading paths (security men in tow) made famous by the old guard of Lutyens' Delhi. And in many ways, this beautifully laid out nursery-turned-public-park is a step up from their old haunt as it has a definite 21st century ethos that Lodhi Gardens lacks.

That, of course, is in no small measure due to the work of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Union Urban Affairs Ministry. The exquisite Humayun's Tomb complex with Sunder Nursery on one side and Abdur Rahim Khan-e-Khanan's mausoleum on the edge of trendy Nizamuddin East on the other, is a wonderful mix of history and nature.

Both have magnificent medieval monuments, but what puts Sunder Nursery on a different plane from Lodhi Gardens is its engagement with today. Art installations and organic markets, quixotic plots of foodgrain and flowers, beehives and water bodies stimulate eclectic Indians—and likeminded foreigners. There is an obvious concern for the future besides a commitment to preserve the past.

Public spaces need to be interactive and connect with the lives of those who frequent it. The relatively recent spate of exhibitions like the hugely successful Hunar Haat on Rajpath's lawns (where the PM famously snacked on litti-chokha while admiring the handiwork of artisans) probably have a similar intention. But there has to be more to engagement than commerce and entertainment.

A friend and I finally made it to Sunder Nursery last weekend for one such subliminal connection—via a bee workshop. The organic market held there every Sunday by the Earth Collective is already a huge draw in this 90 acre swathe of gracious old trees and restored structures, newly re-laid Mughal-style formal gardens and thickets of native shrubbery. Bees are a less known but crucial feature.

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exclusively female, I might add—workers. They not only pollinate but also gather nectar which they convert into honey in their hives to feed their larvae and pupae, which we humans then greedily appropriate.

For most of us, however, they are nuisances that refuse to go away—like that proverbial bee in the bonnet—and have a stinging retort to boot. The only bees we have some affection for is the fuzzy bumble bee, of which India has 48 species. But, as Rakesh Gupta of the Golden Hive Foundation revealed to us at the workshop, bees are pretty amazing—and not merely because they make honey.

Incidentally, not all honey is great. Commercially produced honey has little value as the processes kill the benefits; even putting honey in hot water or tea destroys its goodness! Nothing more than lukewarm will preserve its unique healing properties. While high altitude honey is best as there are no pesticides in wild flowers, for other floral varieties kinds, it depends on the bonafides of artisanal beekeepers.

Back to bees: their colonies are awesome, more efficient than even the most 'advanced' societies we humans create. The sole queen bee of a hive is a conscientious, hardworking monarch created democratically by her all-female workforce, who mates just once in her lifetime with drones (the only male bees, whose work is to mate and die!) and then lays 1,000 eggs a day for the rest of her 3-year lifespan.

Worker bees live for just six weeks, but their days are filled with unceasing activity. For the first few days they tend to the eggs, larvae and pupae in the honeycomb cells, turn pollen into edible pellets and evaporate nectar into honey. Then after three days of orientation flights in a 1.5km radius from their hive, they spend the rest of their lifespan collecting and depositing nectar and pollen.

Bees have age-old plans for every exigency, from a queen's decline or demise to change of weather. But like other animals there have no contingency for human rapaciousness. We cause climate change and loss of habitat, we destroy their hives in order to plunder them or just to get rid of them. We spray crops and flora with pesticides that transfer onto bees and thoughtlessly shower killer insecticides.

But we covet their honey, protein-rich pollen grains, beeswax and magical royal jelly that transforms a three day old worker bee larva into a queen bee, with nary a thought for the astonishing, indefatigable creatures that create them. My friend and I can say without doubt that, thanks to this workshop at Sunder Nursery, we will never look at honey—and bees—with the same irate eyes ever again.

I don't have the gumption to keep bees on my balcony as Rakeshji (probably) fondly hopes but the two hours spent learning about them have been invaluable. With bee populations falling alarmingly worldwide, a perfect solution would be if people like us can offer our balconies and rooftops for beekeeping, and experts can come round and 'manage' them for us, with honey as the sweetener!

Open spaces help to open minds. Trips to Lodhi Gardens—whether for power-walks or picnics—are refreshing and energising, but Sunder Nursery's artisanal markets, beehives and various nature-related workshops show how urban public spaces can serve a higher purpose by opening eyes to many of the big issues that profoundly impact us all but find little space in the media or in our own minds.