

The loss of a calm which gardens bring

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Gardens provide great insights into their owner's priorities in life. This fact was made clear to me at the age of eight when I climbed a mango tree. Swinging onto a branch that seemed strong enough, I held on to it in fright as it came away with an awful cracking sound from the main trunk and precipitated my descent to the ground. Dusting sand off my frock, I ran to confess to my mother. Exclaiming over the calamity, she mobilized the gardener, the driver, the cook and the peon to help her reposition the broken branch which was very gently bandaged with an old soft sari of hers. She didn't think it necessary to ask me, her one and only child, if I had got hurt! I suppose I should be grateful that I didn't get walloped for hurting her beloved tree.

Of the many gardens I've wandered through, some had the special quality of disorder in them, which made them unique. A jasmine creeper whimsically planted in the middle of an extensive lawn had all the children in the neighbourhood plucking its buds for garlands. A tall henna bush took root at the entrance of a friend's house. Soon, the lovely green of its tender leaves lent atmosphere to the entire place.

In other gardens, an exotic tree or plant was the focus of attention. A solitary wood-apple tree, standing its own among the coconut and mango trees crowding a neighbour's backyard, attracted many enquiries about its health because everyone wanted some of its delicious fruit. My mother became very ambitious once and tried to grow an alphonso in the alien environment of Chennai. The tree grew, fruit appeared, and I can tell you that they were the strangest alphonso I have ever eaten, they tasted nothing like those nourished by Ratnagiri soil and Konkani waters.

That haphazard charm is lost when a garden is landscaped down to the last white pebble. An acquaintance of mine, who has no green thumb, methodically uprooted the garden she inherited. She got the area landscaped, ensuring that it required minimal care from her. The result is a garden that looks the same any time of the year. Locked into artificial contours, it denies the changing seasons their exuberant vitality.

I suppose I should be grateful that she still believes in the idea that a home and its garden are inseparable. I'm filled with dismay when I see houses all over Chennai being pulled down, gardens decimated, and concrete

sealing every square inch of the land. The story is the same everywhere: trying to ensure an amicable division of their property between children, elderly parents convert their spacious garden-homes into several self-contained apartments. The neem tree opposite my house, whose spreading branches were axed to make space for one such apartment complex to flourish, has never regained its grandeur.

As real estate prices vault, the city is shorn of greenery and the sense of leisure that a garden affords. What it tells us about ourselves is disturbing. To my mind it reveals a shrinking inwards, a voluntary relinquishing of an invaluable dimension of life and an unconscious yielding to gross materiality. A wealth commonly available to anyone owning land in the city, the delight of watching plants grow, is paradoxically becoming something only the rich possess.