

# Memories & Layers

## Collages of Cubbon Park

### Viral Mehta

What is a collage? In relation to place-making, could it be elements taken from different places and combined - juxtaposing, overlapping, merging - to simulate an experience? Cubbon Park, Bangalore feels like a collage. This unique park is made of diverse elements - flora in particular - and welcomes myriad activities. Designed and created by British colonists in 1870, Cubbon Park came to life for two primary reasons. One, as an (unachieved) extension of the Lalbagh botanical garden to form a continuous green corridor between the *pete* and Cantonment. Two, for the British to feel at home, by planting tree species and practising gardening techniques brought from their home country and around the world to create a picturesque landscape. The 300 acre park in the middle of Bangalore, comprises so many elements that it is difficult and limiting to represent in a single collage. Hence, I approached collage-making to reflect three major aspects of Cubbon Park - botanical variety, cultural diversity and ecological impact.

To achieve a home away from home, the Britishers introduced exotic species, and implemented design strategies and visions of serial blossoming which are seen even today in the park. The pink trumpet tree planted in a large open ground stands out from far and provides an ever-magnificent experience. The *nilgiri* plantation in the low-lying area of the Park, planted to prevent malaria, still stands tall. Several tree species known for trading and medicinal value, found their way to Bangalore through Cubbon Park. The boulder outcrop of the Dharwar cratons within the Park remains unchanged, capturing the region's natural terrain formation. A few Hindu shrines, along with the sacred landscape of the *ashwath katte* (a traditional peepal tree seating with Hindu gods), became part of the Park at the time of its making, and continue to preserve the regional landscape. The bandstand, commemorative statues of British royals, government buildings around and within the Park, including the High Court, State Central Library, Venkatappa Art Gallery and Government Museum - all these independent elements kept adding to the collage.

### Collage One

Broadly, tree species found in Cubbon Park can be classified into five categories. The first, representing the native species of the region, include honge, jackfruit, neem, copper pod, ficus, etc. The second category includes species that are native to the Indian subcontinent but not necessarily the Deccan Plateau, and were cultivated across the country for the use of their fruits, leaves, or bark, such as the mango tree.

The third category is species such as coconut and tamarind that were brought to India from other countries and continents and are now naturalised and integrated into the Indian ecology and culture so that most times they are perceived as native species. The fourth consists of tree species, such as the *nilgiri* and Rain trees, which arrived as gifts for kings or were brought by rulers like Tipu Sultan and Babur who were keen botanists.

The fifth, and maybe most dramatic layer in Cubbon Park, is the tree species introduced by British colonists to create beautiful scenic landscapes. This huge variety of trees, consisting of native, naturalised and exotic species, was strategically planned to create a collage wherein at least one flowering tree was in sight at all places and times of the year, a phenomenon called serial blossoming. Exotic trees are important for serial blossoming, as most Indian native trees blossom during the summer, while the exotic trees keep the canopy collages colourful in the other months.





### Collage Two

The range of cultural elements and activities that take place in Cubbon Park indeed come as a surprise to a first-time visitor. Cyclists, dog lovers, skateboarders, stand-up performers, worshippers, nature lovers, yogis, artists, sculptors, classical music enthusiasts, historians - all can find their own place and people within Cubbon Park. There are large open spaces for people to perform yoga, play frisbee, soak in the sun; nature trails within dense plantations for jogging and solitary walks; a bandstand where one can find classical vocal artists practising on early Sunday mornings. Vehicles are prohibited on a few roads of the park on Sundays and are used for skating instead. A dedicated dog park draws dog-parents and

their dogs from across the city to socialise and play. The 137 years old Government Museum, houses relics from Mohenjo Daro, Halebidu, and Vijayanagar, some of them older than 5000 years and of immense historical value. Intricate wooden sculptures dotting various locations in the Park, are the outcome of a wood-carving workshop, where various artists created nineteen sculptures with fallen branches and deadwood of silver oak, raintree, and gulmohar. An *ashwath katte* with two gigantic peepal trees, shrines of Hindu deities and snake gods, represents the few sacred landscapes left undisturbed by urban growth, and remains a hotspot for everyday religious activities in the Park.

### Collage Three

A green patch comprising native and naturalised species such as Mango, Peepal, Banyan, Amaltas, Pink cassia, Palash, and African tulip, helps reduce pollution in and around the park, while providing shade in the hot summer months. An interesting phenomenon called 'canopy shyness' can be seen in rainforest tree species, such as the raintree and the African tulip tree, where the treetop branches do not touch one another, allowing the sunlight to reach the ground and forming a visual network of meandering pathways in the sky. The park also has an intricate, interconnected water system of ponds and swales,

that help in nourishing the biodiversity. However, the Park's *nilgiri* trees, an Australian native species imported to India for their many uses, such as timber, fuelwood, paper pulp, and oils, give cause for concern because of their tendency to drain moisture and nutrients from the soil. The British extensively planted *nilgiri* trees near Bangalore's marshes and wetlands, to drain them and restrict mosquito-breeding to prevent the spread of malaria. Although malaria is no longer a threat today, the *nilgiri* plantations in the low-lying areas remain, damaging the groundwater.



#### Related references

Dhanpal, Sonali (2022). 'The making of a model town: planning in a Princely city and the All-India Sanitary Conferences.' *Planning Perspectives*, October 17, 2022.

Pai, Roopa (2022). 'A new book traces the shared roots of Cubbon Park and Bengaluru, and what the future holds for them.' *Scroll*, October 05, 2022.

---

Viral Mehta is an architect with a keen interest in landscape design, and a researcher currently exploring the terrain of the Deccan plateau. Email: [viralmehta.architect@gmail.com](mailto:viralmehta.architect@gmail.com). Instagram: [@eyesforlandscape](https://www.instagram.com/eyesforlandscape)