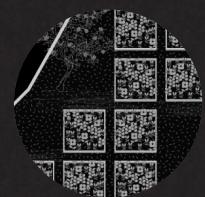
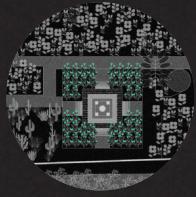
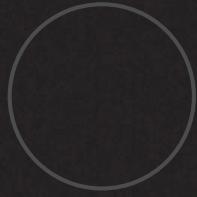
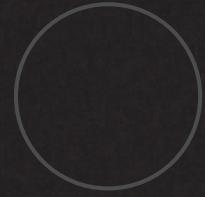




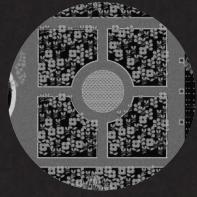
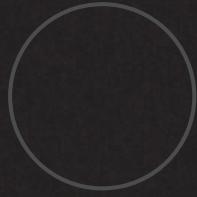
THE GARDEN



HISTORIES



OF AHMEDABAD





Landscape Environment Advancement Foundation, LEAF
Estd. 2007

LEAF—the not for profit research arm for M/s Prabhakar B. Bhagwat—was founded in 2007 by Prof. Prabhakar B. Bhagwat, India's first qualified Landscape Architect. In the nearly 2 decades since the Foundation has been active, it has worked towards the demonstration of two ideas—the first that the first being that design cannot be undertaken in silos—but rather must be informed and supported by context, and the second that the idea of the profession must expand beyond practice to create spaces that allow for dialogue, conversation, and reflection.

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Preface

05

In the chronicled history of Ahmedabad, there is a tale of a *Malik*¹ of the Gujarat Sultanate who retired early, simply to stay close to his garden. He chose to spend the remainder of his life there, and was eventually buried in that very garden. This is merely one of the many stories that have come up during the course of this exploration, reminding us that gardens are more than just a carefully crafted combination of plant material, water features, walkways and seating spaces. They are a cultural consequence layered with meaning, acting as palimpsests of the city's identity, while also being transient and temporal.

“There are many Gardens in Ahmedabad; and are so full of Trees, that when one looks upon that Town from a high place, it seems to be a Forest of green Trees...”

in *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the Third Part of the travels of Jean De Thevenot...*²

Alluded to as a city of gardens so abundant that it appeared as “one big garden,”³ Ahmedabad’s garden legacy remains surprisingly under-documented. Once a repository of culture and leisure, most of these spaces have faded into obscurity, leaving only faint echoes in historical records and collective memory. This study intends to bring such forgotten spaces to life, and show how gardens—through changing ideas and meanings—reflect the city’s layered history. As a historically significant mercantile and economic centre, Ahmedabad is riddled with stories of social, political, and communal strife, natural calamities, experiments with self-governance, and the influence of colonial interventions that was quite unique to this city. Several consequential events have contributed to the transformation of Ahmedabad’s gardens: the diffusion of external ideas, the rise of textile mills, the emergence of an urban elite, colonial infrastructure, the city becoming the first capital of the independent state of Gujarat, and the forces of cosmopolitanism. Through this study, we seek to understand how such events shaped the city’s gardens, and in turn, how gardens reveal Ahmedabad’s enduring relationship with nature.

To pursue this inquiry is to look not only at gardens for their form and aesthetic, but also at the complex interplay between human behaviour, cultural expression, and spatial design. They must be

read as evolving forms, continuously shaped by and reflective of the evolution of society at large. *The Garden Histories of Ahmedabad* is an investigation into this potential of garden spaces as vessels of socio-cultural memory; spaces that hold within them the shifting tides of power, society, and identity.

This endeavour was instigated by a desire to look back into the story of Ahmedabad for a record of gardens. We began by looking at accounts of various travellers, starting from Alberuni in the 11th century, to French, Portuguese, Dutch and English travellers in consequent time periods. These travelogues proved to be a rich trove of descriptions of gardens, architecture, and the socio-political milieu of Ahmedabad. Although these accounts often carry the cultural biases of their authors, in most cases they provide the only glimpses available of gardens now lost. Complementing these narratives is an extensive cross-referencing of multiple sources; ranging from literature, archival sources and art, to first hand documentation and oral narratives. The presence of institutions of higher learning and research in Ahmedabad—a significant feature of the city’s identity—proved invaluable, both in terms of the resources they provided, and their overall influence on the shaping of gardens.

In considering these narratives, it is important to acknowledge that this study engages with the garden-making practices of imperial rulers, as well as the industrial families of Ahmedabad, acknowledging their role in shaping the city’s spatial and aesthetic fabric. While our focus on their acts of patronage may risk being misconstrued as casting these figures in an unequivocally positive light, the intent is not to celebrate a singular dimension. Rather, it is to recognise that although patronage played a significant role in shaping Ahmedabad’s gardens and built environments, it did so within a wider field of social, ecological, and economic structures that equally warrant critical attention.

What do we mean by a ‘garden’?

Recognising that gardens are not static entities but evolve, adapt, and cease to exist, the study posits them as social constructs, dynamically intertwined with cultural and behavioural nuances. Moving beyond formal design critique, we view each of these gardens as lived spaces; as products of culture, modes of

expression, and reflections of societal and urban developments. Although the definition of a 'garden' is not uniform and may vary across time, geography, and context, this inquiry draws from the understanding of an 'Indian' garden derived in *A Million Gardens*⁴:

"A garden was a space that had a circumscribed territory, its limits notional or clearly marked but at all times discernible and finite; the very marking of this territory could happen by an act of active making or even claiming one already marked and within this would exist a certain prescribed ritual that allowed the many ideas of nature to be experienced in an articulate manner."

in *Tracing Narratives: Indian Landscape Design*⁵

With this definition as a foundation, we have tried to contextualise gardens within Ahmedabad to encompass the various forms that have emerged across the city. Our approach for this study extends beyond formal, curated garden landscapes. We also intend to include spaces that may not traditionally be categorized as gardens, but still represent 'human interventions in natural landscapes with an underlying sense of purpose or ritual'. This broadens our scope to include orchards, temple and house courtyards, roadside plantations, and other functionally devised spaces. Though not always conforming to strict garden design conventions, these carry cultural, ecological, and historical significance that is inseparable from Ahmedabad's evolving landscape. Ultimately, as the research progressed, it sought to uncover and incorporate multiple interpretations of what constitutes a garden within the city's context.

The gardens identified⁶ and discussed in this study have not only shaped the cultural landscape of Ahmedabad, but also have had an impact on its evolving Garden form. This research does not claim to be exhaustive, or become an accurate representation of all the gardens in the city. Rather, it is an exploration of the multitude of garden typologies one is able to observe. For each garden—depending on the availability of information—this study considers its location, historical context, concept and form, biodiversity, patterns of use and activity, and the transformations it underwent over time.

As these aspects are investigated, a set of questions guides us:
 What were the ideas behind the making of gardens? Who made them, and who used them? What sets a garden apart from the others that were made at the same time, or for the same reason? What are the memories that people associate with a garden? How have some of these gardens survived the passage of time? How have they been repurposed or reconditioned? And most importantly, what is the legacy they leave behind?

¹ An official that handles the complete administration of an area under his jurisdiction. Similar position to a Duke.

² Thevenot, 1666/1949, p. 14.

³ Commissariat, 1931a, p. 29.

⁴ A lecture that attempted to define the various forms of the 'Indian' garden later led to the *Tracing Narratives* travelling exhibition, which explored the fundamental question of what an Indian garden truly encompasses. Both endeavours were undertaken by LEAF.

⁵ LEAF India, 2017, p. X.

⁶ More on this in *How to read this monograph* (see page 11)



Gardens of Memory

Ahmed Shah's Mosque

Shah Bari

Bagh-e-Fateh

Jitbagh

Dutch Tombs

Andhari Bari

Jesingbhai ni Wadi

Victoria Garden

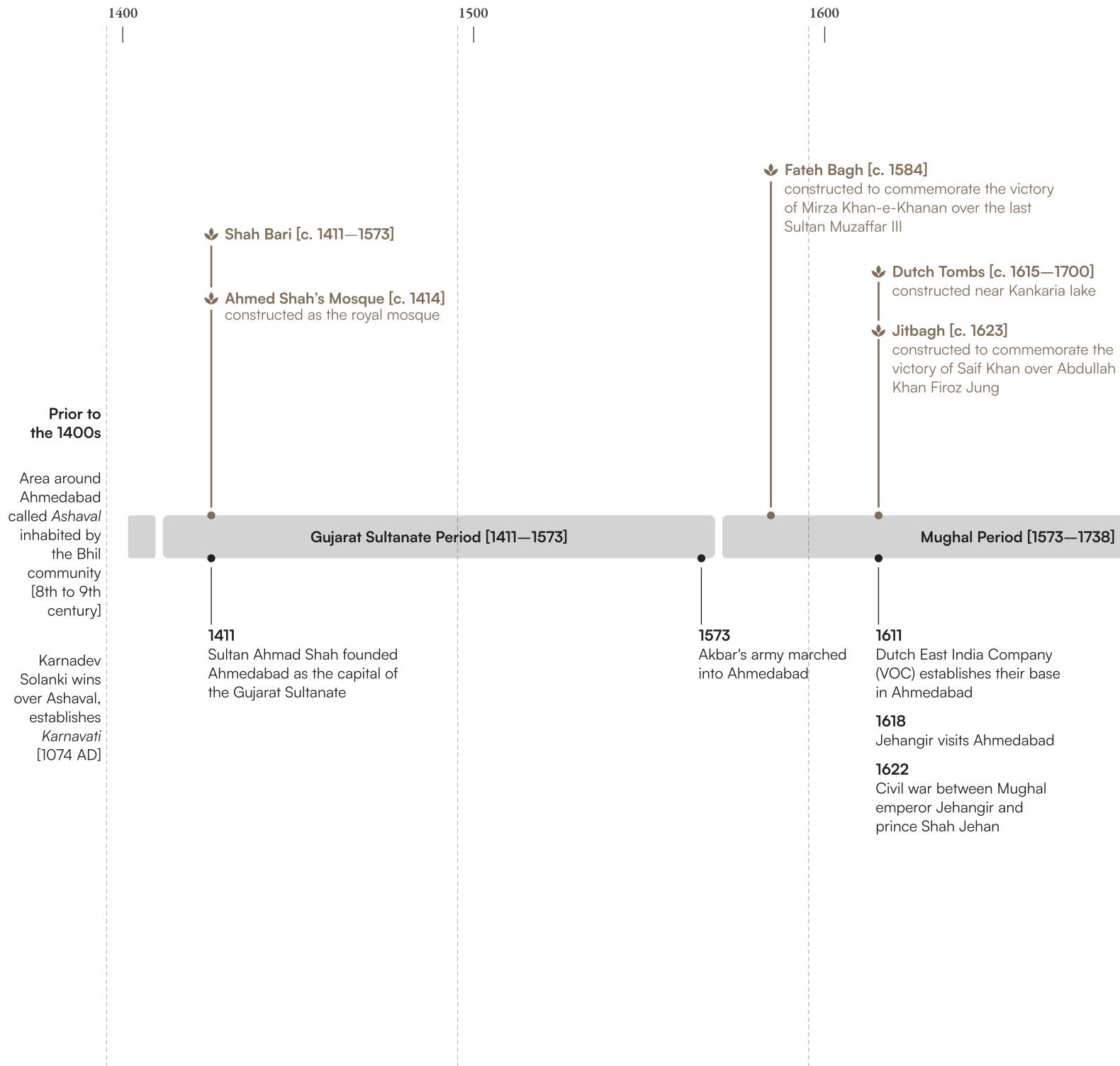
Ashaval Garden

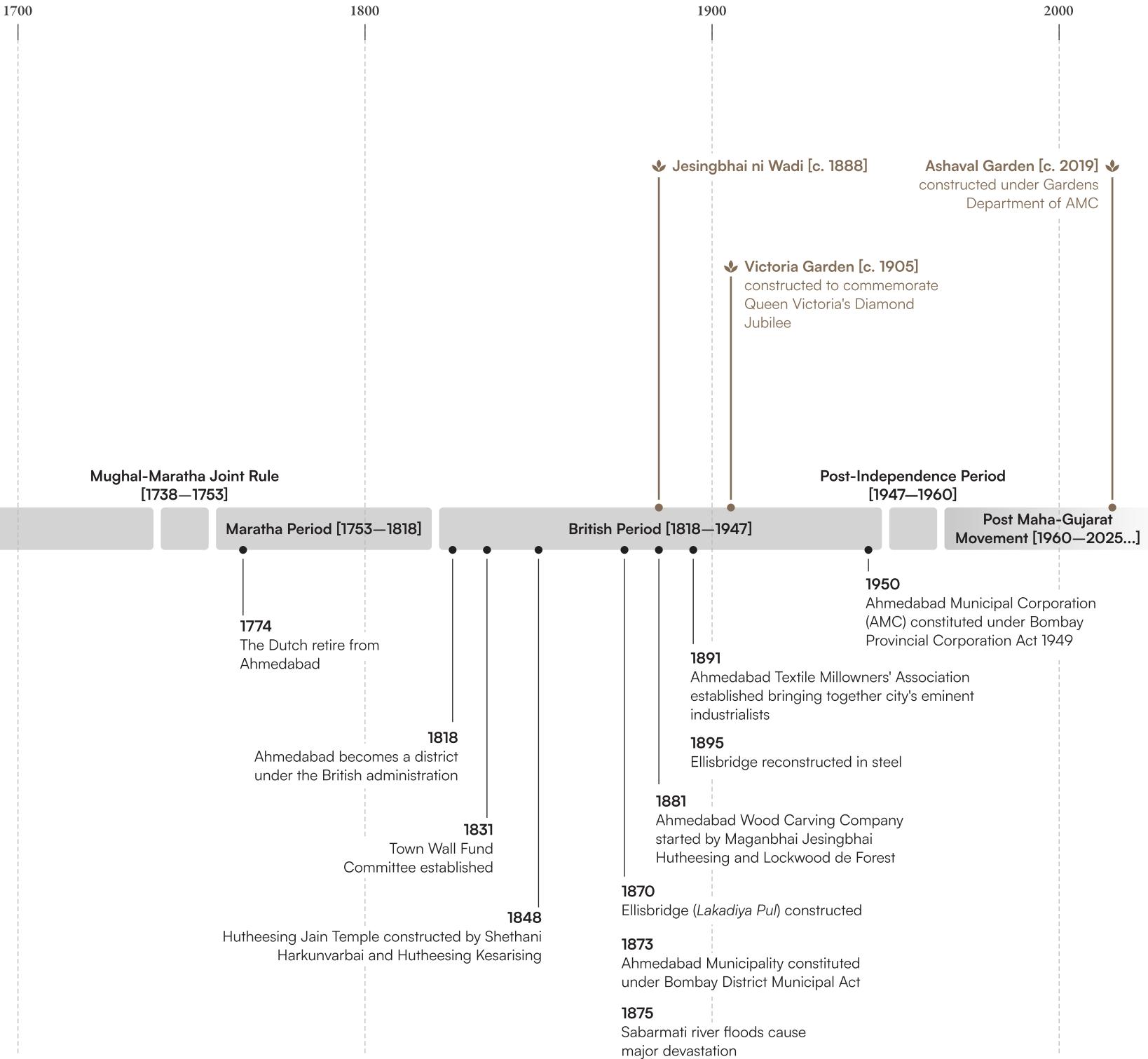


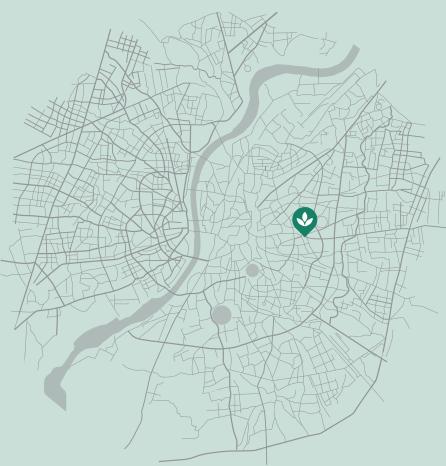


Gardens, as repositories of history, capture the cultural and social dynamics of their time. While transient by nature, they hold layers of memory; they transform over the years due to neglect or decay, yet retain traces of their original purpose. Designed for posterity, these garden spaces embody the idea of legacy, and the ways in which evidence is retained or altered reflect the changing narratives of the city.

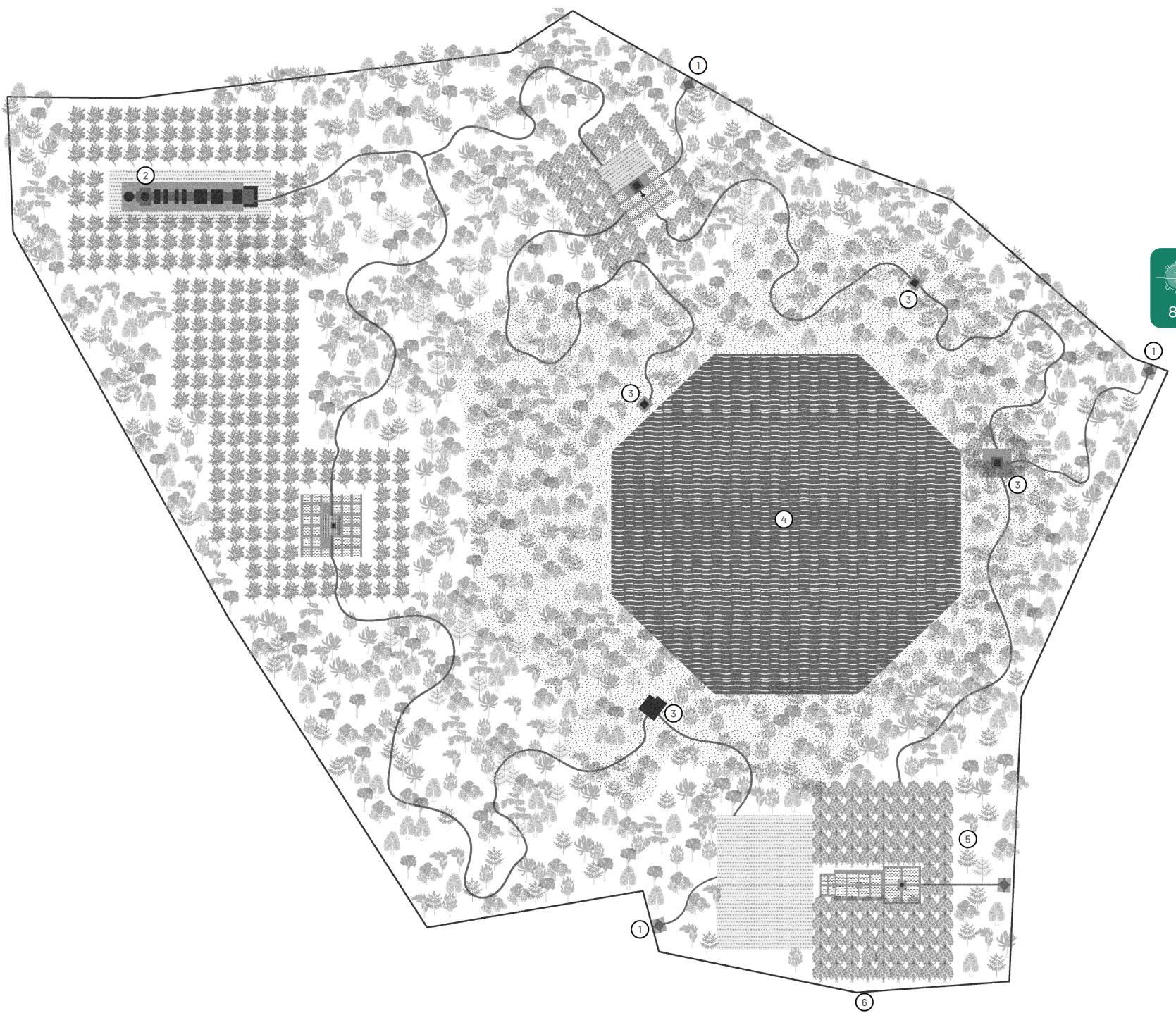








BAGH-E-SHABAN



1. Entrances
2. Malik Shaban Dargah
3. Pavilions
4. Lake Rimmed With Stone Steps
5. Step Well
6. Burnt-brick enclosure

50m 100m



Bagh-e-Shaban

Historical Garden | Between 1458-1511 | Gardens of Rituals



83

In the Sultanate era, emphasis was laid on making places of residence and prayer into 'paradieses' on Earth; gardens and far landscapes gaining an integral part in these environments. With an inherent sense of sacred or religious duty,¹ an added impetus of image-building and status further fostered this garden culture. Administrative changes such as giving the right of land ownership to high-ranking officials resulted in nobility contending against each other in building magnificent gardens around their mansions. These were 'gardens of delight', built as personal retreats. They were the centre of social activities, often serving as a retreat for spirituality, music, festivities, and entertainment among the elites.²

One such garden was laid by Malik Shaban, also known as Malik-us-Sharq, towards the eastern suburbs of Rakhyal (now in Bapunagar). He is credited with instituting a land survey, and developing the revenue system during his administration. His garden, Bagh-e-Shaban, was surrounded by a wall of burnt brick. Within this enclosure were built structures including pavilions, a mosque, and a stepwell; navigated by pathways laid with stone, and an octagonal lake rimmed with stone steps—all interspersed with planted greens.³

Captivated by the solitude and tranquility offered by the garden, the Malik—despite Sultan Begada's persuasion—took retirement to spend his remaining time in Bagh-e-Shaban in the service of God. Eventually, the Malik is known to have drifted towards repentance and spirituality. Believed to have never left the garden again, his remains are buried in the mosque's court, frequented by followers even today.

"The rest and leisure that I experience during one day's retirement and quiet in this garden is such as I have never before enjoyed in my life..."
in *Mirat-e-Sikandari*⁴

Bagh-e-Shaban thus acted as a space of ritualisation: in the way it was designed and laid as a private retreat, tended to and used as a place of spiritual and philosophical significance, and its enduring fragments as reminders of the temporality of life and inevitability of change.

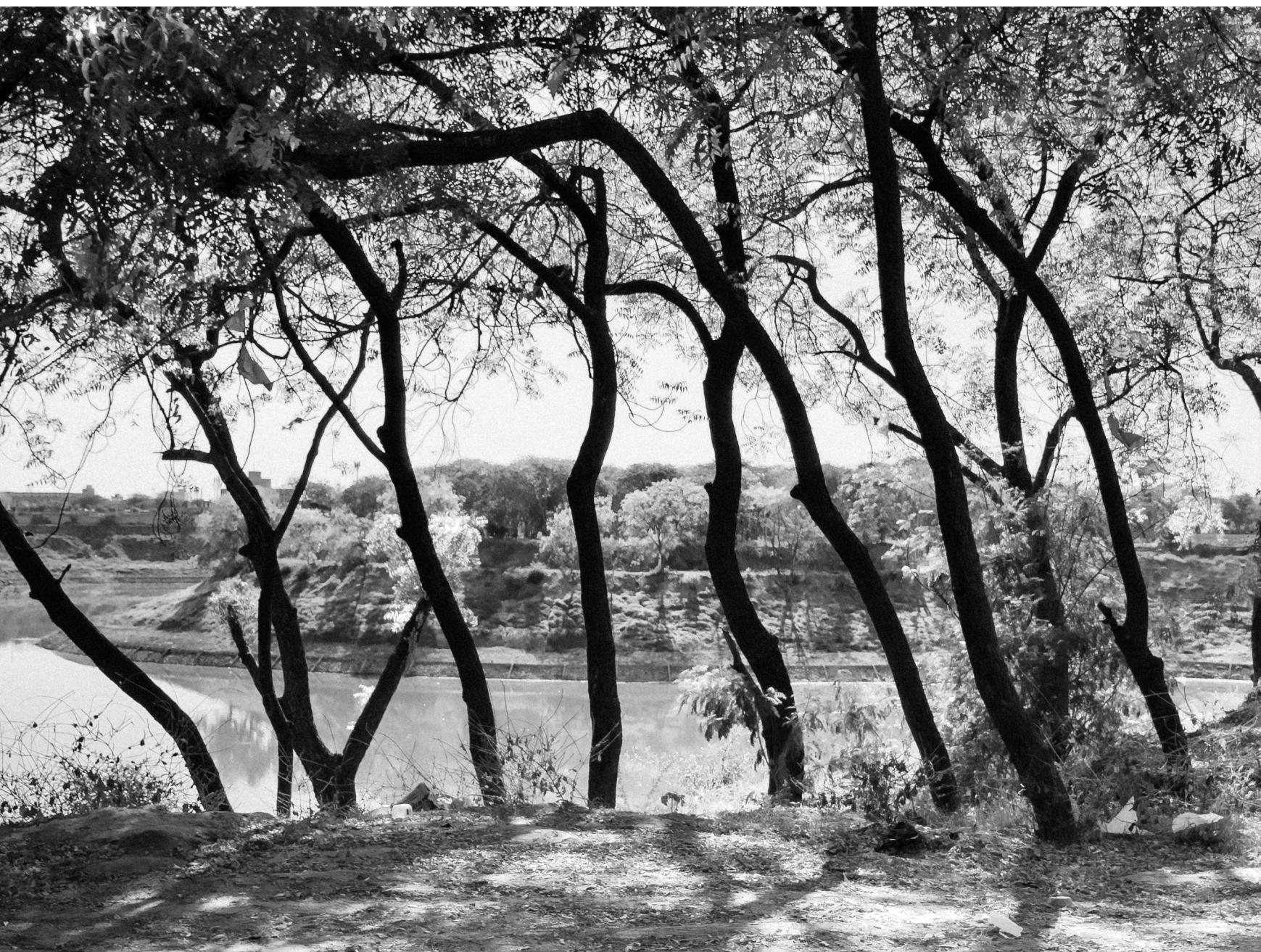
While we do not know how Bagh-e-Shaban transformed after Malik's death, the lake's transformation since the British period is traceable. Urbanisation-led deforestation and construction activities in the area resulted in the drying of the lake bed. Later, in 1960, the site was converted into Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). The communal riots of 1985 and related social segregation in the area left the stadium neglected. After persistent waterlogging and drainage issues, AMC repurposed the stadium into a lakefront and garden in 2012.

¹ In making nature prosper to the utmost was also a physical and symbolic expression of *khilafah* or trusteeship of nature. It was imperative for people in power to create places of beauty and relief for public welfare, a sacred need to follow the *ahadith* or the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. (Shaheer et. al. (2013).

² It has been recorded by a German traveller Mandelslo, who was in attendance of one such feast at Azam Khan's palace, which overlooked a vast garden. (Commissariat, 1931a, p. 32)

³ While the author of *Mirat-e-Ahmad* enumerates the elements present in the garden, we find little information on the structure or form of the garden, as is the case in many Sultanate gardens found in Gujarat.

⁴ Sikandar, 1613-1615, p. 87.









INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT



1. Main entrance with tree-lined avenue
2. Iconic mango tree near Harvard Steps
3. Vikram Sarabhai Library
4. Faculty Wings
5. Academic Block
6. Louis Kahn Plaza
7. Tower Lawn
8. Nursery
9. Residence Gate
10. Dormitories with garden courtyards
11. Sunken gardens
12. Faculty residences with private garden spaces
13. Demonstration arch
14. Azad Gate
15. Lawn spaces
16. Asopalav-lined avenue

50m 100m

Indian Institute of Management

Contemporary Garden | 1961 | Gardens of Makers



217

In the years following Independence, a network of technical and management institutions were established across the country to build the nation's intellectual and technological cadre. Among these was the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), conceived to shape leadership and research in a rapidly modernising economy. Simultaneously, modernist ideas were imported and 'Indianised'¹ to shape a new national identity. In a way, this import was facilitated by newly emerging foreign-educated Indian architects, who invited international figures to contribute to India's global image. It was in this context that architect Louis Kahn was introduced by B. V. Doshi to industrialists Vikram Sarabhai and Kasturbhai Lalbhai—the spearheads of the IIM project²—for the design of the Ahmedabad campus in 1962.

Kahn's concept was grounded in the idea of a "monastery": an academic institution conceived as a small self-contained city, further realised by Anant D. Raje as the on-site architect.³ Central to this concept were the intermediary spaces—like the Louis Kahn (LIK) Plaza—that linked the private residences, academic and administrative blocks. Woven between these red-brick built forms, the gestural open spaces and pathways soften the rigid and stark geometry, structure moments of pause, and enable the spillover of academic discussions to non-academic and interstitial spaces. Lined with trees and hedges and interspersed with grassy mounds and paved courts, each court offers an individualistic spatiality, responding to varying forms and proportions of the built volumes and shaped through everyday use and seasonal adaptation. These planted fractals are diverse in character. Some are recreational, such as the private faculty residence gardens or the sports grounds; others are ritualistic, as in the LIK Plaza, or nostalgic, such as the lawn with the demonstration arch supervised by Kahn himself.

The institute's 65-acre site was largely flat, with some cultivated patches and scattered mango trees. Landscaping work began even before formal plans were drawn. In the early years, Kamla Chowdhry⁴ hired Ram Ratan Pasi, previously employed at ATIRA, to supervise the landscaping of the IIMA grounds.⁵ His team of four gardeners tended to and cultivated the land, as per the formal landscape development plan prepared by the National Institute of Design in 1968. The Estate Department—comprising Prof. S. S. Ahluwalia of ISRO and landscape advisor Prabhakar B. Bhagwat—oversaw the larger development of the gardens and





nurseries. The first phase of landscaping was carried out by Ramesh Nursery,⁶ incorporating Kahn's suggestions for planting hedges around the houses. The trees selected were neem and *asopalav* for the roadsides and vacant areas, and cassia and *kadamb* for the courtyards. By the early 1970s, forester Madhusudan Mehta sourced a large number of neem saplings from the Forest Department.⁷ Avenue planting was done using a theodolite instrument under the supervision of structural engineer Suresh Bunker.⁸

Photographs by Pranlal Patel from the 1960s and 1970s capture the early landscape—open, sparse, and under formation. Today, that landscape has matured into dense canopies and shaded corridors. The Harvard Steps, once clearly visible from the forecourt, are now filtered through layers of foliage, most notably the mango tree that anchors the entrance. Trees like *saptaparni*, *palash*, *jamun*, banyan, *gulmohar*, Indian almond, palms, and mango dot the grounds. Fruit trees such as banana, sapota, pomegranate, and drumstick; and flowering trees like *champa* animate smaller pockets. Copper pod and *asopalav* are common along the tree-lined avenues on the campus. The nursery across from the Louis Kahn Plaza, with its meandering paths and towering green walls, reinforces the name of the adjacent Tower lawn, so-called for the service tower rising behind it.

Throughout the eerily empty main campus, one witnesses custodians silently tending to the lush green spaces in the scorching heat. These gardens are the result of layered authorship—by the gardeners and foresters, architects, planners, local leadership, Governments of India and Gujarat, the Ford Foundation, and the Harvard Business School—who shaped the campus in visible and invisible ways.⁹ They signal the rise of landscape as a critical discipline in post-independence India and a broader shift in the city's design culture, with the focus moving beyond beautification towards engagement with climate, ecology, and pedagogy.

¹ Examples that blended functionalism with evolving Indian traditions include Anand, Apte, and Jhabvala's Kirori Mal College (1954), Achyut Kanvinde's IIT-Kanpur campus (1959), and Habib Rahman's R. K. Puram Housing (1960-1967).

² While Bombay as the leading industrial city of the country was the preferred location for the institute, Vikram Sarabhai lobbied strongly for Ahmedabad as the site of the proposed institute, taking advantage of the slow response of the newly formed state of Maharashtra. (*Brick by Brick: A Journey through IIMA Archives*, 2021)

³ Raje, in his future works, goes on to integrate Kahn's modernist values—sense of order, use of light, local materials and materiality, climate control—suitably within the Indian context, especially by highlighting the sense of a humanised scale.

⁴ Kamla Chowdhry was the first faculty member at IIMA, and a key member in its founding and functioning in its early years.

⁵ Excerpts from a conversation with Ram Ratan Pasi are provided in an article titled *Khet hi Sona Hai*. (Kumar, 1979, p. 3.)

⁶ Interestingly enough, Ramesh Nursery won the bid with the lowest amount of Rs. 34,908. This included preparation of rough lawns (1,08,556 sq. ft.), planting of trees (about 480), hedges (8,225 running feet), and maintenance for a year. (Chand, 2023, pp. 55-56.) The IIMA gardens also set in motion a long partnership between Prabhakar Bhagwat and Naresh Patel, who co-owned the nursery. The duo continued to work on a number of significant landscape projects.

⁷ Chand, 2023, pp. 55-56.

⁸ N. Patel, personal communication, May 15, 2025.

⁹ *Brick by Brick: A Journey through IIMA Archives*, 2021



Fig 5.4: View of the Main Campus from the entrance, mid-1970s.

Photograph by Pranjal Patel published in *Not Yet 25* (2023)



A recent photograph of the Main Campus taken from the entrance.

A welcome sight of the monumental built forms, partially filtered through the mature layers of foliage, captured in 2025.



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