

Paleoethnobotanical studies at the Mahtab Bagh: Taj Mahal pleasure garden.

(Oral Presentation)

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Introduction

Located across the river from the Taj Mahal, the Mahtab Bagh (or Moonlight Garden) was a pleasure garden built by Shah Jahan in the 1600's. From this vantage point, the emperor could relax and enjoy the vista of his great work in a setting of fountains and airy pavilions. For centuries the moonlight garden has been shrouded in mystery and misconception until the recent excavation to reveal its purpose, architecture and botanical past.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to reveal the structure of the historic Mahtab Bagh garden and provide an assessment of the plants grown within.

Methods

Modern plants were collected from all portions of the existing garden and adjacent landscape. Excavations at the site were conducted in cooperation with the Archaeological Survey of India. Pollen samples, flotation samples and macroremains were collected from all undisturbed contexts. Extracted plant materials were examined in U.S. laboratories using light and electron microscopy.

Results

Over 150 plant specimens were identified from the modern garden environs and the surrounding area. Paleoethnobotanical remains from six garden species, viz., jujube (*Zizyphus jujuba* Lam.), cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* L.), red cedar (*Toona ciliata* M.J. Roem), chirunji (*Buchanania latifolia* Roxb.), champa (*Michelia* sp.) and coxcomb (*Celosia cristata* L.) were recovered from Mughal era archaeological deposits.

Conclusion

The archaeobotanical data, although they represent a small portion of plants originally grown at the garden, suggest a number of intriguing aspects of the of the floral arrangement at Mehtab Bagh, and, at the same time, tell us something about the aesthetic preferences of the garden designers. Of the six garden plants identified at Mehtab Bagh, only one, cypress, was a Mughal introduction; the other five have a long history of use in India and connections with Indian folklore. Notwithstanding the sample size, it appears that the plantings at the Mehtab Bagh during Mughal times bear more of an Rajput imprint than a Mughal one.

Keywords: Mughal, Rajput, Moonlight Garden, archaeological botany, India

Selected References

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