

Sacred Groves to City Gardens: Ancient Indian Green Urbanism

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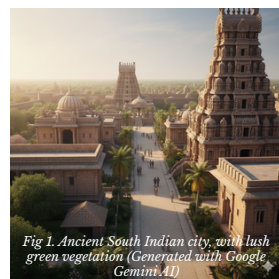


Most urban residents in India today are starved of three main ingredients for a healthy and happy life: fresh air, clean surface water, and a rich biodiversity. We are so used to seeing the best public parks locked away behind gates or only on TV, from far-flung foreign countries like Singapore. However, what if I told you that ancient Indian cities were once filled with lush, well-planned public parks and sacred forests, designed for the spiritual and philosophical enlightenment of their citizens? Ancient Indian cities embodied three core urban design principles:

- Nature-based urban design
- Ecological infrastructure
- Spiritual cultural urban design

The Skanda Purāṇa prescribes city layouts (nagara-vyavasthā), with designated parks (upavana) and sacred groves (devavana). It recommends integrating these with ponds, lakes, and temple precincts. The scripture stresses that these parks are essential to the well-being of the planet and the sacredness of the land. It describes various flowering, fruiting, and creeping species that should be planted in urban parks, such as Arjuna, Aśoka, Punnāga (Calophyllum inophyllum), Tāla (Palmyra), Hintāla (Phoenix tree), Śāla (Sal tree), Prācināmalaka (Flacourtia cataphracta), Lodhra (Symplocos racemosa), Bakula, Nāgakesara, coconut palms, jackfruit, mango, sandalwood, fig, and date palm. It mentions many more trees, including Priyāla, Sarala, Himalayan cedar, wood apple, champaka, karṇikāra, kovidāra, pātala, kadamba, margosa, nipaka, pomegranate, mandāra, pārijāta, holy fig trees and agallochum. The Skanda rban design Purāṇa also specifically praises Orissa as a land of heaven, filled with countless beautiful flowering trees and gardens. The Mānasāra likewise prescribes the integration of upavana (parks around temples for recreation) and vanas (sacred forests) for purification of the city, ecological balance, and biodiversity retention.

Scared forests are not just merely green lawns with a few flowers scattered around, rather they are pure untouched nature, a niche for all species to thrive in cities without human intervention. No one is supposed to enter these spaces, neither are trees allowed to be cut.



These sacred forests were also essential for Ayurvedic treatments, as they served as genetic reservoirs for medicinal herbs and plants. Parks, sacred grooves, temples and urban areas are to be designed in integration. With only 1/3rd of the urban space to be built-up, the rest is for urban infrastructure and green spaces. The Manasara prescribes urban green fresh-air corridors throughout the city. The Mayamata scriptures in Sanskrit, mandates that atleast 1/7 or 1/8 of the urban surface area should be entirely allocated for green spaces. Nagara-vatika (urban forests) are sited within residential quarters, near temples, water tanks, and along main streets. There are specific directives that parks or groves should be easily accessible from public areas, should physically as well as visually connect to important religious structures and water bodies for ritual and environmental purposes. The nagar-vartika is not just merely an ornamental park, but a multifunctional space for water management, spiritual recreation, bioengineered landscape clusters. The city of Singapore has mandated very similar principles in its 2030 Green Plan. The 12th century Lingayat reformer Basavanna, wrote about the same principles in his text Basava Purana. Southern Kerala, having been spared by invasions from invaders, has many surviving “kaavu’s” sacred forests, like the Iringole Kaavu, a temple dedicated to goddess Durga, located in the Kunnathunad Taluk.

Fig 1. Central Public Plaza, the Brahmathana (Generated with Google Gemini AI)

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