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Delhi Diary

The sky is brassy, the trees, the birds and even the monkeys from Raisina Hill who regularly traipse through my garden, long for water to moisten their parched throats

MANOHAR SINGH GILL

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A Murder At The Waterhole

The months of April and May bring hot, dust-laden winds from Rajasthan to Delhi. The sky turns brassy, the trees, the birds and even the roving troupes of monkeys from Raisina Hill who regularly traipse through my garden, long for water to moisten their parched throats. As a form of prayer, the best type

perhaps, I have put three shallow earthen paraats among the flower beds and under the lagerstroemia trees.

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Every morning, I wash them out and fill them with fresh water. A little grain is scattered around the watering holes and it is simply a joy to observe the mynahs, pigeons, parakeets and squirrels—all happily sharing the meal. The frisky little squirrels climb over the pan's ledge to take

circumspect sips of the refreshingly cool water. The kites, so very alert to steer clear of humans, swoop down for a drink. The crows, just as wary of man, sometimes come with the stale, stony chapattis pilfered from the security police lines nearby, sit on the pan's edge, soften the rotis by dipping them in the water before eating them. I marvel at their intelligence. They even leave behind pieces for those to come. Sometimes, on a cool morning or



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evening, I walk past them, but the crows, now familiar with my friendly overtures, do not flee. I take this trust as a gift from the Gods.

Green-Thumbed Legacy

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I have a number of gulmohars, a few amaltas (the Indian laburnum), frangipanis, pink cassias, maulsaris—and of course, the lagerstroemias framing my verandah. A canopy of flaming red, yellow, delicate whites brushed pale in the petals, elegant shades of pink as in Delhi's seas of

chunnis and a host of other colours and designs hold back the harsh summer sun and afford me my indulgent daily pleasure of taking in the soft multi-coloured petal-carpets strewn under the trees. Many of the trees were planted by those who came before me: the giant ancient ficus retusa, imli, kachnars—all 70 years old—by the British superintendent of the Sunder Nagar nursery tasked with greening Lutyen's New Delhi. Occasionally, other residents have left their own additions, but alas these have been all too few. I have spent many years at Akbar Road and have tried to leave behind a legacy of planting trees, nurturing four kadams like my own children. They are full-grown now.

During my time, other stand-outs like lemons, jacarandas, more gulmohars and champas have been added. I wait anxiously for them to mature into full adulthood soon.

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Bee-Littling Beer Barons

High on the branches of the ficus, as in the film *Avatar*, is perched a beehive. This is home to a colony of indigenous bees—wild, aggressive and dangerous. A year ago, we had flirted with the idea

of bringing in apiarists to extract the honey and remove the hive. People had voiced fears of getting attacked. I have never done so. Curiously, in keeping with their own migratory patterns, the whole colony, one fine day, up and moved to another home on another tree. Soon after, the woodpeckers arrived and consumed

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the empty shell of a hive. Many months passed and I had begun to think that they were gone for good. During an early summer walk, I looked up to find them buzzing about again. I do not know very much about bees, but one thing is obvious. In vastu-obsessed Delhi, the bees too—like my Rajya Sabha peer Vijay Mallya—maintain several elegant homes around the capital. I suppose they flit from one home to another, as whim takes the Queen Bee. I was as overjoyed as the biblical merchant, upon the return of his prodigal son.

Between 1986-88, I had lobbied for the introduction of Italian Melliflora Bees and promoted the honey production industry in Punjab. It is an ideal and lucrative avenue of self-employment for small farmers and people of little means. Just the other day, Jagjit Singh Kapoor, the owner of Kashmir Honey in Ludhiana, to whom I had given a leg-up many moons ago, sent me pictures of two container trains he had flagged off, carrying 2,000 tonnes of honey to Mumbai for export to western Europe! He obviously meets the snooty European standards of food administration. Not a small achievement these days.

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Extra-Parliamentary Affairs

A parliament of little owls flourishes in the bole of my kajeria tree. Like the other animals and birds, they too have sized me up over the past year. Little nestlings peep out of the holes in the trunk without

fear, bobbing their necks up and down in curiosity. The elders gather at the same time, morning and evening, on the same branch in silent contemplation. They take no notice of me. I suppose they consider me a natural part of their universe. All through the night, I listen to them hooting in happy gossip, flying around and even sitting beneath the lights on the grass outside the verandah. Since we're almost friends now, I am seriously contemplating seeking their sagely advice for my current travails as I ponder my life as a former minister.

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Having fired out of council of ministers MS Gill has nothing much to do except birdwatching and gardening.

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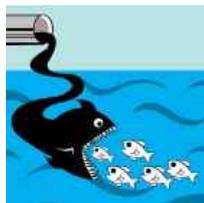
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