

# ORACLE LANDSCAPE OF ORCHHA, INDIA: RECLAIMING THE LOST HERITAGE.

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Figure1. Photograph by Amita Sinha. 2012.

Cultural landscape as a conceptual category for assessing and conserving heritage is increasingly significant worldwide for many reasons, foremost in its capacity to ensure authenticity and integrity, two important criteria for success. It offers a frame for mediating between many forms of heritage—natural, cultural, built, and intangible--by providing a spatial context and acting as a catalyst in their sustenance. It connotes dynamic process in temporal layering of sites rather than the static artifact. UNESCO’s categories for World Heritage status designation—designed, organically evolved and associative cultural

landscapes—provide a framework for assessing heritage (Taylor and Altenburg, 2006). However heritage sites in the Indian subcontinent with attributes from all three do not fit neatly into one type. They show design intelligence at work in the past, continuous evolution of settlements with a traditional way of life, and sacred associations with natural landscapes—often all combined in one site. The case study of Orchha, a heritage town in Madhya Pradesh, illustrates the inclusive approach needed for conserving its multi-dimensional heritage through landscape planning and management.

Orchha, capital of the Bundela Rajputs from 1531-1783 CE, has a number of historic palaces, gardens, temples, and murals representing Bundela achievements in art, architecture, and landscape design. They are in the island citadel on the banks of the River Betwa and in the settlement that sprung up across the moat from the fort (Kambo, 1984; Singh and Singh, 1991; Srivastava, 1999). Orchha is now a small town of 11,190 residents and the destination of over 120,000 tourists and pilgrims annually. By 2035 the number of tourists (domestic and foreign) is expected to rise to 445,029 per year (Lea Associates et al, 2011). Efforts by the state to protect historic monuments and develop tourism infrastructure have had limited success so far and only partially address the full gamut of heritage conservation. New random development, degradation of historic sites, and loss of collective memory are among the many challenges facing Orchha. In the proposed conservation framework, landscape is considered salient and integral to protection and interpretation of multidimensional --archaeological, natural, and intangible—cultural heritage.

### **Grounded Speculation**

Orchha's historic structures—palaces, mansions, temples, and gardens within the fort and outside it—comprise a monumental landscape visited mainly by tourists interested in Bundela history –and pilgrims who workship. Temples and shrines, some historic and others more recent, attract pilgrims, as does the Betwa River, from nearby districts, especially on religious festivals. Their ritual enactments—circumambulatory tours and river bathing—create a local economy revolving around circulation of images and objects in public spaces. This kinetic landscape, always in flux, responding to the pilgrim flow and festival cycle, also reflects the tourist demand for souvenirs and handicrafts. Juxtaposed with the monumental and kinetic is the vernacular landscape of residential housing in tightly clustered, linear neighborhoods built with local materials in the traditional design vocabulary. The monumental landscape represents history, and the vernacular landscape building traditions that have created socially- and climatically responsive living environments. The kinetic landscape adds a dynamic and vibrant layer acting as foil to the seemingly static, imposing monuments. Together the three landscapes in Orchha create a picturesque charm unique among heritage towns.

The palimpsest and quilt metaphors are descriptive but inadequate in fully understanding how the contemporary cultural landscape embodies multiple forms of heritage and what would be sustainable ways to conserve it for posterity. The historic landscape structure of Orchha is hidden amidst the juxtaposed and overlapping layers and new construction. To recover its historic specificity at any given point of time appears difficult, especially so given the lack of Orchha's documented history and archival records. Instead knowledge of design principles that would have guided its evolution for two hundred and fifty years (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c) will prove to be essential in imaginatively reconstructing the landscape structure. This will prove to be instrumental in managing the landscape today and controlling change that adversely affects heritage conservation.

*In grounded speculation, experiment engenders expertise, which in turns fosters the imagination. In that way, the practice of grounded speculation empowers landscape architects to develop accessible, engaging, and meaningful solutions to contemporary challenges, regardless of their scale or technical objectives* (Hays, 2010, p. 179).

Grounded speculation on the lost landscape intelligence and knowledge base that had built a habitable milieu in Orchha is made possible through sophisticated and developed version of traditional 'site analysis performed through bodily encounter: assessing conditions, coming to terms with limits, and identifying potential opportunities for intervention' (Hays, 2010, p. 178). Sensory input from looking and walking the site is supplemented by old and more recent technologies of vision—photography and satellite imagery. Intuitive understandings of landscape structure from somatic perception are refined through representations in site readings and site mappings. Site readings explore the phenomenology of experience through feeling, imagining, and representing *chora* in visual collages and readings of mythic narratives (Marcus, 2010). Site mappings charting *topos* analyze the natural and built landscape: its topography, hydrology, vegetation communities, buildings, streets, other public spaces. Both terms for places--*topos* and *chora*—logic and spirit of place provide the essential nomenclature in developing a 'foundation of expertise' for grounded speculations on the historic landscape structure.

### **Oracle Landscapes**

Orchha derived its name from the phrase 'ondo chhe' meaning low or hidden, apt for a bowl shaped region, enclosed by bluffs and forests. The Bundela citadel was built on an island in the River Betwa, as a *jal durg* (water fort), one among the fort types discussed in the medieval design treatises, *Shilpashastra* (Acharya, 1934; Begde, 1982). The rocky and barren Bundelkhand plateau was ideal for fort building by Rajputs in the medieval period and was their sanctuary from Mahmud of Ghazni's raids and later attacks by Sultanate and Mughal forces (Sharma and Sharma, 2006). Betwa and its tributaries

have carved deep ravines in low gneiss and sandstone ridges crisscrossed by basaltic dykes. Teak forests and scrub jungle flourish in their alluvial plain of sandy loam and disintegrated basaltic Deccan trap (Luard, 1907; Pandey, 1995). Betwa, known as Vetravati in the epics, is ascribed great purity and power, washing away all sins when one bathes in it. Its banks were considered to be *tapovan* (forest of penance) where ascetic built their ashrams, taught the sacred texts and purified the wilderness of its evil (Gupta, 19989). Betwa's two tributaries—Jamner and Ghurari—merging at Orchha, create a natural landscape of fording streams, ideal for a moated citadel in perilous times.

Across the moat, west of the citadel, developed a group of palaces and temples, forming a secondary core in a largely uninhabited area circumscribed by a semicircular wall. Towards the south, on the banks of Betwa, rose a group of cenotaphs, known as *chattris*, memorials to Bundela rulers and their queens. Around the core groups of monuments, open spaces--gardens, plazas, and *ghats* (steps) on the riverbank—were built over time. Today, the main spine of the settlement between the citadel gate and the city wall gate has vernacular housing on both sides while the street connecting the north city gate with the fort entry extends along the moat southwards towards the river. The town appears to have evolved organically around palaces and temples to meet the requirements of habitation, security and worship. Although Orchha's urban structure is not complex yet a complete understanding of its order demands it be interpreted within the world view of the Bundelas. It is speculated that its cultural meaning transcended its utility as a habitable and safe setting to that of an auspicious landscape, read as an oracle by its inhabitants for a sense of wellbeing and protection promised by the presence of gods in their midst.

### **Archetypal Imagery**

Orchha's landscape was rendered auspicious through concrete embodiment of archetypal images deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Indic cultures. The images are varied, ranging from figural to abstract, but what they have in common is their potential to evoke the divine immanent in nature. This imagery was deliberately and consistently employed to produce an ordered landscape from the chaos of wilderness. The archetypal images were encoded in built forms, pervaded building interiors, reproduced in place settings, reflected in the waters, and imagined as visual axes in the urban structure. Their presentation and re-presentation in the landscape made it iconic and oracular. The symbolic significance of the following archetypal images is pertinent in interpreting the iconic landscape structure: Mount Meru and cosmic pillar, mandala and yantra, and place archetypes.

## **Mountain and Cosmic Pillar**

Hindu cosmography imagines the center of cosmos to be Mount Meru, as a form of *axis mundi* linking earth with the heavens. Cosmos is conceived of centered on Meru, rising out of the middle of seven ring-shaped concentric continents and seven circumambient oceans. The island citadel of Orchha has palaces and temples with tall spires grouped in the center of the inner enclosure and scattered in the outer fort, all rising out of the waters of Betwa and its tributaries, popularly known as Satdhara (seven streams), an allusion to the mythic seven oceans. Another archetypal form signifying the *axis mundi* is the axial pillar churning the oceans in the cosmogonic myth of creation of space and time out of primordial chaos. The pillar/mountain separates the skies from the earth and marks the point of cosmogony where earth emerged from primordial waters. The cenotaphs on the Betwa River rising out of the watery expanse in fording streams, southwest of the citadel, were built on the cremation sites of Bundela kings. These riverfront commemorative memorial towers were symbolic representations of the world pillar rising out of the waters and reaching the skies, promising renewal and rebirth upon death.

## **Mandala and Yantra**

Mandala and yantra are archetypal geometric forms used widely for consecrating space by inviting gods to reside and subduing demonic spirits of the site. Mandalas are usually circles or gridded squares, symbolic replicas of the cosmos representing concentrations of its positive energies. Yantras on the other hand are triangular in shape and function as ritual objects of meditation and worship (Buhemann, 2003). Both are auspicious mystical forms and at Orchha, as in Chitrakut and Hampi, were implicit in the landscape and articulated through built forms (Dubey and Singh, 1994; Fritz and Michell, 1987). They were mental schemas visualized in a coherent cognitive map of the settlement. A series of circular mandalas and four isosceles triangular yantras, discerned from above, with the royal palace Raja Mahal in the island citadel as the center and apex, organize the location of temples, cenotaphs, palaces, and gateways. The natural and the built appear to be in synapomorphy in the emerging landscape structure thus rendering the site auspicious for the Bundelas.

## **Place Archetypes**

Orchha's landscape is imprinted with the archetypal places of the epic *Ramayana*. The hero-god Ram, considered to be the real king of Orchha, was brought from his capital Ayodhya by Ganesh Kuvari, wife of the ruler Madhukar Shah. As legend has it, Lord Ram refused to move from her palace Rani Mahal (his own palace Chaturbhuj Temple was not completed in time) and thus Rani Mahal became the Ram Raja Temple from where Lord Ram ruled over his earthly kingdom. Bundela kings sought to model

their values and code of conduct after Ram and shape their society in the image of the utopian *Ramraj*. Places associated with the exile of Ram, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshman into the wilderness were archetypal landscapes—*tapovan* (forest of penance), Chitrakut mountain, the garden-grove Ashok Vatika, and the island fort Lanka (Sinha, 2006). Sites in Orchha celebrate the mythic narrative through the building of temples in the wilderness in the outer fort and across the River Betwa. Vanvasi Temple, Chitrakut Temple, Ashok Vatika shrine and Lanka fort wall are narrative place markers commemorating Ram’s epic journey and his victory over evil.

### **Strategies for Envisioning**

The landscape structure of Orchha emerged in accordance with design principles for reifying archetypal imagery, i.e. making manifest the auspicious iconography of the sacred in the here and now. Three design strategies are evident—location, plan and orientation of buildings, spatial transposition, and building interiors and exteriors as spaces for representation. The transformation of wilderness into the habitable landscape required the site to be conceived as a receptacle for divinity embodied in architectural forms of temples. The urban order was visualized as a series of imagined mandalas and yantras linking the major landmarks of Orchha. In addition to the design principles for *jal-durg*, encoded in the *Shilpashastras* and adapted to the local conditions, an intricate set of formal rules for the siting and orientation of temple and palatine architecture would have guided development. This lost cultural knowledge needs to be reclaimed through grounded speculation based upon site studies.

### **Building Location, Plan and Orientation**

Site mapping of terrain and hydrology revealed the location of buildings at different heights afforded by topography making possible the visualization of mandalas and yantras. The major palaces and temples of Orchha—Raja Mahal, Jahangir Mahal, Ram Raja Temple, Chaturbhuj Temple, Lakshmi Narayan Temples were located on higher promontories (225 meters and above) —while mansions, smaller temples and their plazas—Radhika Raman, Raghuvamsani, Kanhaiyya Mandirs—were built on slightly lower hillocks (on or above 220 meters). Closer to the riverfront on its floodplain (215 meters) are cenotaphs and *ghats*, reflected in the waters. It is the visual relationship among the buildings, not the street layout--for instance Chaturbhuj Temple and Raja Mahal roughly at the same height and on the east-west axis—that is crucial in understanding the urban spatial order. This order is discerned primarily through visual axes linking the buildings—palace, temples, cenotaphs, and city gate in triangular yantras.

The location of temples, sacred sites, and the city wall visually inscribes the circular mandalas centered at the Raja Mahal. The biggest circle overlaps with the city wall built by the Orchha ruler, Rudra Pratap Singh, marking out the space for habitation. Circles centered on Jahangir Mahal in the citadel describe the location of many smaller temples built on lower hillocks and Betwa's banks. The rim of a larger circle connects the Lakshminarayan Temple at the highest point in the site facing the sunrise on the summer solstice with the entry gateway to Orchha. As the sun sets behind the cenotaphs on the winter solstice, they are reflected in the Betwa, resulting in a spectacular vision of the place where the sun completes its circumambulation of the earth. Here the structures are a symbol of the world pillar mediating between the heaven and netherworld.

Natural features—Betwa and its tributaries as well as natural dykes—made building the *jal durg* possible. Roughly polygonal, its walls rise parallel to the moat, tapering sharply, twelve degrees east of north, and parallel to the longitudinal axis of the island. This orientation determined the alignment of many buildings including historic temples within the fort, and those outside in the town. Whether this alignment also corresponded with any stellar constellation or not cannot be determined yet. However, royal palaces in the inner fort—Raja Mahal and Jahangir Mahal—are oriented east-west, on axis with the Chaturbhuj Temple, built across the moat. The two orientations—east and twelve degrees north of east—of adjacent buildings set up an interesting spatial dynamic in the public plazas and gardens between them. Etched on the third floor of Jahangir Mahal, is a curious mystical diagram, an yantra—section superimposed on a plan with numerals—believed to be the plan of the *jal durg*, however its symbolic significance is difficult to interpret.

The mandala archetype is evident in palatine and temple architecture where its material embodiment makes for a visceral experience rather than a mere exercise in visualization. The three palaces—Rani Mahal (now Ram Raja Temple), Raja Mahal, and Jahangir Mahal—are based upon the *paramsayika mandala*, i.e. square subdivided into smaller squares and rectangles with open space in the center. The palatine designs are highly evolved formal exercises in composition and massing, and play of solids and voids. They mark the singular achievement of Bundela style—open courtyards alternating with pavilions at higher stories such that interior open spaces form an inverted pyramid. *Chattris* (kiosks) and domes break up the roofline: projecting walls, jail corridors, brackets, and balconies enliven the blank outer surfaces (Tillotson, 1987). Orchha temples have the Bundela octagonal *shikhara* (tower) shaped like a pine cone and crenellated domes in monumental temples such as Chaturbhuj with a cross-axial plan and the unusually rhomboid shaped Lakshminarayan. Spacious *mandapa* (hall) interiors with vaulted ceilings for large congregations are a Bundela innovation although they are lacking in smaller temples in the northern part of the island fort, likely meant for private worship by the royals (Rothfarb, 2012). The

riverfront cenotaphs are based upon the square *panchayana* temple form with four small towers surrounding a large central tower.

### **Spatial Transposition**

Site readings based upon interviews with local informants and observations in walking tours gradually revealed *chora*, spirit of the place. The formal urban and architectural order was given meaning through myths and legends, in particular the epic myth of the god-king Ram after whom the Bundela rulers modeled their kingship. The *Ramayana* narrative was imprinted on Orchha's cultural landscape through the process of spatial transposition involving mimesis. Not only was the Ram idol brought from his capital Ayodhya so that the rulers could reign on his behalf but also places associated with his legend were transposed to Orchha. Specific sites were named after *Ramayana* sites elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent, in particular those associated with his exile--Chitrakut and Lanka (Eck, 2012). This toponymy reveals a cultural landscape of narrative place markers, where temples were built to commemorate Ram's victory over demonic forces thus purifying wilderness of its evil.

The temples of Orchha testify to the Vaishnavite (Vishnu and his *avatars*—Ram and Krishna) orientation of Bundela rulers—for example Chaturbhuj and Lakshminarayan are named after Vishnu, the former housing a Krishna idol is in active worship. The most prominent temple and the destination of regional pilgrimage, is Ram Raja Temple from where Lord Ram rules over Orchha. Those built in outer fort in the island and across the Betwa refer to places Ram lived in during his exile. Vanvasi (forest dweller) Temple is at the northern tip of the island and Chitrakut in on a hillock towards the east rising above the Betwa.<sup>1</sup> The building named Yagya Shala (sacrificial chamber) alludes to the rites performed by ascetics in *tapovan*. Across the Betwa is a small temple in a site known as Ashok Vatika where Sita was imprisoned by Ravan in his island fort Lanka. Further north where Betwa meets with its tributary Jamner is the point known as Sangam, alluding to the real *sangam* (confluence of Ganga and Yamuna) crossed by Ram, Sita and Lakshman in their journey to the south.

### **Representational Space**

Architectural surfaces, exterior and interior, provided spaces for iconic representations that added to the auspicious perception of the physical environment. Visual survey of palatine and temple murals and sculptural reliefs revealed ways in which framing created a focus and affirmed the auspicious feel of the environment. These representations are primarily of heroic figures from myths and legends—gods and goddesses, demons, mythical composite creatures, flora and fauna, Bundela princes, ascetics, dancers, *nayak-nayaki*, and *rag-ragini* figures (Aruna, 2002; Chakravarty, 1984; Yadav, 2012)). Among these,



narrative imagery from the epic *Ramayana* was particularly important as visual reminder of the divine kingship model that the Bundela rulers were expected to abide by. Murals on interior walls and ceilings—Ram’s birth in Ayodhya, marriage with Sita, vanquishing the demon Ravan, return from exile, and his coronation--depict his valor, fortitude, courage in adversity, and triumph over evil. In palaces and temples, the interior surfaces were dematerialized by the extensive depiction of narrative imagery, creating a dream like sensual near environment populated by a multiplicity of figures. The walls and ceilings appear to be projections of inner psychological space just as buildings were symbols of the self. Framing of narrative episodes occurred by delimiting the space with foliate borders, placing figures under canopies and in blind arched or gabled openings.

Sculptural reliefs on building interiors and exteriors portray the exile of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman. Framing of iconic imagery on walls of temples in the northern part of the outer citadel—Vanvasi, Radhika Bihari, and Panchmukhi, and across the Betwa in Ashok Vatika --occurred in blind windows and niches, and *jharokhas* (protruding balconies). At Vanvasi and Ashok Vatika Temples, sculptural reliefs of Ram and Sita with Hanuman and other figures are carved over the doorway and in the interior wall. The framed imagery is an ever-present reminder of the trials and tribulations faced by *Ramayana* protagonists in *tapovan* during their exile. At Radhika Bihari and Panchmukhi Temples, relief carvings and *jharokhas* on exterior walls show seated and standing ascetics who sanctified wilderness of its evil. Although the imagery does not directly represent the natural landscape of the island fort, it alludes to its symbolism through iconic figures, thus creating an auspicious environment for the Bundela rulers to worship and perform rituals in the temples.

Framing of Chaturbhuj Temple, the embodiment of four-armed Vishnu metaphorically represented in the cross-axial plan, occurred by puncturing apertures in the wall screens and window openings in the Ram Raja palace. The opaqueness and heaviness of the wall gives way to transparency and lightness brought about by its dematerialization through framed openings. As one traverses the corridors on the upper three floors on the western side of the palace, the temple comes repeatedly into view, assuring the viewer of the divine presence within it. The landscape of Betwa and cenotaphs on its banks are framed on the southern and eastern walls. Its sacred features—natural and built—kept continuously in sight, producing the dialectical relationship between architecture and landscape within which one is contained within the other (Hays, 2008-9).

### **The Landscape Today**

With the departure of Bundela rulers to their new capital Tikamgarh in 1783 CE, Orchha’s population dwindled, its palaces and gardens fell into disrepair, and its artistic traditions no longer

received royal patronage. With the passage of time, the oracular landscape was hidden from view with its meaning rendered undecipherable. The design principles used for envisioning the auspicious in the built environment were forgotten and are lost knowledge today. The site was overgrown and the jungle seemed to be taking over the area around the monuments in the photographs taken by George Edward Herne (1865), Deen Dayal (1882), and Edmund Smith (1885). By 1901 Orchha was reduced to a small hamlet with a tiny population of 1830 living in thatched housing near Ram Raja Temple (Meyer et al, 1908-31). Its landscape conformed to the colonial notion of the picturesque, attracting Europeans to photograph and write about it. The French traveler, Louis Rousselet described Orchha in 1882 as having ‘many subjects of great interest for the traveler’, ‘its palaces and its chief temple bear comparison with the masterpieces of the great Hindoo Schools of Architecture’.

Today Orchha is a thriving town visited by pilgrims, and tourists, domestic and international. Its picturesque charm persists in spite of new commercial development, chaotic traffic, and poor public sanitation. Pilgrimage has kept alive mythic memories, but not of Orchha’s historic past. A majority of Orchha’s temples in the island fort and a few in the town no longer receive worshippers; Ram Raja Temple however has acquired fame and over the years become an important regional pilgrim destination. Betwa’s popularity as ‘Ganga of the Kaliyug’ is unabated and thousands of devotees bathe in it on festivals and auspicious occasions. The pilgrim space is limited to the complex of temples, plazas and gardens in the center of the town and the Betwa riverfront near the cenotaphs. Movement of pilgrims between these two hubs has resulted in a pilgrimage circuit that largely ignores the island fort, except for one shrine.

Tourist space, on the other hand, is largely centered on the inner citadel, although riverfront and the town center are also visited. Tourist infrastructure is presently inadequate with no interpretive programming (with the exception of a sound and light show), poorly developed heritage trail network, and lack of good rail and road connection to Orchha. The tourist and the pilgrim inhabit separate cultural worlds, the former interested primarily in the monuments, while the latter visit temples and Betwa, and rarely venture into the island citadel. The tourist seeks history while myths are all important in the pilgrim worldview. Both worlds are sustained by Orchha’s heritage sites, overlapping to a limited extent only. They call for different responses, either triggering mythic memories or a search for historical facts. The two cultural spheres need to be reconciled and integrated through site planning and management of the cultural landscape for a complete and authentic experience of Orchha’s multi-dimensional heritage.

### **Reclaiming the Lost Heritage**

Grounded speculation on the historic landscape structured by auspicious vision points to strategies for site planning and management of the present day cultural landscape. The vernacular and kinetic landscapes add vitality, although new construction not following the traditional design vocabulary is a discordant element. For an imaginative interpretation of the historic landscape, it is essential that the hidden and implicit visual structure be amplified. The picturesque charm of Orchha, captured in looking and photographing, in rich perceptual experiences in site visits, should be augmented by a cognitive understanding of what gave meaning to the landscape aesthetic in the past. This is possible by ensuring that the physical environment experienced in vision and movement and aided by interpretive signage and programming is interpreted as a rich text. Three strategies are proposed for doing so-- viewshed preservation, heritage trails, and reclamation of public spaces.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Viewshed Preservation**

Visual management of Orchha townscape is essential in appreciating its aesthetic qualities and the cultural visibility responsible for reifying archetypal imagery in the built environment in the past. Three levels of visual management are prescribed. At the highest level, at 225 meters or above, viewshed protection will ensure that yantras and mandalas implicit in the landscape structure can be discerned. Panoramic views of the natural landscape and Orchha townscape from the temples and palaces at this level enable the viewer to develop a cohesive image that includes the visual relationship between the natural and the built and among the historic monuments themselves. At the middle level of temples, plazas, and gardens, built at or above 220 meters, are opportunities to see the townscape 2-3 meters above the street level. Openings in the buildings are also frames for viewing the citadel and Betwa. The lowest level of open spaces and buildings at 215 meters, is the sphere of interaction with the river, offering unique visual and tactile experiences of the landscape. Here ritual activities such as bathing and immersion of idols occurs, cenotaphs lit up at sunset are reflected in the waters. Viewshed protection at each level will ensure that archetypal images—Mount Meru rising out of the cosmic ocean, temples as embodiment of divinity, and the imagined yantras and mandalas—will continue to be perceived.

### **Heritage Trails**

Ritual circumambulation (*panchkrosi parikrama*) by pilgrims engage is re-enactment of mythic memory of seeing the auspicious landscape, feeling the divine immanence, and being part of the community of faithful. This movement pattern circumscribes a much smaller area than that traversed by the Bundelas in the past, resulting in limited visual experience and knowledge of the historic landscape. Interpretive trails are proposed that tie together the scattered heritage precincts and the outlying sites into a connected pattern. Partially overlapping with the existing streets, they extend the visitor experience—of

the tourist beyond the monuments and of the pilgrim beyond the sacred complex and riverfront. The tourist has the opportunity to view and be immersed in the living traditions while the pilgrim in seeing the monuments can relate myths with history. Extending to the outlying historic city wall and the forest sanctuary across the Betwa, heritage trails expand the visitor range and link cultural heritage with natural heritage. While protected viewsheds at three levels serve the goal of imageability, environmental legibility is achieved by viewing the landscape in movement. The series of sequential views in motion build a coherent mental image, offering the possibility of identifying, understanding, and remembering the landscape structure.

### **Reclaiming Public Spaces**

Nav-chowk in the town center with temples and palaces built around courtyards, gardens, and plazas is most heavily used by pilgrims and becomes extremely crowded during festivals. The public plaza in front of Ram Raja Temple is the origin of many festival processions, including Ram Vivah (marriage of Ram and Sita) and like the adjoining plazas and historic garden Phool Bagh, is under stress, its carrying capacity exceeded beyond limit. Public spaces in the proximity, above the street level, should be reclaimed as rest places and sites of interpretive programming—festivals, *Ramayana* performances, handicraft bazaar—thus taking off some of the pressure from the Ram Raja Temple. Visited sequentially and affording mid-level views of the townscape, they offer glimpses of the urban landscape palimpsest. At the lowest street level, viewpoints to the citadel and access to the moat should be opened up by restoring the seasonal bridges. Across the Betwa, a heritage trail should link the historic and sacred sites of Sangam, Ashok Vatika and Lanka since spectacular views of the island citadel and the cenotaphs are obtained here.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural landscapes in the Indian subcontinent defy easy categorization and therefore a clear approach to their conservation and management practices. Orchha's landscape is a case study in re-discovery of design principles formulated within the socio-political context of medieval period and guided by the period eye that sought archetypal images in the built environment as a reaffirmation of divine protection. In the absence of sufficient archival record of the Bundela period documenting socio-religious mores, its landscape history is yet to be written, although its religious and palatine architecture have received scholarly attention, as have their murals. Grounded speculation on the historic landscape structure from site studies supplemented by art history scholarship suggests not only an interpretation of the past but also conservation of heritage, i.e. what is valued from the past.

Orchha has many attractions for the tourist--its monumental architecture and picturesque views, set off by the human scale of its vernacular architecture and lively public spaces populated by sacra, ephemera, and people. Pilgrims are drawn to its famous temples and the sacred Betwa, re-enacting ancient rites and reinvigorating mythic memories as they worship, bathe and circumambulate the landscape. Through site planning and landscape management, myth and history can make room for each other and the picturesque can be made meaningful by understanding archetypal imagery. The paradox of conserving cultural landscapes changing with time, making recovery of its historic specificity at any given point in time difficult if not impossible, can be resolved by showing the visitor how to imaginatively read the past in the present.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Radhika Bihari Temple is named after Krishna but that is likely a later appellation.

<sup>ii</sup> Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) initiated the first conservation plan for Orchha Heritage Zone in 2002. See Singh (2004) for a brief summary of its objectives and the rationale for urban conservation.