

Book Review by **Snehanshu Mukherjee**

THE SECRET ABODE OF FIREFLIES

Loving and Losing Spaces of Nature in the City

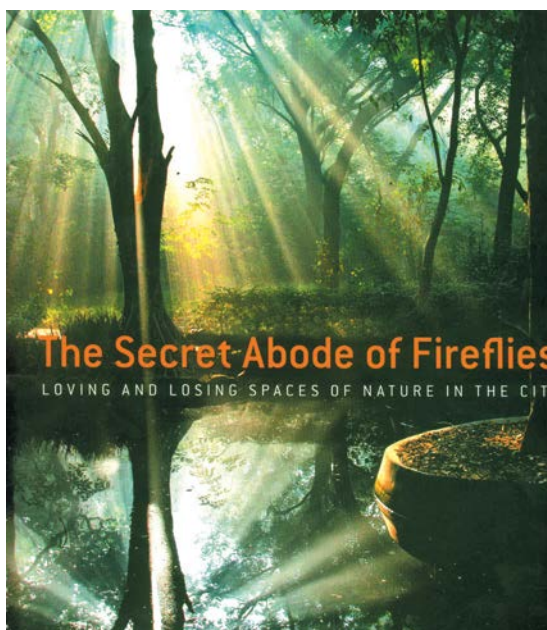
Edited by Nanni Singh

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225 x 235mm, 370 pp, Hard bound

To write book reviews usually takes me a while. This is usually the case for non-fiction with dense reading matter - something that needs to be read carefully, understood and only then can the review be written. For the book reviewed here, I was confronted with an additional factor – the design of the tome itself. The design and layout of this book does not seem to conform to other books on urban planning, landscape architecture, nature, jungles, or their flora and fauna that may be found on the shelves of libraries and bookshops. This, to the best of my knowledge, is a unique book on different aspects of the manifestation of “Nature” in cities – chiefly in Indian cities with a few examples from other countries such as South America, USA and Spain.

The unique design of the book can be seen from the way the groupings of the various essays are arranged under subject heads on the Contents page. The essays however under different subheads are not put together strictly chronologically according to the page numbering sequence. Instead as one goes through the book, one finds essays on Urban Planning, followed by Poetry, then by Urban Planning, then Creative Writing and so on. While there is a certain thematic chronology followed in the sequencing of essays, interviews, poems and art works that the pages are arranged with; it does be-



come a bit difficult to locate articles from the Contents page. This is because the Contents page has the essays grouped according to themes or subheads but their page numbers do not follow a natural sequence. One therefore needs to have a visual memory, rather like remembering directions in an unfamiliar city, as to where a certain essay lies within the pages as you flip through the book.

The book is however designed to be a visual delight; it has full page illustrations, double spreads and headers over the essays that incorporate works by well known painters,

graphic artists, master crafts-persons and photographers. Therefore, as a “first look”, by flipping through the pages, the images captivate and overwhelms the reader and creates the impression that (s)he is going through an art catalogue. The beauty of the book is the intermingling of art and graphics with serious essays by a variety of authors – writers, poets, scientists, social scientists, politicians, architects, planners, horticulturists, environmentalists, ecologists and activists.

The Secret Abode of Fireflies, as the subtitle states is about Loving and Losing Spaces of Nature in the City, and this is presented from different viewpoints. The writings are grouped under subheads such as Green Cities, Urban Planning, Creative Writing, Wilderness Walks, Activism, Spirit, and Poetry.

The selection of the authors is eclectic, reflecting the varied viewpoints expected of such a topic. Many of them are well known in the literary world, such as Ruskin Bond, Anees Jung, Geeta Mehta, Bachi Karkaria, and Gieve Patel. There are also contributions from well known academics, philosophers, experts and activists such as Ravi Agarwal, Narayani Gupta, David Orr, Satish Kumar, Fritjof Capra, Devdutt Patanaik, and Pradip Krishen to name a few. The quality of the essays and conversations do not disappoint. There are evocative pieces that conjure up the sense of loss as the urban sprawl expands and destroys the tranquil pockets of wilderness or a grove of trees that have provided solace for centuries. Ruskin Bond dips into his notes from 1959 when he lived on the then western outskirts of Delhi. He writes about a “village pond and beside it a magnificent banyan tree”; and of a “large *jheel*” on Najafgarh Road “famous for its fishing”.

“I wonder if any part of the jheel still exists, or if it got filled in and became a part of greater Delhi. One could rest in the shade of a small babul or kikar tree and watch the kingfisher skim over the water, making just a slight splash as it dived and came up with a small glistening fish.”

Ruskin Bond in *A Wilderness in New Delhi*

To anyone who has ventured on to Najafgarh Road in Delhi in recent times would probably find the description above unbelievable; when all you can see today is dispiriting urban sprawl, some unauthorized, and the rest authorized. Efforts by individuals or groups to try and stop indiscriminate cutting of trees or converting parks into other uses are also documented in the book. One such account by Anadish Pal shows the difficulty of preserving trees when the local government employees work hand in glove with contractors and other vested interest groups.

“The land here belongs to Pitampura village. There were sheesham trees here but they were felled by the logging mafia. They would say, ‘We are very powerful, we are working for the PWD. Nobody can stop us.’ The contractors were boisterous and ebullient and said I could go ahead and meet the Tree Officer – they were so certain that they had the Tree Officer on their side.”

Anadish Pal in *Saving the Revered Peepul Tree*

The week I received a copy of the book from Youthreach, I also read a feature in the Mint Lounge newspaper.

“From around midnight on 30 June, into the early hours of 1 July, 15 residents-turned-activists watched as Bruhat

Bengaluru Mahanagar Palike (BBMP) workers ran electric saws through trees flanking Sankey tank in Bangalore’s Malleswaram. The group, subdued by the heavy police presence, could only offer some verbal protest.”

We have no branches by Pavitra Jayaraman in Mint August 6, 2011

The issues that the book brings forward are very much alive and taking place across India, maybe even as you read this review. *The Secret Abode of Fireflies* therefore is an extremely relevant publication, probably the first of its kind, aimed at reaching out to not just the institutions, experts and executives but to laypersons alike. It seeks to raise the awareness levels amongst even those who are not informed about the loss of natural cover in cities. The book is not just a lament but brings together options that have worked in other cities across the world, and the efforts made by individuals and institutions in trying to change the rules of the game. The design and visual content makes it a very attractive book to open and immerse oneself into. However my chief worry is that will it reach out to the populace and make them aware of the issues, so that more and more of the citizens can join the forum and force change? Will the people who make decisions (on our behalf), the executives in the government, will they at least read this book? Whether they subscribe to the point of view that the book brings forward is altogether another story, but at least one can hope that they have read *The Secret Abode of Fireflies* and it has managed to convey, even in a minuscule amount, the concerns raised in this book. If this does not happen then we should be prepared to see more such news items as the one quoted earlier.

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