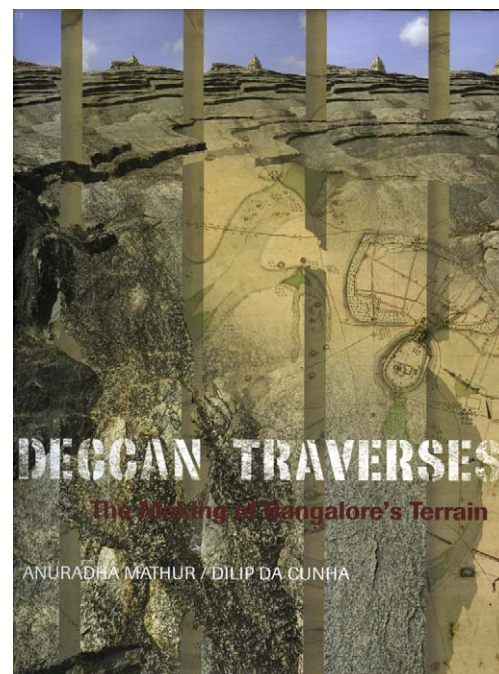


**Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore's Terrain**

ANURADHA MATHUR and DILIP DA CUNHA

Rupa, 2006  
231 pages, illustrated  
\$115.00 (cloth)



Initially setting out to develop a landscape strategy for Bangalore, a city on India's Deccan Plateau with over six million inhabitants, Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha uncovered myriad layers of interventions and of landscapes that problematize any singular understanding of the city or of its natures. Further clouding this condition is the complicity of many of these layers with colonialism and acts of war. In *Deccan Traverses*, they present the results of this research, which aims at elucidating some of these individual layers of landscape. Rather than framing proposed future interventions as a critique of colonialism by returning Bangalore's constructed natures to a precolonial condition, they instead endeavor to reveal and read each of the layers by parsing and representing them. In so doing, they frame the region as the site of multiple and opposing trajectories that collide to form the matrix of Bangalore. To deny the colonial undertakings, they insist, is to deny some of the most essential frameworks that comprise

contemporary and future Bangalore (irrespective of postcolonial sympathies and understandings).

In this way, they read settlement as a Deleuzian enterprise, rather than what had long been understood as a structuralist act, outlined by preeminent historian of religions Mircea Eliade. In his seminal 1957 book *Sacred and Profane*, he argues that uninhabited space is homogeneous and chaotic and cannot be settled until some order is traced onto the landscape. Order comes by way of revealing a site of divine intervention, an absolute marker from which all subsequent settlement can be organized. In this formulation, landscape is given singular meaning with inarguable authority. While *Deccan Traverses* does not mention this work, traces of this methodology exist in this new reading of Bangalore. Known as the “naked plain,” Bangalore’s settlement in 1537 was carried out by erecting a central hut and encircling it with a mud wall, which created the sort of dialectical distinction outlined by Eliade.

Mathur and Da Cunha, however, evocatively draw out the subtle and conflicting layers transcribed over time onto the landscape. Far from an objective act creating perceived dialectical realities, they present a landscape of overlapping simultaneities. By undergoing a series of mappings and representations, the authors reveal the significant, but at times individually invisible, forces at work in the Deccan Plateau. Approaching Bangalore as a rich and conflicted palimpsest, each chapter of the book diagrammatically renders individual layers decipherable.

They identify four factors that shape Bangalore’s landscape: The War, The Survey, The Picture, and The Garden. And they show the continued influence of each of these acts of colonialism, tracing the transition from a naked plain to a thriving settlement that was to become a nineteenth-century Garden City and today’s “Silicon Valley of India.”

Absent from early English maps of India, Bangalore made its first detailed appearance in cartography due to its role in the Third Mysore War of 1791. These early maps embedded military strategy into representations of Bangalore. Documenting both space and time, the authors draw a connection

to Bangalore’s initial settlement in 1537, which was understood “not as a spatial entity but as an auspicious event” (p. 34). British colonialists overlaid another set of readings onto Bangalore and thereby initiated a different set of geographical understandings.

In their treatment of surveying, Mathur and Da Cunha demonstrate the subversive implications in the modes of representation used by the European surveyors. The prevalent water storage tanks of the region were critically important in regulating seasonal water flow but were variously manifested as fluctuating compositions of clay. And religion was there too. Tied to seasonal ritual, the pious immerse idols of Ganesha into the tanks. Though they could be dry beds for months at a time, European cartographers represented these tanks as reservoirs rendered in blue, thereby making them susceptible to development, manipulation, and control. The significant cultural and temporal mechanisms were lost in representation.

In *The Picture*, the authors present what was the fledgling Picturesque movement in art, where colonial painters collaged together different moments, places, and events to represent falsely constructed realities in the service of colonialist exoticism.

And in the last section, *The Garden*, Mathur and Da Cunha document the lasting effects of a botanical colonialism. Because of Bangalore’s mild climate and favorable soil conditions, it could readily support flora from across the world. Using diagrams and mappings, they reveal the widespread and seamless integration of colonial enterprises on the Deccan Plateau. They argue that it is not simply the plantings and landscape morphologies of Europe, Asia, and South America that become literally transcribed onto the Bangalore landscape, earning it the reputation as “Garden City.” They extend their analysis to show the garden’s implication in the larger, dominant apparatus of capitalism.

With these analyses, the authors manage to question the dialectical relationship of subject and object. They show that landscape is not simply the objective product of human intervention but that subject and object are constantly linked and that each perpetually shapes the other. By highlighting the myopia of colonialist representations, and by

proposing new interpretations, the authors explore the limits of possibilities in contemporary methods of representation. In so doing, they attempt to use the practice of architectural research to unravel and pacify sites and times of contestation.

Most revealing are the working drawings before the authors return them back to obscurity as silk screen images. Initially conceived as an exhibition in Philadelphia and Bangalore, many of the images, especially the silk screens that divide sections, are meant (appropriately so) more for a gallery’s wall than for pedagogical representation. Despite the book’s obvious polemic, the argument at times is lost at the expense of these graphics and organization. Neither chronological nor entirely topical, the authors group imagery into the broad categories discussed above, which makes for an arbitrary and fragmented narrative, mitigating the decisiveness of their argument.

The authors nevertheless make a compelling case for the important applications of architectural research. By revising these understandings of landscapes, the authors empower the discipline to critically assess the legacies of its own past interventions and to engage and advance discourse beyond its disciplinary boundaries.

*John P. Gendall*