

RECREATING THE GARDEN OF DREAMS: THE KESHAR MAHAL PROJECT

*Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!
The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,
Ah, whence and wither flown again, who knows?*

*Ah Moon of my Delight, who Know'st no wane,
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again.:
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me– in vain!*

Behind a high wall in the centre of bustling Kathmandu stands a cracked marble slab inscribed with those verses from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. An anomaly? No more so than its still hidden surroundings – the long-abandoned Garden of Dreams, the creation of Field Marshal General Kaiser Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana (1892–1964). This remarkable man – diplomat and also world traveller, connoisseur, scholar and botanist – eschewed the courtly intrigues of his time, and set about creating not only a monumental library in his private residence, but also a unique garden that drew its inspiration from Oriental and Western sources. No ascetic or recluse, the aristocrat enjoyed the pleasures of this world. And, so the story goes, it was a particularly lucky turn at the *kauda* conch game in 1920, on Laxmi Puja Day – the day when the goddess of wealth looks benevolently on gamblers – that enabled him to start work on a fantastic garden with pavilions, balustrades, lofty subtropical trees, exotic flowers, and statuary with motifs from the Western and Eastern cultural heritages.

After the death of the Field Marshal – who preferred to spell his name Kaiser rather than Keshar, reflecting his admiration of Kaiser Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary – His Majesty's Government of Nepal purchased the Keshar Mahal Palace including its 'Kaiser Library' and adjoining gardens. In 1975, the Ministry of Education and Sport moved into the palace, but nothing was done to maintain the Garden of Dreams. *Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose...* that inscribed slab stands outside the Spring (*Basanta*) pavilion, which, like the rest of the garden, was slowly crumbling into oblivion, vanishing with its roses.

Then came Visit Nepal Year 1998. Its convenor, the renowned Karna Shakya, noted with horror that yet another one of the remaining three pavilions – originally there had been six, one for each season of the Nepali year – was being torn down. The western portion of the garden had long since disappeared, and now all that was left was its eastern half, a site of approximately half a hectare, overgrown with wild, unplanned vegetation around a large pond which is set, Edwardian style, in the sunken part of the garden. Would that too disappear, and with it a unique testimony to a bygone era? Ministries were contacted, a group of concerned admirers of the gardens, Nepali and Austrian and American, set about mobilising support. The previous year, Austria's Foreign Minister of State, Benita Ferreo-Waldner, had visited the country on the occasion of the opening of the Patan

Museum, and had been alerted to the predicament of the Garden of Dreams at Keshar Mahal. Finally in 2002 after an intensive period of preparatory work and a feasibility study, the final bilateral agreement was signed between HMG Ministry of Education and Sports, and the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Eco Himal embraced this as a cultural heritage and tourism development project: with the planned early opening of the garden to be combined with the establishment of a garden café, while ongoing work will continue to restore and add additional facilities until 2006.

And indeed, the gardens are being brought back to life. The rich flora – towering palm and Araucaria pine trees, mulberry, magnolia, silk cotton (kapok), teak azaleas, camellia trees, wisteria, bougainvillea, peony, wild orchids, crepe myrtle – are once again receiving expert care. The area has long been a haven for bird life, with egrets, herons as well as mynahs, doves, crows, marsh hen, bulbuls, thrushes; other visitors include babblers, barbets, hoopoe, kingfishers, woodpeckers, red-billed blue magpies, minivets – and roosting owls. Reminisces Lok Bhakta Rana, youngest son of the Field Marshal and member of the new Keshar Mahal Garden Board of Directors: *'Once a huge snow owl – a rare Himalayan species – found its way into the garden and was mistaken for a thief!'*

But why should Eco Himal, as an environmental development agency, choose such a project – a luxury retreat of the former Rana elite, in the heart of Kathmandu? To quote site architect Prabal Thapa: *'This isn't just an exercise in restoration and renovation, it's to give another example (like the Patan Museum) how a historical site can make the transition to a new economic and cultural self-sustainable reality.'*

The accumulated rubbish and overgrowth of decades has been removed, yes; the pavilions and pergolas are being rebuilt; statuary, balustrades, decorative walls and walkways are being meticulously restored, as is the ornamental pond – but the project does not stop there. No longer reserved for the aristocracy, the Garden of Dreams will be open to the general public, an environmental and cultural gem on the doorstep of Kathmandu's main tourist area. There will also be an aviary of Himalayan birds, a rhododendron garden, a large area for open-air performances and gatherings, high-quality handicraft and garden/floral shops... as well as a top-class restaurant and, in the former Spring pavilion, a Viennese Coffee House, the *Kaiser Café*.

As in all Eco Himal projects, the foreign component is minimal – project manager Ludmilla Hungerhuber and architect Goetz Hagmüller and Erich Theophile are part-time consultants with landscape architect and gardener Helga Gropper and architecture students from Graz and Cologne as interns. Just as with the Patan Museum, the aim is not only to make this an economically viable enterprise, but also to transfer all management to Nepali hands. The Board has five Nepali members under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Education's Secretary (with one representative from Eco Himal); and, under the direction of site architect Prabal Thapa, some 40 Nepali craftsmen

and gardeners are transforming a wasteland into a true Garden of Dreams. As project manager Ludmilla Hungerhuber concludes: *'Our dream is to restore this area as a recreational oasis in the heart of busy Kathmandu. Every time I come here, I leave the noise and bustle behind. Gardens make people happy – and if some 70 permanent new and qualified jobs are created, I have no qualms about the “luxury” aspect of the new facilities added to the historical setting.'*