

India from Another Perspective

BY PEDRO J. MORALES, PUERTO RICO

I have known about bonsai in India for many years largely because of the work of the well known couple Nikunj and Jyoti Parekh. I had visited them a couple of times and I had the pleasure to make many good friends and learn about bonsai in India. It was really a great experience because the group was very unified and friendly.

This trip to India resulted from an invitation from another person in a different society unknown to me because I had never seen information on their activities. Mr. Sujay & Rupa Shah became interested in bonsai during an exhibition in 1985 in Mumbai. This couple also belongs to the Parekh group.

After many e-mails and phone calls I agreed to go, after all I really enjoyed my first experiences in India so why not try it again? The India Friendship Bonsai Society founded in 2002 was to be my host. I have to say that what I found was beyond my imagination.

First of all these people live outside of the main city of Mumbai (Bombay). Upon arrival I was escorted to a magnificent garden with hundreds of bonsai and pre-bonsai material. It reminded me of my first visit to China when I went to see bonsai nurseries there. The difference is that the garden of this Indian family represents a personal collection and not a commercial enterprise. The garden and bonsai are for their own enjoyment and when they have visitors from other countries who want to learn from Indian bonsai they are welcome to see the Shah trees. They just love to share their collection and experiences.

Mr. Shah is a landscape designer and owns two nurseries where he has the material for his business and some pre-bonsai material developing on the grounds. This makes the trees grow

faster and I have to say that I was very impressed to know that I was very impressed to know that he has been only about 5 years in this new place. Mr. Shah began to grow bonsai seriously in 1989. His passion for plants and his desire to learn make him go the extra mile to get more information and learn from different people all around the world.

This garden is known as Surup Bonsai. They have hosted many masters from Southeast Asia including Robert Steven, Rudy Najooan and Budi Sulistyio. Usually the Masters stay with the Shahs at the nursery and work on trees with them. This way

they learn and share with guests the techniques that they use to propagate their plants and also to learn new techniques for improving their own bonsai skills. It is important to know that they have more than 80 different varieties of plants and more than 20 different varieties of ficus.

I could see the influence of Chinese bonsai here. I was really impressed with the rock plantings and the forest plantings. Also it was excellent to see many new varieties of plants that will grow in my own tropical climate. This experience could be compared to a child in a toy store, but



Sujay & Rupa Shah with a ficus forest planted on a slab.



India Friendship Bonsai Society members pose with the planting created by Pedro Morales (top row, second gentleman from the right) during his recent visit.



The Shah's garden

better because I could pick any plant I wanted to work with. Then we sat in one of their multiple gazebos to work. Sometimes I would just sit and watch them do their planting.

Their plants came from all over Thailand, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and of course I brought some from Puerto Rico to their new home.

It is very interesting that the Shahs keep some plants in the ground to let them grow and develop good nebari. Before digging up a plant they make an air layer and begin the same process again. This increases the numbers to hundreds of plants from each species and when plants are needed for a demonstration or a workshop there's plenty to select from.

We worked for several days and I also gave a lecture demo to others from India. Many came and we had a wonderful activity in an excellent classroom, with plenty food (including potato burgers) and trees to choose. It was a shame that many people who wanted to come decided not to because they received instructions to attend only their own club's activities. This reminds me that I have to do more to get to all people interested in bonsai. In the words of my friend John Y. Naka who once told me: "it is important that your students learn from many different



teachers then leave them to develop their own style."

Sometimes people believe that they are the only ones good enough to teach and do not recognize the talent of their students. I remember in one of my classes in Puerto Rico many years ago, one of my students, a lady known to ask "stupid questions" and no matter how I explained things to her she never got it right. Then in one of the classes I removed an air layer from a plant and after I cut the big branch I turned to show it to my students and asked, "Which style does this air layer suggest to you?" I have looked at that plant many times and it was obvious to me that it should be an informal upright or a slanting style. Each student expressed an opinion, close to my own assessment, until I got to the lady. "I see a semi-cascade or a cascade there," she stated. Every one looked at her and no one said a word but waited for my reaction to another stupid comment. But guess what? When I began to explain why it should not be a cascade or a semi-cascade, I started to see what this lady



Mrs. Shah with *Cassuarina forest*

was looking at. I was the most impressed because finally she was the one who got the best of that class.

What I learned was to never underestimate my students, AND, most importantly, let them see through their eyes, not mine. This lady is now considered one of my best students and a person who has taught me more than I could teach her.

Why were these bonsai students instructed not to attend another club's activities? I have no idea but I do know that all who attended learned more about bonsai and shared Indian bonsai with me, the best way—without restriction.

Mr. Sujay & Rupa Shah will be one of the greatest Master couples from India in a few years. Their names will soon appear in many magazines. For my part, I really appreciate the opportunity to visit with them and their colleagues of the India Friendship Bonsai Society and to see this fantastic garden. Hopefully I will return soon. I need to try those potato burgers again!