



## SAVE RANI BAGH BOTANICAL GARDEN FOUNDATION

Reg. No. E – 29101 (Mum)

(Formerly Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Action Committee)

January 1, 2018

Dear Friend,

Greetings from the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Foundation!

Responding to a request for an update from friends and well-wishers we have penned an account of current developments and an update on our recent efforts to ensure that any renovation plan of the zoo segment of V.J.B. Udyan, popularly called Rani Bagh, will not encroach upon the botanical garden space and keep it accessible to citizens from all walks of life. We do have a slew of developments to report - for those who may find the update lengthy (and we certainly can't blame you if you do!) may we suggest a quick glance at the subtitles?

**Eleven year milestone:** This year we clock eleven years from the time we embarked on the struggle to preserve and protect the heritage botanical garden of Rani Bagh from the forces of so-called redevelopment and to ensure that this precious public heritage is passed on to future generations.

**Struggle, solidarity, lessons, highs and lows:** In the course of these eleven years we are indeed grateful for the encouragement and support received from all city environmental and heritage conservation groups as well as from a cross section of citizens and friends who have expressed solidarity with our cause. Listing organisations and individuals who supported us would run into a few pages and cannot be mentioned here for lack of space. However, we cannot fail to highlight the unstinted support of Mr. D.M. Sukthankar and Mr. S.G. Kale, former bureaucrats and concerned citizens, who have stood with us at every juncture through our decade-long journey, accompanying us to official meetings, hearings and site visits and have spoken up for the botanical garden in diverse forums.

As is to be expected from an eleven-year trajectory, we have learnt a great deal, burnt our fingers on occasion and experienced a few moments of elation and satisfaction, particularly when successive redevelopment plans were rejected by the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee. But for the most part, we have put in hard labour and plodded along, persevering with a sense of responsibility towards our beloved Rani Bagh - the island city's only heritage botanical garden, its biggest green public space, its largest agglomeration of trees and widest diversity of species.

**Recap – success with Heritage Committee in 2011 and 2014, setback in 2015:** You may recall that responding to our numerous petitions and representations at several hearings, the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee had rejected successive Master Plans for redevelopment in March 2011 and November 2014. Among the many stringent directions imposed by the Heritage Committee in 2014,

the most important stipulation was that proposed animal enclosures be located at the footprint of existing animal enclosures, to ensure that there was no reduction in the botanical garden space and also to prevent tampering with its heritage layout. Successive Heritage Committees headed by Mr. Sharad Upasani, Mr. D.K. Afzalpurkar and Mr. V. Ranganathan had invariably responded positively to our just demands and concern for the botanical garden. However, in a serious setback in November 2015, the present Committee headed by Mr. Ramanath Jha chose to accord ‘in principle’ approval to the very Master Plan rejected by the previous Heritage Committee in 2014. At this juncture we felt we were left with no option but to approach the judiciary under writ jurisdiction and prepared ourselves for the task.

**Municipal Commissioner appoints DMC to review and amend Master Plan incorporating our suggestions:** We sent a slew of representations to the BMC, Heritage Committee and the Central Zoo Authority. At a meeting with Municipal Commissioner Mr. Ajoy Mehta in March 2016 to address issues related to the redevelopment plan, he appeared receptive to our concerns. We were surprised when he stated that he would direct the Deputy Municipal Commissioner (DMC) Mr. Sudhir Naik, to review the plan with us and make necessary changes in the interest of the botanical garden. This marked a new phase in our struggle, a chapter where the BMC was ready to sit across the table and heed our objections.

**Not lowering our guard while interacting closely at weekly review meetings with DMC’s team, from March 2016 to the present time – meetings that have yielded valuable positive changes as also a few disappointments:** Given our long experience of the BMC’s callous disregard for the botanical garden and a history of manipulation of facts and data, we were naturally skeptical of the outcome of any such dialogue and always remained vigilant. However, after regular weekly site visits with the DMC and his team, we are satisfied that most of our suggestions are accepted and significant changes effected in the Master Plan. A couple of our objections have been disregarded and we persevere in our effort to address these and hope to convince the BMC through discussion and written follow-up. The changed mindset has also resulted in consultations with us before any tree trimming exercise is undertaken and solicitation of our input for garden-related issues.

Listed below are a few of the significant decisions taken and changes agreed to by the BMC over the course of the past twelve month period.

### **Issues related to Master Plan**

- 1. On-site marking and examination of boundaries of proposed animal enclosures for our review:** The DMC’s team drew out the exact boundaries of each proposed animal enclosure with white chalk powder on site, an exercise

that facilitated a cogent co-relation between the layout drawing and the actual location/situation on the ground.

- 2. Some proposed animal enclosures scrapped to preserve integrity and vistas of the botanical garden:** A few proposed animal enclosures that would have harmed and/or marred the botanical garden have been scrapped. For instance the proposed crocodile and gharial enclosure that was designed to have high walls around it and the proposed cat complex that would have marred the secondary axis near the bandstand have been scrapped. In short, not only has the physical space of the botanical garden been safeguarded but its vistas and the issue of the visual sweep of the botanical garden when viewed from different locations, has been successfully addressed.
- 3. Some animal enclosure designs modified in the interest of visitor safety and protection of trees:** Other proposed animal enclosures have been modified and several detrimental and harebrained features like viewing a tiger below ground level through a glass wall, while it would be induced to dive into a water body to grab meat bait, have been discarded. We cautioned that this would have caused a stampede-like situation in an enclosed below-the-ground space. Incidentally, this feature would also have violated statutory norms that prohibit the use of animals for entertainment. We were also able to convince the authorities to desist from the proposed plan of erecting a high opaque wall around the proposed bear enclosure and to substitute that with a conventional wire mesh thus enabling visitors to view the botanical garden expanse beyond the wire mesh.
- 4. Space occupied by some proposed animal enclosures reduced:** The space slated to be occupied by some proposed animal enclosures, for instance, the lion enclosure and the bird aviaries has been trimmed in order to adhere to the footprint of existing enclosures.
- 5. Viewing areas reviewed and modified to protect trees and preserve botanical garden ambience:** The proposed viewing areas of some enclosures have been modified in order to keep tree trunks on pathways free of awnings as in the bear enclosure. The initial plan was to have these tree trunks projecting out of awnings and rain shades, a feature that we felt was both unnecessary and ill-conceived in a heritage botanical garden.
- 6. Our suggestions regarding location of public amenity blocks accepted:** Our suggestions as to the location of public amenities like toilet blocks, water kiosks and tea/coffee vending stalls were also accepted, and we are satisfied that these amenities, which are presently under construction, are located at suitable spots around the botanical garden, where vistas are not compromised and trees remain unharmed.

- 7. Service road length curtailed in the interest of safety of trees:** The path of the proposed service road was minutely surveyed by us along with the BMC team and our suggestion to desist from fresh construction on a section at the northern boundary which has thick tree cover, and to instead use the existing pathway as a service road, was accepted.
- 8. Boundaries of animal enclosures modified:** The boundaries of some proposed animal enclosures have been altered in the interest of the health and accessibility of trees as in the case of bringing a giant rain tree outside of the proposed tiger enclosure and shifting the location of a ramp in the bird aviary.
- 9. Objection to leopard enclosure with a proposed high overhead netting above the existing tree canopy disregarded:** Though most of our suggestions were accepted, albeit after much discussion and exhortation, we were unable to convince the authorities to refrain from using a very expensive netting (called 'Jakob rope system'), to enclose the tall trees in the leopard enclosure. We continue to oppose this feature on the ground that a huge net-roofed enclosure, located as it is at the culmination of the secondary axis, would mar an important vista of the botanical garden. We also stressed that covering tall trees with overhead netting would be unviable in actual execution and fatally flawed from an aesthetic perspective. Our suggestion that another animal, one that could not leap as high as the leopard, be housed at that location so as to avoid a netted structure, was rejected. We remain cautiously hopeful that repeated exhortations may result in success.
- 10. Fresh Master Plan adhering to footprint of existing animal enclosures and incorporating many positive changes in the interest of the botanical garden, prepared and handed over:** A new Master Plan incorporating all the modifications listed above was furnished to us, though it is still to be sent to the Central Zoo Authority for approval of the many changes.

#### **Issues related to internal gardens**

- 11. BMC spruces up internal gardens:** The BMC has recently been sprucing up many of the internal gardens and we are satisfied that a host of our suggestions in this regard have been accepted.
- 12. Suggestion to install low cast iron fencing around internal gardens in consonance with heritage design of external fence accepted:** The BMC planned to erect a high metal fence around each internal garden to replace the existing wire-mesh fencing. We felt such a move would needlessly fragment the botanical garden space and suggested that a low cast iron fence matching the design of the external heritage boundary fence be erected. This suggestion was

readily accepted and implemented. The new low fence erected around several internal gardens is easy on the eye, adds to the heritage feel of the botanical garden and has resulted in substantial saving of public funds.

- 13. Proposal to lay concrete on a section of every internal garden dropped at our insistence:** A substantial chunk at the entrance to each internal garden was sought to be concretised as part of the 'beautification' plan. We were horrified by the proposal and insistent that all internal gardens be totally permeable and free of concrete. The DMC agreed with our stand and directed that the concretization (that had just commenced at the time), be reversed and halted. Presently, the entire area of each internal garden remains permeable and covered with grass as before.
- 14. Needless excavating and replacing of old soil avoided:** The BMC had proposed to dig out and replace the soil in each internal garden (up to one foot or more in depth) on the ludicrous excuse that it was "infertile" and needed to be replaced. We convinced the authorities that this was a totally needless and wasteful exercise and the soil need only be aerated and enriched with natural fertilizer. Here again needless expense was avoided.
- 15. Sensible approach to plant selection adopted:** The plant selection and design for internal gardens furnished by the consultant was gaudy, pretentious and impractical - it also failed to factor in Mumbai's climatic conditions. Along with BMC horticulturists we suggested alternative shrubs, grasses and herbs.
- 16. Suggestion to affix each tree with a new name board in aftermath of recent tree survey accepted:** We convinced the DMC to install new number-cum-name plates on each tree in accordance with a recent BMC tree survey. We undertook the painstaking and lengthy task of checking the botanical name, common name and family details of 4,131 trees and submitted a list in Marathi and English. Most of these plates have now been installed on all the trees.
- 17. Suggestion to install 50 new information plaques near prominent trees, of both native and exotic species, accepted:** We have persuaded the BMC to install 50 large information plaques with basic material in Marathi and English together with pictures of features such as fruit/flower/bark etc. under the respective trees. The write-up in Marathi and English and photographs are provided by us and we expect that the plaques will be put up once BMC tenders receive a positive response.
- 18. Native tree saplings planted in Parcel D and Master Plan modified to augment green area:** Several native trees suggested by us were planted on Parcel D (the recently acquired 6.5-acre erstwhile Mafatlal Mill plot lying to the east of the park) at our behest. Our suggestion to widen and extend proposed

pathways and increase the green cover by trimming the size of animal enclosures in the proposed plan for this plot, has also been accepted.

### **Issues related to entry plaza renovation**

- 19. Protecting trees, promoting heritage features and ambience:** All our suggestions to safeguard trees and most points to renovate the area keeping in mind its unique heritage character were accepted. We were present through the excavation and resurfacing process and cautioned against dumping of debris and construction material near trees, each time eliciting a positive response from the DMC.
- 20. Lowering the entire entry plaza ground to bring it in level with the Triple Archway Screen floor:** Years of repeated, indiscriminate laying of concrete and tiles on the ground surface of the entry plaza had resulted in the ground level being raised by more than a foot in height. Consequently, the floor level of the heritage Triple Arch Screen had seemingly sunk over a foot below the level of the rest of the entry plaza ground, resulting in an ugly unwieldy step at Rani Bagh's most recognized and beloved monument. We convinced the authorities that, since they were digging up the entire entry plaza ground to lay a fresh cobble-stone paving, they ought to return the ground to its original level. After this suggestion was implemented, the elegance and general ambience of the plaza and the Triple Archway is restored as it once again stands on level ground with the rest of the plaza.
- 21. Safeguarding trees near booking window block:** The plan of the booking window block was suitably modified to keep a safe distance from a large and rare Brazilian Ironwood tree (*Caesalpinia ferrea*), that stands on its western edge. We convinced the DMC to keep the trees in front of the booking block free of the awning, doing away with the initial plan to have these tree trunks projecting out of the awning, a feature that would have looked clumsy and out of sync with the heritage character of the botanical garden. These trees have been provided with a suitably large permeable soil belt around them.
- 22. Keeping a small patch permeable:** Our suggestion that a patch to the west of the booking block meant as a small seating area be kept permeable and covered with grass was accepted.
- 23. Suggestion to adhere to the heritage ambience:** Some of the small pillars flanking the booking window were designed in an inappropriate style and our suggestion to match the design of these pillars to those of the Triple Archway Screen was accepted and the design changed.

**24. Belts of permeable soil lined with trees maintained on either side of parking lot:** Two large belts bearing numerous trees, on either side of the parking lot were kept permeable and unpaved at our suggestion.

**25. Suggestion to set up information plaques on heritage monuments accepted:** Written matter in Marathi and English on the heritage monuments in the botanical garden to be etched on stainless steel information plaques was furnished by us. These include the Clock Tower, the Triple Archway, the Conservatory, the original 'Kala Ghoda' statue, the Frere Temple and a plaque denoting the internal garden at the junction of the primary axes where Flora Fountain (originally commissioned by the Agri Horticultural Society of Western India), was slated to have stood. Four of these stainless steel plaques are now installed.

**26. Unsuccessful effort to avoid GRC/FRP tableau:** We were unsuccessful in our efforts to dissuade the authorities from setting up a large tableau of assorted animal models placed in an artificial water body situated to the east of the booking block, as also the installation of large artificial birds on the roof of the booking block. Our entreaties that such a tableau did not blend in with the heritage ambience of the entry plaza were disregarded. In addition our point that fabricating these models out of GRC (glass reinforced concrete) and FRP (fibre reinforced polymer) created a somewhat jarring and loud effect, was also not accepted.

**27. Original lion and lioness sculpture reintroduced though not in bronze:** We informed the DMC that the original bronze lion and lioness sculpture that stood on two pedestals on either end of the central garden of the entry plaza had been shifted to the Chowpatty beach and that replicas could be re-installed there. Though models of a lion and lioness have been installed, sadly these are not cast in bronze but made of FRP.

### **Issues related to Development Plan classification**

**28. Dangerous initial designation and provisions, series of 'suggestions-objections', hearings and finally, a positive outcome of 'botanical garden' designation:** In June 2014 we represented before the Officer on Special Duty protesting crippling provisions of the Proposed Draft Development Plan for Mumbai 2014-34 namely, (i) the designation of Rani Bagh being randomly changed from 'Garden' to 'Zoo', (ii) provision of FSI of 5 and (iii) unprecedented powers conferred on the Municipal Commissioner under the head 'Ancillary Activities'. We filed our 'Suggestions-Objections' in November 2015 and once again in July 2016. Though the subsequent designation 'Garden and zoo' indicated that a positive change had been effected after repeated follow-up, we

are happy to report that at a hearing in November 2016, Mr. Gautam Chatterjee, Chairman Planning Committee, assured us that the designation will be further strengthened to 'botanical garden', a designation specially created for Rani Bagh. We expect that this new explicit classification will prove to be a shot in the arm and aid in reinforcing the notion of the reality and value of the botanical garden.

### **Grave danger of entry fee hike – our strong objection to the move**

**29. Dogged opposition to steep entry fee hike:** The chief twin planks of our ten-year-old struggle have always been: (i) the preservation and protection of the botanical garden and (ii) its accessibility by common citizens from all walks of life. Apart from being Mumbai's only heritage botanical garden and largest green public space, Rani Bagh is also the most visited park by far, with an average of 8,000 visitors each day peaking to 40,000 on holidays. Egalitarianism has been the hallmark of Rani Bagh since its inception in 1861. An affordable entry fee of Rs. 5 for adults and Rs. 2 for children facilitates entry of visitors from underprivileged sections. We have always feared a steep entry fee hike that could destroy this egalitarian and inclusive ethos, a hike premised on the exorbitant amounts proposed to be squandered on 'redevelopment'. Consequently we have consistently warned the BMC that we will launch a determined struggle against any attempt to raise the entry fee exponentially, a move that will make Rani Bagh an elitist preserve for the well-heeled. Unfortunately, a newspaper item in January 2017 reported that a 20-fold increase in the entry fee was planned by the BMC. At a meeting with the Municipal Commissioner in July 2016 and thereafter through strongly worded detailed representations, we expressed our opposition to such a retrograde and anti-people move in the strongest possible terms. We set out to campaign against the fee hike in a concerted manner by addressing a joint letter to the Chief Minister signed by retired judges, representatives of environment, open space and heritage groups, floating an online petition on our website to raise awareness, sending individual representations to the Mayor, the Municipal Commissioner, Municipal Corporators and Standing Committee members, and addressing a joint press conference with Trustees of NAGAR and Mr. D.M. Sukthankar.

**30. We continued to oppose Standing Committee's revised proposal to scale down fee hike from Rs. 100 per adult to Rs. 50 per adult:** During the course of our opposition campaign, covered widely in the media, we learnt that the Standing Committee had proposed a 50 percent reduction in the earlier announced fee hike. Finding this scaled down hike too totally unacceptable we reiterated our strong opposition to the Rs. 50 proposal as it would effectively

create an economic barrier to public entry and once again sent our renewed representations to all public bodies and to individual Municipal representatives.

**31. Struggle to oppose fee hike falls on deaf ears of BMC elected representatives:** In July 2017, the General Body of elected representatives of the Municipal House voted to increase the entry fee from Rs. 5 to Rs. 50 with the caveat that a family of 2 adults and two children would be jointly charged Rs. 100. A few Municipal Corporators abstained from voting but there was no debate in the House and a 156 year old tradition of egalitarianism was effectively destroyed in one action by the Municipal Corporators. This unjust and unfortunate development is without doubt a great loss to the city of Mumbai and to our struggle to preserve the identity, integrity and accessibility of Rani Bagh as a haven for common people from all walks of life. It may be some small consolation to democratic forces that the scale of the hike was reduced from the earlier proposed Rs. 100 to the finally decided figure of Rs. 50 (per adult) and the earlier provision of free entry to senior citizens and Municipal School children was continued into the new fee regime. The new fee structure came into effect from August 1, 2017 and as expected revenues soared and the number of visitors dropped, even as a time-honoured legacy of inclusiveness lay in a tatters.

### **Wasteful expenditure opposed**

**32. Opposition to exorbitant expenditure on imported materials, exotic animal exhibits and consultation fees:** We cautioned the Municipal Commissioner that the MCGM should desist from procuring expensive imported materials like the 'Jakob rope system' and 'Plexiglass' viewing panels and instead use equally effective and locally available, more affordable materials. The 'Jakob rope system' alone, proposed to be used in four animal enclosures was slated to cost Rs. 37.83 crore. We asserted that such expenditure was a flagrant waste of public funds and that to make such expenditure an excuse to raise the entry fee to a level where it becomes unaffordable for common citizens, would amount to a travesty of the notion of public welfare. We also pointed to the enormous cost of the Humboldt penguin exhibit (Rs. 60 crore) and cited the huge fees (Rs. 17.86 crore), paid to the consultant, Ms. HKS Designer and Consultant International. (Most Indian zoos are completely renovated for much less than this figure.) We further stressed that such wasteful expense cannot be used as a reason to raise the entry fee to unaffordable levels.

## **Demolition of unauthorised walls**

**33. Commitment to demolish some sections but refusal to tear down all unauthorised walls:** In response to sustained opposition and protests over five years against the erection of a series of unauthorised walls randomly constructed within the botanical garden, the MHCC had, on numerous occasions, directed that all these walls be torn down. However, in November 2015, the MHCC accepted the BMC's stand that it would demolish the section near the aquatic birds' cage and around a small internal garden to the north of the Nilgai enclosure, but would retain the unauthorised walls erected around three bungalows. We are happy to report that a long length of the unauthorised wall to the west of the aquatic birds enclosure and visible at the main entrance has already been demolished and replaced by a cast iron heritage fencing thereby restoring visibility and space continuity in the botanical garden. The BMC has informed us that it would honour its commitment to demolish an unauthorised wall section to the west of the open air auditorium soon as the demolition work is included in a forthcoming tender.

## **Suggestion to create mini forest of native trees on Parcel C**

**34. Staff quarters proposal dropped:** We are happy to report that the BMC has discarded the earlier plan of constructing staff quarters on Parcel C, (a three-acre plot of the erstwhile Podar Mill) acquired for Rani Bagh. We had always opposed the staff quarters proposal and have now exhorted the BMC to harness this substantial acreage to create a mini forest of trees native to the Sahyadris and to use it as an open-to-the-skies nature interpretation centre.

## **Future initiatives**

**35. Input sought in design and content of proposed Nature Interpretation Centre focused on botanical garden:** Our input has been sought in the design and content of a proposed Nature Education Centre on the first floor of the new Administrative building and we are happy to report that our suggestion that it be primarily devoted to the botanical and cultural aspects of the heritage botanical garden of Rani Bagh, has been accepted.

**36. Butterfly, Medicinal and Tactile gardens:** We will be assisting in the setting up of a butterfly garden, a medicinal garden and a tactile garden in different areas of the campus and will provide the relevant written matter and photographs for the signage boards.

**37. Hand-held guides, booklets, nature trails:** Publication of hand-held guides on the trees of the botanical garden is on the anvil. We plan to chalk out five nature trails within the campus that will be easy to follow with the handy booklet-guides.

**38. Suggestion to set up a herbarium:** We have long suggested that Rani Bagh should have a herbarium. A former Additional Municipal Commissioner had tentatively agreed to this proposal and we are given to understand that space for it will be earmarked in the new administrative building.

**39. Information plaques on unique and historical features of heritage botanical garden to be installed:** Written matter in Marathi and English for etched stainless steel plaques, furnishing important information on the botanical, historical and cultural aspects of the botanical garden in a succinct bullet-point format will be furnished by us and these plaques will be installed at prominent locations in the campus.

As we sign off we thank you for your solidarity over the past eleven eventful years and look forward to your support in future campaigns to protect and promote the unique botanical garden of Rani Bagh and to keep it accessible to common citizens.

With kind regards,

For Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Foundation

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Trustees