



Mumbai's garden of Eden

**Rani Bagh, Mumbai's Heritage Botanical Gardens –
150 Years**

Veer mata Jijabai Bhosale Udyan & Zoo

By Sumaira Abdulali, Pheroza Godrej and
Hutokshi Rustomfram

National Society of the Friends of Trees, Save Rani Bagh
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Leafing through the book *Rani Bagh* is like taking a shady walk through Mumbai's most beautiful city space. Typically designed and presented as a commemorative 'coffee table' book, its 157 pages include articles written by city historian Mariam Dossal, conservation architect Vikas Dilawari, botanist Marselin R Almeida, history scholar and conservationist Pheroza J Godrej and campaigners Hutokshi Rustomfram and Shubhada Nikharge who, from what we see in the book are both passionate about "saving" the garden from the city planners.

In a nutshell, the book is illustrative of a serious attempt at saving a part of a city from itself. It is not an unusual or extraordinary attempt; we see publications all over the world making attempts at spreading awareness on a historic site, precinct, monument, neighbourhood or area of pristine natural beauty in a bid to save a precious natural or man-made piece of our heritage. This is undertaken on the premise that "only if one knows what one has, can any attempt be made to save it". Whether one book can achieve this aim is questionable but by garnering support (and a commitment in print) from government officials and other garden enthusiasts from other parts of the world (the various "messages" in the beginning of the book are jarring but were, one supposes, necessary for the purpose) the whole team of writers, contributors, photographers and publishers have made their a brave and commendable effort.

Gardens, parks and maidans in the old cities of India did not spring out of thin air, overnight. They were planned outcomes of passion, love and concerted effort on the part of rulers, citizens and collectors and propagators of plant material. Rani Bagh (is this spelling of the name a deliberate attempt at a veering away from the colonial Baug?) has everything a citizen could dream of: rich and varied plant material, evidence of the history of the city in terms of its conservatories, gates and a museum dedicated to the city and, what's more, all this impeccably documented by its city historians. In an urban setting where citizens are losing perspective with changing skylines and altered roofscapes, this is no small reassurance. Mariam Dossal deftly takes you through the labyrinth of historical

events that led to the creation of Rani Bagh while sharing the painful efforts of erstwhile botanists, collectors and individual tree enthusiasts who have made the garden the largest and richest collection of plant material in India.

Conservation architect Vikas Dilawari writes with clarity and feeling on the symbiosis of natural and man-made heritage at Rani Bagh. He traces the history of the garden to other developments in the city and tells us how museums formed central landmarks in Company gardens; how "the pan-European passion for Greek and Roman statuary was reflected in all great gardens of the time" and, how, like so many of Bombay's monumental buildings were funded by public subscription.

Rani Bagh's incredible botanical wealth has been listed by master botanist Marselin R Almeida (a teacher

I am personally indebted to for sharing his vast knowledge on the plants of the Western Ghats) and who, in his article tells us that selecting samples to write about for this book was a difficult task, such is the wealth of the plant material at Rani Bagh. Here, Shubhada Nikharge's photographs of the flowers, trees, leaves and fruit do justice to Almeida's writing. Almeida's writing style, akin to his own personality, is simple and reader-friendly and peppered with common names, popular names, medicinal values and various attributes of the plant or tree. If there is a cynic amongst the book's readers who for some inexplicable reason does not want to protect "trees for the sake of trees" then the "usefulness to man" argument underlines all of Almeida's descriptions.

Katie Bagli ferrets out the smaller creatures that inhabit the Bagh — the

flying foxes, the mongoose families, the wild birds that thrive here outside the cages in the Zoo, the moths, toads and skinks. These are the actors backstage, the animals and birds that thrive because of the micro diversity of the habitat they are in and it is no small miracle that so many of nature's gifts actually not just inhabit but flourish in the heart of a once industrial city.

Of all the contributions in the anthology, the one written with most feeling is the article by Pheroza J Godrej. It is a personal account of a childhood spent in the metropolis, a touching story told in an endearing style. Her story of "being driven to the gardens in his [grandfather's] elegant Ford, with its well-kept canvas hood rolled down, always made me feel special and signalled excitement and great adventure ahead" gives us a word picture of a Bombay of unimaginable elegance and beauty. Godrej's "special moments" with her grandfather are reminiscent of a city where there once was grace, art and sensitivity, a haven for its citizens, an oasis where they could come and drink at the fountains of "wild profusion and colourful jewels".

Hutokshi Rustomfram and Shubhada Nikharge in the last chapter of the book draw urgent attention to the ongoing campaign to "save" Rani Bagh from Mumbai's city planners. They trace the history of the formation of the park and its administrative aspects, going back to newspapers as early as 1861 to track down expenses, subscriptions, deficits and contributions made to the park for its construction and upkeep way back then. Going by their account and research, Rani Bagh seems to have faced struggles and strife from its inception 150 years ago although these were of a different kind then. It was the citizens of the city who gave the park its body and soul. That city was called Bombay then. It is some solace to see that 150 years later, in the heart of a commercial metropolis, in this city renamed Mumbai, the trees, plants and animals, pathways and monuments of Rani Bagh are listening to the same heartbeat. ■

