

Rani Bagh's Incredible Botanical Wealth

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As you take the first step through the classical triumphal triple arch into the botanical paradise that is Rani Bagh, your senses are assaulted by a variety of green hues, the scents of different flowers and the call of birds. The air is noticeably fresher and the din of the traffic outside is magically diffused. This wooded haven layered with trees of every description and size, stretching as far as the eye can see, invites you to explore. Handsome avenues and inviting internal gardens complete this enduring first impression. Ambling through the many pathways, you can discover over and over again the natural charm of a park laid out for the public with exceptional care over 150 years ago.

This botanist's haven is the unquestioned cradle for taxonomy study. Virtually all botany students of Mumbai University have traditionally gleaned a wealth of information from the garden. Several heritage trees here are majestic award-winning centenarians. Rare trees like *Amherstia nobilis*, *Adansonia digitata*, *Ficus bengalensis* var. *krishnae*, *Colvillea racemosa*, *Castanospermum australe* and *Strophanthus boivinii* attract hundreds of visitors.

My association with Veermata Jijabai Bhosale Udyan, popularly Rani Bagh, is almost as old as my association with the city of Mumbai. When I arrived here as a callow youth of 19, VJB Udyan went by the good old name of Victoria Gardens and Mumbai was still called Bombay. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I cut my botanical teeth in Rani Bagh. Interestingly enough, my very first tutor was Sitaram Badambe, the field collector of St Xavier's College. He and I made weekly trips to Victoria Gardens to collect specimens for the college's botany practical lessons. Badambe was a very knowledgeable peon and I was a laboratory assistant, an aspiring botanist eager to imbibe every little nugget of information shared by one who had been at this task for the past 25 years.



I did not perhaps, in those far-off days, consciously recognize the importance of Rani Bagh as a botanical treasure-house, but as I progressed from lab assistant to botany graduate and thereafter obtained my post-graduate degree in the subject, I occasionally reflected on my earliest collecting days with some nostalgia. It was many years later, in the early 1980s, that I once again renewed my close association with Rani Bagh thanks to the nature trails I conducted for BNHS members. It was with years of experience behind me that I could truly appreciate the marvel of a huge botanical garden thriving in the heart of the city. Every botanist and most nature lovers know the fundamental truth that no other park in Mumbai by far has the sheer density of trees or the astonishing diversity of plant species.

Providence offered me a chance to repay my debt to the botanical garden in February 2010, when Mr Dinesh Afzalpurkar, then Chairman of the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC),

Clockwise from above:
Bright and dazzling cluster – the beauty of the flower of the Sita Ashok is enhanced by the presence of long stamens.
Photograph courtesy Shubhada Nikharge.

Lignum Vitae flowers – notice the yellow stamens.
Photograph courtesy Shubhada Nikharge.

Young translucent leaves and buds of the Bitter Quassia.
Photograph courtesy Shubhada Nikharge.

Previous pages:
Captivating personality – Colville's Glory in the monsoon.
Photograph courtesy Dhiman Chatterjee.



appointed me as an advisor to guide the MHCC on the environmental feasibility of the BMC's redevelopment proposal to establish an international zoo. Members of the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Committee had brought this issue to my attention in 2008 and I had written several letters to the BMC stating my opposition to the redevelopment idea. Now, in my position as an advisor, I was handed an opportunity to formally cite the serious dangers inherent in the redevelopment plan. Fortunately, the MHCC sent the plan back to the drawing-board in May 2010 and directed that a new tree survey be conducted as the existing one was riddled with errors. The BMC assigned the task of the floral survey to me and the final tally was impressive indeed – 853 plant species belonging to no less than 149 families, and as many as 3,213 trees (286 species) that make Rani Bagh the location with the largest number and widest species diversity of trees in the island city. Completed and published in October 2010, the “Trees and Vegetation Survey of VJB Udyan,” available with the BMC, is a comprehensive compilation of Rani Bagh flora. Though I always knew that the botanical garden had a huge number of trees and diverse flora, that the final tally would yield such impressive figures was a welcome surprise.

I had often enough in my letters to the BMC stated that Rani Bagh was a live laboratory for botany students particularly in the disciplines of Systematic Botany and Plant Taxonomy, i.e. scientific identification. A series of field trips to Rani Bagh is part of the regimen in the botany departments of the 50-odd Mumbai colleges that offer the subject for their Bachelor of Science course. All botany departments at the graduate and post-graduate levels utilize the diverse flora of Rani Bagh to source their practical examination plant samples. No other city venue can substitute Rani Bagh as the prime location for botany study and research.

References to plants from Rani Bagh used for particular observation and study are freely found in books like R.N. Sutar's *Systematic Botany*, a standard university text. Victoria Gardens was clearly Sutar's botany hub – he considered it his *karmabhumi*, the site of his life's work.

Mumbai's Blatter Herbarium, established in 1906 and one of the largest in the country, bears proud testimony to Rani Bagh's pre-eminent position in the city's botanical history. Being a youth of modest means I supplemented my income by doubling up as an assistant at the Herbarium. Hardship is its own reward and my long stint here provided the opportunity of learning first-hand from such distinguished and exacting mentors as Father Hermenegild Santapau, Dr Nariman A. Irani, Dr Robert R. Fernandez and Professor P.V. Bole. Some of the earliest samples in the Blatter Herbarium are, quite naturally, from the erstwhile Victoria Gardens, many collected by the above-named stalwarts themselves. Of the 465 specimens preserved from Rani Bagh, the earliest surviving sample, *Elaeocarpus angustifolius* commonly known as Rudraksh, was appropriately enough collected by Father E. Blatter himself back in July 1916.

The lack of official records furnishing details of the dates when trees and shrubs were planted in Rani Bagh, and of supplementary data regarding their growth, is a huge lacuna. It is hoped that this will be remedied in the near future as the botanical garden receives more attention. A cursory glance at the tree list shows that a few species have been planted repeatedly without much thought. For instance, we find a huge number of Coconut Palms (198) and False Ashok trees (168).

Selecting plants to be included in this essay proved to be a tricky task given the wealth of attractive, imposing and unusual plants. Even a cursory perusal of the sheer variety of Rani Bagh flora brings to mind the famous Sanskrit saying “*Vasundhara Kutumbakam*” – the whole world is one family.

In an attempt to adequately represent the diversity of the park, this essay is divided into three succeeding sections, on native trees, exotic trees and other flora – namely climbers and shrubs. Given the inherent requirements of a popular illustrated large-format publication, technical terminology and morphological details have been avoided as much as possible, and information on the origin of the plant, its uses and associated folklore have been included.