

Foreword

I deem it a rare privilege to have been called upon to write the foreword to this resplendent and informative book on Rani Bagh. This vast garden spread over as many as 53 acres is located in the heart of the island city of Mumbai. It is the largest green public open space in our extremely dense and congested metropolis and is truly a botanical oasis. It is a priceless repository of plants, shrubs, climbers and trees, some of them grand centenarians. It is but apt that this impressive and unique book is being published to commemorate the completion of 150 years from the day the garden was opened to the public by Lady Catherine Frere on November 19, 1862.

This book is a compilation of articles contributed by eminent and knowledgeable authors on the historical, design, botanical and social aspects of Mumbai's only heritage botanical garden. The garden is home to as many as 3,213 trees of 286 species and a total of 853 plant species. Besides, it provides a rich habitat for a variety of mammals, birds and insects. Laid out in the classical axial planning design, all its axes and meandering pathways are embellished by charming internal gardens. There are, in addition, several features and attractions to enrich the experience of visitors. Rani Bagh is indeed "a unique city jewel where a symbiotic relationship has been crafted between natural and built heritage". It is truly a city landmark as outstanding as the Gateway of India or the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, with the added virtue of being Mumbai's largest, much needed, green lung space.

Since the year 1994 when the Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act was amended to bring it in conformity with the 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India, "urban forestry, protection of environment and promotion of ecological aspects" has become one of the prime obligatory duties of the Municipal Corporation. Even over a century prior to that, when the Act was first enacted in 1888, "the laying out or the maintenance of public parks, gardens or recreation grounds" was stipulated as a discretionary duty of the Corporation. The vital importance of parks, gardens and such other public open spaces for a highly densely populated metropolis like Mumbai needs no elaboration. Mumbai has the dubious distinction of having the lowest open space to population ratio in the world, a mere 0.03 acre per 1,000 persons against the international norm of 4 acres per 1,000. Rani Bagh is not only the island city's largest green open space – 53 acres – but is a welcome haven for common Mumbaikars, particularly the underprivileged. On an average, 8,000 visitors visit Rani Bagh every day and this number swells to 30,000 on holidays. Apart from being a coveted haunt for rest, relaxation, recreation and enjoyment in

the congenial company of Nature, Rani Bagh, with its prime location and incredible botanical wealth and diversity, has no substitute city venue for botanical study and research.

Detailed and definitive archival records and documents clearly establish the fact that the "Botanical Gardens of Bombay", the precursor of today's botanical garden in Rani Bagh or Victoria Gardens, came to be originally set up at Sewri in the 1840s by the then Horticultural Society of Western India. In the early 1860s, the Society shifted its botanical garden from Sewri to the present location at Byculla. Later in 1873, the Society went into liquidation and ceased to exist. The Government therefore handed over the botanical garden to the then Bombay Municipality, which has been maintaining it till date as a public garden. After the addition of about 15 acres by purchase of some adjoining plots, in 1890, a few animals were introduced into the garden to add to the local pageantry of nature. This heralded the birth of the zoo as part of the public garden. The botanical garden and the zoo have coexisted all along in Rani Bagh since that time, though the zoo came later. The botanical garden occupies almost two-thirds of the Rani Bagh area and the rest is occupied by the zoo. The primacy of the botanical garden over the zoo in Rani Bagh is thus absolutely self-evident, historically as well as otherwise.

The peaceful coexistence of the heritage botanical garden and the zoo for well over a century in Rani Bagh unfortunately came under serious threat when the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai made public, in April 2007, its grandiose plan to makeover and transform the zoo in Rani Bagh into a so-called "international zoo", at a stupendous and equally astounding cost of Rs 433 crore! This amount is comparable to the size of the entire annual budget of a relatively small Municipal Corporation in our state. The plan was as bizarre as it was extravagant and utterly wasteful. It envisaged a virtually total destruction of all existing animal enclosures, water bodies, internal gardens and pathways and de novo creation of fresh ones. The plan also listed some utterly mind-boggling and hare-brained features, such as a glass-walled fine dining eatery, an artificial Indian Ocean, skywalks etc. The massive excavation, construction and laying of various essential utilities, which this preposterous plan inevitably entailed, would have certainly resulted in the destruction of vegetation and age-old root systems of plants and trees, thereby sounding the death knell of the heritage botanical garden itself. No wonder that this diabolical plan was strongly opposed by environmentalists, nature lovers, concerned NGOs and common citizens.



Photograph courtesy Rohinton Mehta.

In retrospect, it appears that the only welcome outcome which emanated from this utterly baneful plan was the formation of the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Committee comprising a relatively small group of friends – all determined women – who were ardent nature lovers and botany enthusiasts. They first “decided to band together and investigate” and later on found that the time was then most opportune to launch their struggle to save their “favoured haunt”. Thereafter, as a Committee, they spearheaded a protracted fight to save Rani Bagh with its precious heritage botanical garden. This volume would certainly have been incomplete and soulless had it not carried an article giving a blow-by-blow account of their protracted, painstaking and valiant struggle against heavy odds. It is truly an inspiring saga of epic proportions, culminating after nearly five years in the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC) and the Central Zoo Authority (CZA), whose approval is mandatory, finally and unequivocally ruling against the proposed redevelopment for establishing an “international zoo” in Rani Bagh. Virtually the entire credit for this great achievement goes, in my view, to the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Committee. These brave ladies deserve kudos for their dedicated and tireless efforts, without any financial support from any outside source.

Although the thoughtless design and proposal to establish an “international zoo” in Rani Bagh has been struck down, the MHCC having rejected the makeover plan, and also having directed that all existing pathways should remain intact and no new animal enclosures be added, there is no room for complacency, as past experience has proved. Vested interests may still try to have their way by taking recourse to subtle hoodwinking and subterfuges to encroach upon or fragment the area of the botanical garden to cleverly divert

some portions thereof for the use of the zoo or to construct walls, buildings and other structures which will be derogatory to the heritage character and value of the botanical garden. Eternal vigilance by the MHCC, CZA, SRBBG Committee and all others concerned is, therefore, a must. While there can be no objection to making genuine improvements as per CZA guidelines in the shelters or enclosures for animals/birds/reptiles, these ought not to involve cutting of trees, alteration to old pathways or encroachment on botanical garden space. Needless to say, a truly long-term and effective solution lies only in setting up in a larger acreage on the outskirts of the city a full-fledged new zoo, and this proposal must be vigorously pursued by the Municipal Corporation and the State Government.

“Botanical gardens help people in cities reconnect with nature and inspire them to live more sustainable lives. They are a crucible of nature education for the young. For botanists and nature enthusiasts they function as a living museum and classroom” – thus says, so eloquently, Dr Nigel Taylor, former Curator of the famous Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, UK. Our city fathers should take note of this telling message on the momentous occasion of the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of Rani Bagh, with its precious heritage botanical garden, and dedicate themselves to its proper preservation.

D.M. Sukthankar

Formerly, Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra
Municipal Commissioner, Mumbai
Chairman, Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee