



SAVE RANI BAGH BOTANICAL GARDEN FOUNDATION

Reg. No. E – 29101 (Mum)

(Formerly Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Action Committee)

February 2, 2022

Dear Friend,

Greetings from the Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Foundation!

It's been a while since we sent an update of our work to our friends and well-wishers. The severe lockdown of 2020 and the prolonged closure of Rani Bagh due to the pandemic, naturally created some hiccups in our work. In the months when we couldn't visit Rani Bagh, we were in regular touch over the telephone with the Director V.J.B. Udyan and the Deputy Superintendent of Gardens. After a few months we were able to resume somewhat regular visits and interact with the Director and his team. We are delighted to report that the botanical garden is thriving in all its vibrant colour and glory.

Rani Bagh – the Queen of Gardens celebrates 160 years of its existence in 2022

The year 2022 is a significant milestone for our beloved Rani Bagh – marking 160 years since it was thrown open to the public in 1862. Victoria Gardens (later renamed V.J.B. Udyan), was established by the Agri Horticultural Society of Western India as a botanical garden and inaugurated by Lady Catherine Frere, wife of the then Governor Sir Bartle Frere, on November 19, 1862. The founders succeeded in creating a public park of exceptional beauty and educational value, a haven for common people from all walks of life. Rani Bagh has the unparalleled distinction of being the island city's largest green open public space, its largest agglomeration of trees with the widest species diversity and its most visited public park. Its existence over the past 160 years has borne out its ecological and egalitarian credentials in full measure. We have several plans to celebrate the 160-year landmark but more of that a little later in this update.

And we've been working for 15 years

This February we clocked fifteen years from the time we embarked on our struggle to protect and promote the botanical garden and to ensure that this precious public heritage is passed on to future generations. So, the year 2022 is a happy milepost for us too! We are grateful for the encouragement and support received from environmental and open space groups as well as from a cross-section of citizens and friends who have shown solidarity with our cause.

After over a decade of labour focused on the struggle aspect of our work, like obtaining information under the Right to Information Act, examining plans and documents, building a mountain of correspondence, representing before various official bodies, meeting a succession of officials, attending official hearings and so on, we are finally at that rewarding juncture where we can focus on doing our bit to enhance the botanical garden and attempt to make a positive change in terms of creating awareness through installation of information plaques and conducting regular tree-cum-heritage trails. Needless to add, we provide all information and images to the BMC and conduct trails totally free of cost.

Here's a brief round-up of our work over the past two years and our plans for the 160-year celebrations:

Visits to oversee the construction of animal enclosures renovated at the existing footprint

Our weekly site visits with the Director to oversee the renovation of animal enclosures, initiated in March 2016, continued on a regular basis until March 2020 after which we visited with no fixed periodicity. As the work on most renovated enclosures is now complete, we keep an eye on one remaining enclosure (crocodile and gharial), where construction is ongoing. We remain vigilant about the health of the trees, internal gardens and heritage structures and point out any infection or risk. Fortunately, the authorities are responsive and timely action is invariably taken.

Two short films on Rani Bagh providing a glimpse into its botanical and heritage aspects

We produced a short film giving a glimpse into the botanical and heritage aspects of Rani Bagh (subtitled and narrated in English) called *V.J.B. Udyan Zoo – Mumbai's Only Heritage Botanical Garden* and released it on YouTube in May 2020. The film, admittedly an amateur but passionate effort on our part, has some stunning visuals of Rani Bagh's grand vistas and trees and serves as a good preview for someone who hasn't visited. After some effort and coordination, because of the difficulties created by the pandemic, we were able to produce the film with Marathi subtitles and narration in November 2021. In case you haven't seen the films or would like to share them with friends the links are:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8DE2Lmr3GU>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PkCLwlo4T8>

52 illustrated information plaques installed near respective trees

After years of follow-up, 52 tree information plaques have seen the light of day and are installed near the respective trees, enhancing visitor appreciation of the botanical garden. We furnished photographs and information for these plaques in Marathi and English to the BMC and weighed in on the design aspect as well. If you'd like to receive a PDF version of these information plaques, do write to us and we'll be glad to send it to you. At least 50 more such boards are to be installed in the near future.

4 large general information boards on different aspects of the Botanical Garden installed

Four large information boards (4 feet X 5 feet) on the botanical garden, the heritage monuments and layout, the history of the park and the egalitarian aspect of the facility, with appropriate photographs have also been installed at prominent locations in the botanical garden. As with the tree plaques, we furnished the Marathi and English text and photographs for these boards. It is a matter of the utmost satisfaction to us that the authorities are finally willing to publicly acknowledge the existence and historical background of the heritage botanical garden and are willing to speak of its marvelous attributes and its intrinsic value.

Our input - films, slide show, information plaques - in Rani Bagh's 'Experience Centre'

Through 2020 and 2021 we interacted regularly to create and design content for the botanical garden segment for an 'Experience Centre' (a tableau-of-sorts on some nature sites in Mumbai), set up on the first floor of the administrative building. We are happy to report that a section of the Centre will be prominently titled 'Botanical Garden' and that our films on Rani Bagh in Marathi and English are slated to be played on a loop on two screens. A third screen will play a slide show prepared by us on Rani Bagh's botanical and heritage aspects. In addition, three pictorial plaques with slogans and five large information plaques on the historical, botanical, heritage and people's aspect, for which we have provided the text and photographs, are also to be installed here. The exhibits were nearly complete over a year ago but the Centre is yet to open for the public.

Plantation of tree saplings of unusual species

Though we have planted a few tree saplings over the past many years, we are now happy to report that we are able to plant saplings on a larger scale during the past two years. The Director and staff of the Deputy Superintendent of Gardens welcome our suggestions and arrange for the plantation of saplings we procure. Our butterfly garden created a few years back continues to flourish and attract butterflies.

New designation of Rani Bagh as 'Botanical Garden' accepted in DP 2034 but yet to be notified by the State Government

The saga of the mal-intentioned designation of Rani Bagh as 'zoo' in the Development Plan 2034 is a long and meandering one, where we represented before various bodies from 2015 to 2018. Suffice it to say here, that the Review Panel headed by Mr. Gautam Chatterjee, Chairman Planning Committee, accepted our demand that the designation of Rani Bagh be 'botanical garden' and forwarded the same to the Urban Development Department. We are happy that our struggle paid off and that the term

'botanical garden' has been specifically created as a formal designation in the DP for the very first time. We are grateful to Mr. D.M. Sukthankar and Mr. S.G. Kale who, as always, vociferously supported us by underpinning our demand before Mr. Chatterjee's Review Panel. Unfortunately, the official notification of the new designation by the state government is still awaited after all these years - of the several possible reasons informally cited for the inordinate delay is, of course, the pandemic.

Campaign for official name change of V.J.B. Udyan to add the term 'Botanical Garden'

We will soon launch a campaign to change Rani Bagh's official name from 'V.J.B. Udyan va Pranisangrahalaya' to 'V.J.B. Vanaspati Udyan va Pranisangrahalaya' (V.J.B. Botanical Garden and Zoo). This campaign will form a part of the activities to mark 160 years of Rani Bagh. We shall call upon organisations and individuals who have earlier supported us, to endorse this demand, which will accord a greater degree of protection to, and enhance the image of the botanical garden. The official name change will also aid activists and nature enthusiasts if a fresh danger to the botanical garden crops up in future.

Celebrating 160 Years of Rani Bagh with nature-cum-heritage walks, films, slide shows, seminars, publications, plaques

We are happy that the Director has readily accepted our suggestion to officially celebrate 160 years of Rani Bagh with a string of events and programmes. Several of these will be jointly conducted with the Foundation. In addition, we will also conduct our own programmes. [You will recall that we had brought out the richly-illustrated large-format book *Rani Bagh 150 Years* in 2012 to mark 150 years of Rani Bagh and subsequently the Marathi translation *Ranibagh 150 Varshe* in 2013 (both books jointly published by BNHS, FoT and us)] We call upon our friends and well-wishers to join and support the programmes in any way they can. The prime focus of all activity will be to inculcate among citizens a feeling of affinity and pride in Rani Bagh's botanical garden which has contributed so much to the city and its inhabitants through its 160-year existence and to show how important it is that this rich legacy be safeguarded for future generations to enjoy and cherish.

A few of the proposals are listed below:

- Awareness-raising programmes like nature-cum-heritage trails, slide show presentations, films and discussions conducted on a regular basis by the Foundation for groups like school and college students and teachers, MCGM staff, associations of professionals, citizens' groups etc.
- Holding a seminar both in-person and virtually
- Setting up two additional theme gardens – a medicinal garden and a sensory garden
- Assisting in QR coding of all trees in the campus with information provided on a MCGM website
- Planting of unusual species of trees, shrubs, climbers; installing additional tree information plaques
- Publishing booklets and pamphlets on Rani Bagh's unique aspects and making them freely available in printed as well as in digital downloadable formats
- Holding functions in the week beginning Monday November 14, 2022 culminating in a celebration on Saturday November 19, 2022, the day that marks 160 years of the inauguration

We end with a reminder to support our campaign for effecting a change in Rani Bagh's name by adding the term 'botanical garden' and invite you to participate in the programmes to celebrate 160 years of the botanical garden.

Your encouragement, solidarity and support over the years, mean a lot to us.

With warm regards,

For Save Rani Bagh Botanical Garden Foundation

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Trustees