Restoring Kishan Bagh

Kishan Bagh is a small part of a sprawling set of sand dunes that had come to a standstill at the southwestern foot of Nahargarh, in northern Jaipur city.

It's amazing that these sand dunes came to exist at all within the compass of a bustling state capital but there they were, poor relics of a natural ecosystem, degraded, trampled upon, seemingly beyond rescue. Their proximity to human habitation meant that domesticated animals gobbled up every scrap of green almost as fast as they sprang up in the rains. The sand dunes were almost 'dead' and JDA's project to restore Kishan Bagh is in every sense an attempt to breathe life into a desert ecosystem that was gasping for breath.

Restoring Kishan Bagh is about bringing back the plants and insects and birds and animals that you can expect to find in natural sand dunes in India's western desert. Protection from disturbance is an important component but even more basic is a careful re-introduction of the plants and trees, even the small grasses and micro-organisms, that characterise these sand dunes and which form the base of the entire ecosystem.

There are several examples in different parts of Rajasthan where uncannily similar stranded or 'obstruction' dunes exist. Some provide us with models of what Kishan Bagh could and should look like. Wherever you have a large hill in western or central Rajasthan – such as Bhadrajoon or Jasai-Para or Ahor in Jalore – creeping sand blowing in from the west has been stopped by these hills to become duney habitats of singular beauty. This is what has given Kishan Bagh a set of living models to emulate and be inspired by.

JDA's restoration project has been done by a team of ecological restoration practitioners and architects who have experience and familiarity with the Thar Desert. Pradip Krishen has spent 16 years creating a desert park in difficult volcanic rock in Jodhpur. He brings to the project a unique method of re-introducing not only plants, but also the micro-organisms that play such an important part in any habitat restoration. For example, he believes in 'inoculating' a degraded habitat with soil brought from richer habitats, because this transfer brings not only micro-organisms and seeds of a large number of associated species, but also dusts the dunes with minerals that are essential to the new plants.

Work on rejuvenating Kishan Bagh began in the monsoon of 2016. It was more or less complete by the beginning of 2020 but bringing in new management was stalled by Covid. Kishan Bagh was inaugurated by Rajathan's Chief Minister in October of 2021 and quickly became a popular tourist attraction for Jaipur's residents.

Visitors to Kishan Bagh are guided through the Park on raised walkways through several natural history exhibits where they learn all about sand, for example – where it comes from, what it is made of – and rocks made of silica and other aspects of a living desert. The central fous of the Park is the natural shrubland

known in Marwari as 'Roee'. Pradip Krishen says that he hopes to introduce the word 'Roee' into the vocabulary that people use when they talk or think about the Thar Desert. Because it encapsulates a native shrubland 'jungle' that is unrecognised and unappreciated by even the Forest Department, which treats the desert as a 'wasteland' that needs to be rescued by feeding it water and encouraging agriculture.

The Thar's Roee stands alongside some of the finest natural habitats in arid lands of the world – such as the Mulga region of Western Australia; the Garrigue in the Mediterranean; California's Chapparral... All of these places are carefully conserved, visited, photographed and loved, and it is central to the 'idea' of Kishan Bagh that our own Roee will be recognised and loved and eventually conserved for the same reasons.

The hope of the creators of Kishan Bagh is that it will become not just a beautifully restored natural habitat but a unique learning experience that provides engagement, pleasure and scientific interest to specialists and to general audience alike.