

The Making of Kishan Bagh

It has been a little over 2 years since this Project began and we can now see light at the end of the Tunnel!

It is time to recap and take satisfaction at what has happened and what to look forward to...

The area that is designated 'Kishan Bagh' in revenue maps is a large sprawling tract of sand dunes that have been 'stopped' by the bulk of Nahargarh hill. We don't know *exactly* when all this huge amount of sand blew in, though we do know that it is relatively recent – perhaps within the last 20 years or so – and so something must have changed at that time to allow the sand to blow and bury any vestiges of a garden or Bagh that once existed here. We don't really know what this change was, and it might be interesting to investigate it as a missing piece of history of this Project!

What we do know is that there is a large area, possibly a thousand acres or more, at the south-western foot of Nahargarh, where these 'stranded' dunes now sprawl. Rainwater coming down the southern face of Nahargarh flows through these dunes, creating channels and valleys so that the whole area began to look quite like the Chambal ravines! Throughout this area, people, cows, goats, pigs and wild animals kept the dunes crumbly and broken, criss-crossed with pathways, so that every scrap of grass or herb was either trodden underfoot or eaten before it could grow. This entire tract of dunes was a sad and barren wasteland within the city!

Early in 2016, when JDA first contacted Mr. Pradip Krishen and asked him to visit Jaipur to see if he could identify a plot or garden that he would design for us, it took JDA a bit by surprise when he saw (quite by chance) the ruined landscape of Kishan Bagh and he said he would like to restore it with the natural vegetation of sand dunes in the Thar Desert. This is not the usual kind of landscape or 'garden' that JDA makes, and it was intriguing to see what kind of plans he would come up with.

Mr. Krishen has spent the last 12 years or so restoring the natural ecology of a rocky desert in Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, and that is why JDA reached out to him in the first place. The heart of Mr. Pradip Krishen's Proposal to JDA was the careful restoration of the natural plants that grow in the sand dunes that you find (mostly) in Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. Mr. Krishen told JDA that the prime focus of his effort would be to recreate a special kind of 'shrubland' called '*Roee*' that is a distinctive feature of the Thar.

Roee, as he explained, is made up of a community of plants that is always perfectly in tune with its sand dune habitat. As the personality of the dunes change – from being less to more salty, or being more iron-rich to less iron-rich – the suite of plants change too. And so, as one travels through natural duney landscapes in the Thar, one encounters slightly different combinations of plants that make up the Roee, which is the natural jungle of the desert.

We think of 'jungle' as being a forest of trees, but a desert jungle is a 'shrubland', no more than 6 or 7 feet high, perhaps with a few *kair* trees or *khejadis* dotted here or there, but the *dominant* plants are all shrubs and grasses. Mr. Krishen pointed out that in other parts of the world, these kinds of desert shrublands are the focus of careful conservation and interest. The Chapparal of California, the Garrigue in Spain, the Fynbos in South Africa, the Mulga in Western Australia, these are all some of the most interesting and widely visited shrublands in the world, with an array of plant diversity and fascinating animals and insects.

We have our own desert shrubland in the Roee that is not known, and therefore not visited or conserved or celebrated like it ought to be. So what could be more apt than to begin this work of making our very own desert Roee shrubland known by creating an exhibit here in Jaipur? In the hope that we will be able to inject this new word (Roee) into the vocabulary of ecologists, thereby giving it an identity, dignity and importance.

So this in short, was the basic inspiration behind the Restoration work. But how was it to be done?

Pradip Krishen put together a team of plant ecologists and architects to conceive of a Visitor experience that was going to be All About Sand. The plants restoration was, in one sense, a straightforward job of collecting seeds from the desert and growing species that would find their niche in the 'stranded dunes' of Kishan Bagh. It was and is a specialized horticultural task, drawing on experience of planting up desert landscapes for several years. And the most delightful aspect of the planting plan is that Kishan Bagh will end up with a plant suite that is completely sustainable, requiring very little support once the plants are established. Of course, they will require protection too, and that is why Kishan Bagh is now fenced off and clearly demarcated.

But in different dimension, it is the Visitors' experience that is likely to be the main draw of this Park. After ascending a ramp from the Parking lot to the Visitors Centre, visitors will proceed on an elevated boardwalk about 800m long through several interpretive stations towards a Viewing Deck at the end. At each of these stations, they will have the opportunity to learn about some aspect of sand dune ecology – about things like rocks made up of sand or silica, about the special kinds of habitats in the desert, about birds and insects and most of all, they will make acquaintance with the Roee and all that is special and wonderful about it.

So far – in September of 2018 – we have seen the culmination of the planting effort. The entire 160 acres of Kishan Bagh has been planted up with shrubs and grasses and some trees too. The Viewing Deck – which will be called the 'Long House' – is now ready as the endpoint of the walk, from where Visitors will look out into the habitat of sand dunes. The Rocks and Fossils section is ready too, and so is the miniature hill forest that is called the 'Dhok Habitat' (although it will be some years before the trees grow up). The signage work is just beginning, and we are hoping that it will set new standards in engaging visitors with information that is both relevant and easy to understand.

Work on Phase 2 of the civil works has just begun – on the Ramp leading up to the Visitors Centre, and the Visitors Centre itself, which is a seminal place where visitors will learn what

to expect and do. We are hoping that early in the new year, Kishan Bagh will be able to open its doors to curious and excited visitors.

We know that Kishan Bagh is *different*. We hope it will turn out to be *delightfully* different, and will soon become a natural landmark and wonderland in the city of Jaipur, not just for Rajasthan but for the whole country.