

# THE VOICE OF MALABAR HILLS

Altamont Road Carmichael Road Peddar Road Kemp's Corner Breach Candy Nepean Sea Road Walkeshwar Mahalaxmi Temple Ridge Road Little Gibbs Road Chowpatty Gamdevi

## Live Music to Save Heritage

In 1991 some citizens were very concerned about plans to fill in the Banganga Tank, and allow construction of high rise structures on that land. The ludicrous idea was to build a small temple in the middle to commemorate the area! This was appalling! Aghast the then Municipal Commissioner was approached to save this oldest heritage on the main island, built many centuries before foreign powers even dreamt of acquiring these precious islands.

Who knew of this history and who cared? Every one bandied words like 'Walkeshwar', 'Ridge Road' and 'Banganga' without knowing where they exist and why they acquired those names. To save the tank the first objective was to bring awareness. To introduce these important areas to the city's residents. It is the citizens who must respect their heritage, care for them and hold them in trust for future generations.

To bring awareness a committee was formed under chairmanship of the then Municipal Commissioner and the heads of the different authorities. MTDC and BEST supported this. Thus was borne the idea of organizing the first 'Banganga Festival' to use 'Live Music to Save Heritage'.



Map of Banganga

This is a tank built by the Shilhara dynasty, who ruled the islands in the 12th century and rebuilt in the 18th century. It had suffered neglect over the years. The task to organize any event was tremendous. It was horrendous and only possible by the joint efforts of the authorities and local citizens.

- MCGM discovered that houses around the tank had drainage lines flowing into the tank. These had to be diverted.

- As the massive tank, 140' x 40', had steps right around and the area was poorly lit, the steps were being used for illicit activities. BEST had to install street lights directed onto the steps.



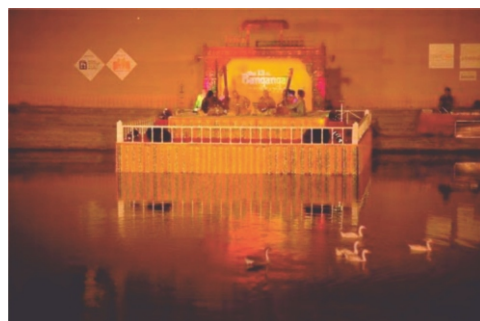
The Banganga Festival. Stage in water & audience on steps around Tank. Picture courtesy Dinodia Photo www.dinodia.com Tel: 022-2204 4016.

- Tank, which is 10' deep, had to be emptied and cleaned. This was done by local residents. They knew of a valve installed by the Portuguese to allow water to flow out to the near by sea. These young men emptied the tank and allowed the underground fresh water stream, 'Bhogawati' to refill the tank only to the desired level.

A very awkward situation had to be faced. The tank belongs to the Goud Saraswat Brahmin Trust, who also owns the Walkeshwar Temple and the Kavle Math on the banks of the Tank. However, the responsibility to look after the Tank rests

with the Archaeology Department of the Government of Maharashtra, the peripheral road belongs to the Municipal Corporation and the houses to individuals. All had to work together. A daunting task with egos of so many persons coming to play.

Respecting the heritage value of the Tank and the surrounding steps, not a single nail could be hammered into the stone. The dream was to have the performances on a large stage in middle of the water on the western side, allow seating on three sides, chairs for VIP guests on the wider southern side, and invite citizens to sit on carpet-covered narrow steps on the east and north. This was managed by MTDC most efficiently.



Above: Mirror image in the Banganga waters Below: Ducks swimming to music in the Tank

The Committee was determined to pursue despite threats from some locals, who felt they would lose their importance, and the first Banganga Festival enthralled the audience on night of Saturday 12th January 1992 by a dance drama performed by Hema Malini and her troupe, and on Sunday 13th evening Ustad Amjad Ali Khan created magic on his sarod across the waters. The Festival was a great success and saved the Tank from meeting the same fate as four other tanks in the city. Live music had brought awareness and saved the city's heritage!

In January 1993 Mumbai was burning and the Festival was rededicated for Peace in our beloved city.

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The Festival was put on the calendar of 'Festivals of India' and the 2nd weekend of January every year was reserved for the extravaganza. This was not enough! In 1994 the Indian Heritage Society Mumbai took under its wings to jointly organize the Festival and undertook restoration work, with kind funding from heritage enthusiasts, of some of the badly damaged structures. The first to get attention was the Rameshwar Temple. In 1995 the Urban Development Department was finalizing the list of heritage buildings and precincts meriting conservation, the Tank, steps, buildings surrounding the Tank and the peripheral road were given special consideration.

The Festival had strictly abided by the Noise Pollution Rules and all lights and loud speakers were switched off before 10pm. (This despite musicians like Pandit Bhimsen Joshi wanting to continue singing the whole night) However, in 2006 the



Bombay High Court placed greater restrictions on silence zones in the city. There were no hospitals or educational institutions within 100 meters, but the Tank was surrounded with places of worship. Nor could the sound levels be restricted to 55 decibels as there was no way of stopping echo from the surrounding wall of the tank! Festival in January 2007 had been announced, and artistes booked for same. Now what? Festival had to go on.

A novel way was suggested. Short waves and amplification through small transistors to the audience seated all around. Could this be done? How could the transistors be fixed? Citizens' efforts again won the day! 100 transistors were donated and so also metal stands. These were placed at strategic places as advised by the Sound Amplification expert and the music could float across the Tank in January 2007. All those who had been skeptical about this experiment were silenced.

However, man always believes he is smarter than his neighbour. Come 2008, certain individuals in the audience started adjusting the sound to suit themselves. The amplification had been adjusted to a specific short wave. This could not be changed. The meddling had shut off the sound completely in those areas, and people started shouting. With very few exit routes from the Tank, and



*Audience enjoying the 'Mumbai Sanskriti' Music Festival sitting on the Asiatic Society steps*

to avoid Kumbh Mela like accidents, there was no alternative but to stop this much awaited and internationally appreciated Banganga Festival.

Indian Heritage Society Mumbai had achieved its objectives to bring awareness, put the site on the citizens' map and Use Live Music to Save Heritage. This Tank will never be filled up to give rise to cement and steel structures. Out of the five tanks in Mumbai, this is the only one that still survives.

But one could not rest on one's laurels! Search started for an alternate heritage site that would lend itself for such efforts. Everyone thinks of the City only as a creation of the English. Forgotten are the structures left behind from over 2000 years ago. The five caves, the seven forts, the temples, churches and mosques that give names to different areas, the people who lived on the islands. Forgotten are the people who toiled to make this metropolis. The Asiatic Library and Town Hall was selected as the perfect venue to continue with traditional music concerts to Save our Heritage.

Again, it was the support of so many who made this effort possible as 'Mumbai Sanskriti' from January 2009 onwards. The sponsors who have continued with their financial support over decades, the Asiatic Society for allowing use of their majestic steps, the Municipal Corporation whose road is used for seating of audience, the Traffic Department of the Mumbai Police for traffic diversions from 5 pm to 10 pm, and most importantly the classical music lovers who throng the venue. The concerts are totally free and the backdrop of the stage shows images of the heritage structures we all need to know, care about and make efforts to carry forward to the next generations. These magnificent structures were borne from cultures that existed during different eras. Our efforts to conserve will show our culture to hold in trust all that we have inherited.

'Mumbai Sanskriti 2020' was very special as it brought in an additional dimension of respect for gurus. On 11th January Ustad Amjad Ali Khan's two sons, Ayaan and Amaan accompanied their father, and on



12th January Pandit Jasraj's students, Sanjeev Abhyankar (vocal) and Kala Ramnath (violin) paid reverence to their guru, who will celebrate his 90 years and the fact that on 23rd September 2019 a minor planet between Mars and Jupiter has been named 'Pandit Jasraj'. With this great honour, 'this doyen of vocal music is now the only Indian musician to join the galaxy of immortal composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Tenor Luciaon Pavarotti' by the International Astronomical Union.



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