

'Sir George Watt' escorts 'Banaras Dawn' to Scotland

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In September 2009 we received an email message:

'My name is Ruhi Thallon (nee Saxena). My father, Major Prem Saxena, cultivated and registered a rose, 'Benares Dawn'. I did not know my father, as my mother left him when I was two years old. Unfortunately I was not able to make contact with him before he died. I have met my relatives and half siblings who resided in Dehra Dun and they told me dad had cultivated a couple of roses, however 'Benares Dawn' is the only one registered.

I am keen to find out more about this rose and, if possible have one to grow in my garden in Scotland. I would also like it for my mother, now 82 and still not over my father! Would you know if Doon Roses in Dehra Dun are still in business and whether there is any chance this rose may still be in existence?'

I replied:

'What a pleasant surprise to get your mail. And we can well empathise with your nostalgic search for a rose raised by your father.

Viru remembers the rose 'Banaras Dawn' and has heard of your father. But we do not know if the variety is still available. We looked up our old rose catalogues and we find that Friends Rosery, Lucknow, had listed it in their 1988-89 catalogue. This is what it said:

BANARAS DAWN: (Maj. Saxena, Introducer: Doon Valley Roses) Rs. 10/-

The first Indian bred apricot coloured rose with gold base, with as many petals as in Medallion but much deeper in colour, more shapely and more fragrant. Very floriferous on long strong stems.

We will try to scout around among our rose friends, some of whom are nurserymen, and see if they can come up with any answers. We do not think Doon Roses is in existence any more.

I do not want to raise your hopes however, because over the years we have found many old Indian raised varieties have disappeared- many of my husband's early ones too. We have not been able to keep even the mother plant as he was on a transferable job till he retired.

I will ring up our good friend Mr G.Kasturirangan who owns KSG Sons, the biggest rose nursery in India and ask about 'Banaras Dawn'.

Unfortunately, Mr. Agarwal who owned 'Friends Rosery', Lucknow, and who catalogued this rose, passed away many years back.'

(Benares is the name of a holy town on the banks of the River Ganges, and is spelt either 'Benares' or 'Banaras'. The variety had been registered as 'Banaras Dawn')

Ruhi wrote that her father died in 1975 but the rose was registered in 1979 and Modern Roses 10 listed it. She was naturally unhappy that he did not know his rose had been registered and therefore all the more determined to try and find a plant. We wondered who had registered it, because in those days all registrations had to be done through the I.A.R.I. (Indian Agricultural Research Institute), which would forward the forms to the IRRA (International Rose Registration Authority), U.S.A., and not directly as can be done now. Perhaps the late Mr. Arpi Thakur, owner of Doon Valley Roses had sent in the registration.

We rang Kasturirangan and were pleasantly surprised (actually we shouldn't have been, as Kasturi, as he is affectionately called, is the repository of an unbelievable number of varieties, old and new) to hear him say, 'yes, I know 'Banaras Dawn' and I have a mother plant'. We told him about Ruhi Thallon and her search and requested him to bud a few plants for her. He agreed and we lost no time in emailing Ruhi with this good news. She was naturally delighted and emailed him and also rang him to thank him.

Plants were budded straightaway, at Kasturi's farm on the Bangalore-Mysore Road, but it took many months for them to grow to a reasonable size – a size where they would recover from the trauma of being transported, bare-root and nearly dry, all the way from Bangalore, India, to Hunter's Quay, near Dunoon, Argyll, Scotland, where Ruhi lives.

Ruhi and we were in constant touch, she fretting at the slow growth, impatient to see them in her garden, and we reassuring her that they were growing and that Kasturi was the best judge of when they would be ready to take flight.

A parallel tale: We had been trying to send plant material of our variety, a Hybrid Gigantea, named for Sir George Watt (who had discovered *R. gigantea* in Ukhrul area, in Manipur State, north-east India) to a botanic garden in Scotland. (Please see my article 'A Tale of Two Knights', IRA 2009) Several parcels, with proper documentation, had been dispatched over the past year, with no success. Once a postal strike in the U.K. delayed delivery over-long, another time the weather was bitterly cold, so the cuttings would not root and a third time, though the stems reached in record time, somehow they didn't 'strike'. We were despondent, as was our friend in Scotland – Morag Williams, the retired Archivist of the Dumfries Hospital (where Sir George Watt, and later his son, had worked) who had been instrumental in sending me precious information about Sir George Watt himself, and putting me in touch with his descendants. We were at our wit's end wondering how to reach 'Sir George Watt' the rose plant to the environs of where Sir George Watt, the person, had lived and worked.

Surprisingly, another hybrid gigantea bred by Viru, (with the same parentage as 'SGW') and named 'Sir Henry Collett', after the other knight who discovered the species gigantea in Burma (in the Shan Hills) has proved much easier to root

from cuttings and has reached southern France and Kent. Just shows how very different siblings can be!!

Suddenly the bright idea occurred to Viru that if we could bud a plant of 'SGW' and grow it to a reasonable size, we could add it to the parcel of 'Banaras Dawn' plants and send them all together to Scotland. Our budding was successful and after a few months we had a strapping plant.

Kasturi called us up in August 2010 (earlier, I had been really bugging him, telephoning every so often to enquire about the growth of the 'Banaras Dawns') to say the plants had reached the size where travel would not affect them. We requested him that when he applied for the phyto-sanitary certificate and all other documentation necessary for sending a parcel of rooted plants he should add 'Sir George Watt' to the list. He readily agreed. But then waiting for the documentation to be completed took all of a month and more—typical bureaucratic delays. Finally one very rainy afternoon he called to say 'the certificates will come tomorrow, so please courier 'SGW' at once so it can be taken along with 'B.D'. 's to the Quarantine Office'. In pouring rain we rushed out, pruned, washed and cleaned up the roots and packed and couriered the plant -from Kodaikanal (where we live) to Bangalore (to Kasturi).

The parcel was finally ready to be sent by an international courier service to an eagerly waiting Ruhi. It so happened that a few days after we had sent 'SGW' to Bangalore we ourselves had to go there as we were keen to attend our very good friend Kasturi's 80th birthday- 'Shatabhishekam' as it is called on 29th September. We met his nephew Sanjay, who had come for the function from London and who offered to carry the precious parcel personally and post it to Ruhi as soon as he returned back home. This seemed a better idea than the courier. The parcel rested in the refrigerator till such time as Sanjay was to leave, just a few days later. But a problem cropped up. We couldn't contact Ruhi for some days so instead we rang Morag and requested her to accept the parcel, and introduced her to Ruhi. Later when they contacted each other, they made arrangements to meet up at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh-- which they did, after a nail-biting delay in the parcel reaching Morag. We were relieved to hear that all the plants were green and in good condition. They are now in the Botanic Garden's quarantine area for three months. Hopefully they will survive and come through the bitter winter- remember they are Indian and acclimatized to warmth.

We are all keeping our fingers crossed—that 'Banaras Dawn' will finally bloom for Ruhi and her mother in Hunter's Quay, Dunoon, and that 'Sir George Watt' will grow luxuriantly in the gardens he created - in the Crichton Royal Hospital, Dumfries and his own house, Rosevale, in Langholm, all in Scotland.