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## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Thinking beyond fairy lights and fountains: lessons from the waterscape of Bengaluru

Hita Unnikrishnan\*

## 1. THE FAIRY LIGHTS AND THE FOUNTAINS

In March 2013, I was part of a group of researchers participating in a discussion with a nodal agency responsible for maintaining one of peri-urban Bengaluru's information technology (IT) hubs. The objective was to seek academic collaboration to understand the ecology of two lakes earmarked for rejuvenation and evolve a plan to clear 'weeds'. We quickly found out 'weeds' included forms of vegetation (like reeds) that were not pleasing to the human eye although they were important resources feeding informal economies integral to this landscape. The discussion included propositions to make these lakes 'attractive'— musical fountains, lights, jogging tracks ... – in essence, everything that would fuel aspirations of the urban middle and upper classes but would exclude people whose lives and livelihoods were directly supported by those water bodies – farmers, fishermen, commercial launderers, urban foragers, and livestock owners. For them, the lake was not an embodiment of beauty and pleasure, but something sustaining their ways of life. That discussion, though disappointing, was not unique. It was representative of how visions, policies, and planning agencies responsible for the city's waterscape operate. It was a glimpse into how the idea of urban Bengaluru as a city of educated, elite upper and middle classes has permeated the identity of the city to the exclusion of several people whose lifestyles, livelihoods, and traditions have

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\* Urban Institute, ICOSS, The University of Sheffield, 219, Portobello, Sheffield S1 4DP, United Kingdom and Azim Premji University, PES Campus, Pixel Park, B Block, Electronics City, Hosur Road (Beside Nice Road), Bengaluru 560100, Karnataka, India; h.unnikrishnan@sheffield.ac.uk; hita.unnikrishnan@apu.edu.in

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unwittingly been relegated to the peripheral margins of the grand urban design.

## 2. COMPLEX REALITIES

However, the identity of urban Bengaluru is more complex than what emerges out of these myopic visions. Having grown engulfing peri-urban villages that today make up the bulk of the city, Bengaluru can only be described as a continuum of sorts – a space where rural and urban meld – in ways of life, livelihoods, and more importantly in how people relate to the land, water, and trees around them (Nagendra *et al.* 2013). It was these interconnections that interested me while I conducted fieldwork as a doctoral student in the city I have called home for over 15 years. Despite having lived in Bengaluru for practically my entire life, having been part of activist groups looking to rejuvenate lakes and clean the city, I had remained oblivious to these interdependencies hidden in plain sight. That realisation was humbling, yet at the same time made me curious – were there ways I could engage better with the complexity of this landscape? And so I tried to research the tangible and intangible ways people have connected across centuries to the waterscape represented by the lakes of Bengaluru. These lakes have grabbed headlines for extraordinary levels of pollution, flammability, encroachment, citizen engagement movements, and evoked nostalgia. Built centuries ago to support an agricultural, semi-arid landscape, they provided water for the city until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Bengaluru started obtaining water from a river 100 kilometres upstream (Nair 2005). Since then many of these lakes have fallen into disuse and become vulnerable to threats like pollution, encroachments, and conversion (Sudhira *et al.* 2007). Lakes that survive in the city, albeit in a highly vulnerable form, are focal points for urban (often middle class and elite) resident welfare associations, nodal agencies, bureaucrats, schools, and local leaders to rally over. With worthy intentions, these groups devise strategies to understand the complexity of water bodies and to intervene in ways they perceive will benefit either the ecosystem or the communities living around them. Many of these proposed interventions seek to engage with the same myopic visions of promoting or enhancing the values of aesthetics and recreation discussed at the meeting. However, lakes in Bengaluru are not just spaces where people jog, walk, exercise, play music, or sit meditatively in front of a large expanse of water at sunrise or sunset. They are not just spaces affording a great view from balconies of apartment complexes, separated from houses by sliding glass doors. They are in fact spaces that support lives, livelihoods, and cultures, and have done so through centuries.

### 3. UNPACKING THE WATERSCAPE OF BENGALURU

My research gave me some important insights. First, lakes are resources that stand testimony to this changing urban landscape. Remains of sluice gates (known locally as *thoobu*), often ornately sculpted, stand sentinel alongside blocks of granite used to mark levels of water. On digging deeper, one learns that the lake provided water to the village communities its banks connected. These communities were responsible for maintenance of the lake, as it was valuable for both water-intensive agriculture (paddy) and dryland agriculture (millets, vegetables, flowers) in the vicinity. Community members assumed specific roles – village waterman, headman, and village crier – to take stock and keep the system functioning. The lake itself met irrigational, industrial, and domestic needs of communities living nearby. Plants such as *Onaganesoppu* (*Alternanthera sessilis*) that grow on the banks of lakes formed the mainstay of people’s diets during periods of drought and famine due to their high perceived water content (Unnikrishnan *et al.* 2016). It is perhaps because of this remembered interdependence that people’s rituals of birth, marriage, illness, prosperity, and death remain to this day centred around lakes, their waters, and deities delivering divine protection from associated natural calamities such as flooding.

Lakes are also associated with several commons that served to meet community requirements in several ways in the precolonial past of the city and, to some extent, in its colonial past too. The village temple and cemetery, which serve to meet spiritual beliefs of life and afterlife, were found associated with a lake in deference to the perceived sacred nature of water. Very often today, these structures persist in the absence of the lake that once connected them. The *gundathope* or village grove consisted of fruiting or timber trees cultivated on banks of lakes to provide resources for community gatherings such as village festivals or marriages (Mundoli *et al.* 2017 a). Harvesting timber or fruit for an individual’s personal needs was strictly prohibited, and compliance was assured because the community held these groves sacred. They served as shelter for nomadic tribes who periodically visited villages to receive food and clothing in exchange for services such as fortune-telling or theatrical entertainment. These groves also provided shade and watering holes for livestock owners and their herds when out in the afternoon sun. In addition to these commons, villages also boasted of communal threshing grounds (where millets and paddy harvests were threshed to separate straws from grain), grazing commons (*gomala*), and spaces where cattle could be tied up (*gokatte*). Further, one could also find the *Ashwathkatie* – a raised platform that in addition to providing seating also housed two to three trees of neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and/or

peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) and idols representing religious figures near a lake. In the past, the *Ashmathkatte* represented a communal space where the village headman administered justice (Nagendra 2016).

Today, many lakes have been replaced by malls, bus stands, stadiums, residential gated communities, and educational institutions. The ones that survive are dynamic in their own ways. Village groves that remain in their original form are used by nomadic communities (who have since changed occupations to include lock making and knife sharpening) and by livestock owners for grazing cattle. Local men and women harvest the reeds growing on the banks of lakes to feed cattle and livestock. Commercial launderers use water from lakes to wash clothes. Local women harvest the green leafy vegetables growing on the banks of lakes either for their own sustenance or to sell in markets for supplementary income. Marginalised daily wage workers (often belonging to the building industry) set up temporary shelters on the banks of lakes. People use lake water to bathe and wash clothes and utensils, notwithstanding the pollution level; sometimes, they even drink it. Cultural traditions such as village festivals (*jaatres*) often involving ritualistic sacrifices and offerings made to lake deities are still practised around these spaces. *Ashmathkattes* no longer serve as spaces for delivering judgement, but communities frequent them to perform religious ceremonies or simply to get together and exchange thoughts. Cemeteries and temples are still an integral part of the waterscape of Bengaluru.

#### 4. TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE, INCLUSIVE URBAN VISIONS

Grand urban visions such as the Smart City Programme or community-led visions of lake rejuvenation have often failed to adequately consider the interdependence of marginalised or vulnerable communities with water bodies (Mundoli et al. 2017b). Consequently, these visions prioritise the needs of urban middle and elite classes and give shape to an urban design that creates enclosures of aesthetic and recreational utilities while excluding (both physically and ideologically) other existing alternative utilities of the water body, such as those described here. Exceptions to this do exist, like the case of Kaikondrahalli lake to the south and Jakkur lake to the north (Nagendra 2016), but these cases are too few and too far between. It is time urban resident collectives, bureaucracies, and planning agencies recognise and encourage informal economies and resource-dependent lives and livelihoods around urban spaces. Only through promoting equitable access to these resources can we evolve targeted schemes of community-led stewardship of urban nature, which is important to urban resilience in a changing world.

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