

DESTROYED BY 'DEVELOPMENT'

## Privatising Bangalore's Lakes

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*In 2002, 60 tanks in Bangalore were sought to be leased out in public-private partnerships that would turn these traditional commons into amusement parks and commercial spaces with closed access. A people's movement that culminated in a 2008 high court order managed to prevent the enclosure of these commons.*

BANGALORE'S TANK SYSTEM, which harks back over 1,000 years and is the result of human intervention and innovation, is going through a crisis due to urbanisation. Many tank beds have been converted into built-up areas, and suffer high levels of pollution, especially from untreated sewerage.

Tanks have historically been maintained by communities through a unique tenure system, which later gave way to maintenance by government departments like the minor irrigation department, the Bangalore City Corporation (BCC) and the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA).

The authorities have attempted several responses for the protection and maintenance of Bangalore's tank system. In the early-1980s, the government of Karnataka set up a committee to study the state of the tanks and offer recommendations on their development and maintenance. This paved the way for the forest department to play a role in managing the tanks. With this, the discourse around tanks underwent a shift as the focus of the forest department was on the ecology of these spaces, not so much on the socio-cultural implications. Thus Bangalore's tanks, or *keres*, began to be referred to as "lakes".

The Lake Development Authority (LDA) was set up in 2002 through a government order mandated to develop and maintain the lakes of Bangalore. It devised a public-private partnership (PPP) scheme that invited private bodies to develop and maintain the lakes on a develop-operate-transfer (DOT) basis. This entailed the leasing of lakes to private bodies for a period of 15 years, renewable at the end of that period. The lessee was required to pay an annual lease amount and a deposit, and in return, could use the lake for commercial activities such as amusement rides, water sports, setting up of food courts, restaurants, etc. The lessees were also required to build water treatment plants, de-silt and dredge the lake periodically, landscape the foreshore area, and carry out other maintenance task. And they were allowed to charge an entry fee to the lake.

Bangalore's tanks thus entered another stage of their existence, transiting from the traditional *kere*, located in the common sphere, to ecological spaces or lakes as envisioned by the forest department, to amusement and commercial private spaces as desired by the Lake Development Authority. The logic given for this latest avatar was the need to generate funds for

their survival. It followed the neo-liberal stance of viewing the environment as a resource for maximising profits.

And so, in 2005 and 2006, four lakes in Bangalore—Hebbal, Nagavara, Venkanayakanere and Agara—were leased out to private bodies including those belonging to the hospitality and real estate sectors. The LDA announced its list of lakes to be privatised under the scheme. Initially, seven lakes were involved but this was modified to 11, then to 36, and finally to 60. The lakes were leased out for amounts ranging from Rs 40 lakh to Rs 60 lakh per annum. Fences were erected around them and an entry fee charged, thereby controlling access to a common property resource. This completed the enclosure of the commons.

The scheme to privatise Bangalore's lakes was conceived and implemented almost in stealth by the Lake Development Authority. There were no announcements or public consultations before it was rolled out. Fishermen, collectors of fodder, commercial washermen, recreational and leisure users, and naturalists—all felt its impact. In terms of magnitude, the worst-affected were people who used the waters to earn a livelihood. Fodder collectors and commercial washermen were banned from using the lakes. Initially, fishermen were also refused access to Hebbal and Nagavara in spite of the lease agreement between the LDA and the lessees containing a clause that mandated recognition of traditional use of the lakes. Because they were organised into cooperatives, the fishermen managed to politicise the issue and regain access, though the process dragged on for over a year.

Nagavara lake, which was leased out to Lumbini Developers for an annual fee of Rs 40,23,000, was transformed into an amusement park with food courts, amusement rides, boating, etc. Its southern shore was paved and made into a footpath. This entertainment bubble, carved out of a living commons, started catering to a new set of users who flocked to the area for their daily fix of outdoor amusement.

Apart from the social impact on various user groups, the makeover also impacted the flora and fauna of these spaces. Till then, the lakes provided a habitat and shelter, albeit somewhat polluted, to various species of birds as well as a variety of plant life. With the changes witnessed at Nagavara lake, where the water has been cleaned to the point of it being sanitised, bird as well as plant life began to get affected. There was now no natural shoreline to nest, all the weeds had been removed, and increased activity and noise pollution added to the already existing water pollution.

Once news of the lake privatisation spread, civil society reacted strongly. Campaigns began around the issue, and protests were launched at various lakes like Hebbal and Agara. The media picked up the story and ran with it for a while. The vocal middle class was split over the move. Debates raged on e-groups and other stakeholders on the pros and cons of the model. All this led to a local NGO, Environment Support Group, filing a public interest litigation against the PPP in 2008. In response the high court stayed the scheme, directing the government not to lease any more lakes under it and not to renew leases already entered into. As a consequence, the EIH or Oberoi Group halted its development plans for Hebbal lake which also included a

floating restaurant. The group had plans for a 223-room hotel overlooking Hebbal lake. It was clear that they intended to convert the lake into a private waterbody for hotel guests. Likewise, Biota Natura Systems was forced to stop development at Agara lake.

The 2008 Karnataka High Court ruling offered a fresh lease of life to Bangalore's lakes, preventing a virtual 'takeover' of these commons. Faced with a lot of criticism about the functioning of the LDA, the government decided to hand over maintenance of the city's lakes to the Bangalore City Corporation or the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). A number of lakes were also handed over for development to the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), the planning agency for the city; these would later be given over to the BBMP.

With this, the possibility of user group participation in the lakes' development appeared brighter. However, the way in which the BDA and BBMP took forward development of the lakes suggested they were simply continuing with the LDA model, albeit without charging an entry fee. This meant that the lakes were being developed in line with the 'civil engineering' approach that involved huge engineering intervention, construction of several structures including a ring bund that circled the lake and was reinforced with cement and granite, creation of artificial islands, a path on the ring bund, parks, etc.

All this suggested that the focus remained on recreation and leisure activities at the expense of people who used the lakes to earn a livelihood. Re-work and dredging, and the creation of a ring bund, meant tampering with the lake's structure. This has led to what is critically referred to as a 'water bowl' structure, where lakes are seen as round structures holding water. It negates their regulatory role of directing rainwater from one lake to another, through a series of lakes. The 'water bowl' meant that the deepest point of the lake shifted from near the bund to the centre of the lake. This reduced the lake's overflow causing stagnant waterbodies and impacting water quality as well as ecology.

*—Third World Network Features*