

Drops that make a city

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water, water, everywhere Sunset in Upper Lake, Bhopal. photo by author
Shefali Tripathi Mehta sails through the many lakes of Bhopal, soaking up some history and pointing out to other sights of natural wonder along the way.



My memories of life in the city of lakes evoke a wondrous kaleidoscope of images, moods and imprints — the balmy breeze that hit our hot faces as the school bus passed by the Upper Lake; the riotous, dark surge crashing on the rocks, sending sprays on the busy road above on stormy days; the placid waters at sunset canopied by crimson skies; the excitement of rushing to the Bhadbhada Dam during pelting monsoons to see its sluice gates open; and the stories of adventure told and retold, of girls commuting by boats between college and hostel.

Bhopal, in the heart of central India with its lush forests and wildlife, is known as the city of lakes for the numerous natural and artificial lakes that highlight its beauty and pleasant climate. Besides the two better-known Upper (Bada) and Lower (Chota) lakes, the Motia Talab, the Shahpura Lake and the Hussain Baksh Ki Talaiya form a vital hub of the city's social, cultural and historic milieu.

History has it...

There is an old saying about the Upper Lake of Bhopal, “Taalon mein taal Bhopal ka taal, baaqi sab tallaiya,” which loosely means that all the rest are ponds compared to it. The largest artificial lake in Asia, it sits in the heart of the city and winds its way around its south-western hills to flow away into the River Kaliasote.

In the 11th century, Raja Bhoj, the Parmara King of Malwa who ruled from Dhar, founded the city of Bhojpal, which later came to be known as Bhopal. Legend has it that he was advised to bathe in the waters of 365 rivers to cure him of an ailment. So 365 tributaries were made to converge and the Upper Lake was formed by constructing a clay dam across the Kolans river.

Till the early 16th century, Bhopal was a small village in the kingdom of the Gond tribes. The exquisitely beautiful Gond Queen Rani Kamlapati, who ruled from Ginnaur, was said to float around the Lower Lake of Bhopal on moonlit nights on a lotus-shaped barge.

Her life and rule ended abruptly when she hired an Afghan mercenary, Dost Mohammed Khan, to avenge the killing of her husband, Nizam Shah Gond. Dost Mohammed usurped her throne and invited her into his harem, leaving her with no other choice but to jump into the lake to save her honour. The ruins of her palace overlooking the Lower Lake still stand. The scary tales of her spirit lingering there kept us, as kids, away from the southern part of what is known as the Kamala Park.

The city of undulating hills runs in a horseshoe around the Upper Lake, leaving it free in the southwest to blend into the horizon and display breathtaking sunsets each evening. The tranquil beauty of these sunsets is best enjoyed from the vantage points atop the two high hills on either side of the lake — the Shymala and the Idgah Hills. Just as the sun dips and the skies darken, the twinkling city lights in the valley town below present another quiet spectacle.

The Van Vihar National Park runs along the lake in the south and the wooded Takia island, a small island with the tomb of the Shah Ali Shah Rahamatullah, adds ethereal beauty to it. The lake is a haven for migratory birds like the white stork, the black-necked stork, the bar-headed goose, the spoonbill and the majestic Indian sarus crane.

Boating wasn't such a common thing to do in our lakes back then. Some boats on the Lower Lake offered the recreation, but the pucca Bhopalees were content to watch. We were careful to not linger for too long after dark at the then 'unsafe' road along the Upper Lake up to the Yatch Club.

Now there is a swank new boulevard with neat flower beds and painted rails along the length of the Upper Lake. Dotted with restaurants and ice cream stalls, balloon sellers and peanut vendor carts, the scene in the evenings is more of a fair. India's first National Sailing Club has been set up at the Boat Club and offers water skiing and parasailing among other water sports. Motor boats zoom across the lake and an artificial rotating fountain spins on it at sundown.

Towards the north, where the ruins of forts and palaces of the old city dipped their feet into its waters, the VIP Road runs along the lake, connecting the city to the international airport. In 2011, the government gifted the city a statue of the tribal king, Raja Bhoj, which stands in the lake. The lake was also renamed 'Bhoj Taal' in his honour.

Among the other notable lakes, in the north of the city, are the Motia Talab, the Hussain Baksh Ki Talaiya and the Noor Mahal Talab, all within the precincts of the historic Taj Mahal Palace.

The placid Motia Talab reflects like a mirror, the crown among mosques, the Tajul Masajid. In the posh, new part of the city is the Shahapura Lake constructed in the 1970s. Home to an amazing variety of resident and migratory birds, it is an oasis among the

concrete human settlements. There are several other seasonal lakes dotting the landscape and adding charm to this beautiful city of lakes.