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Street vendors in KR Market, Bengaluru. DH photo by Prathiksha Lakshmikanth

A mall looks the same whether in Bengaluru, Gurugram or Kolkata, with the same brands and similar food courts. But even within Bengaluru, the streets of Malleswaram, Chickpete, Koramangala and Brigade Road each have their own characteristic street culture, so clearly identifiable. Street vendors shape the culture of cities like Bengaluru in key ways. Everyday unsung entrepreneurs, they bootstrap their stalls using minimal resources, providing food and goods at affordable prices.

The bamboo basket sellers on KR road were amongst the most iconic of Bengaluru's vendors. A common sight in south Bengaluru, they wove and sold baskets, bamboo blinds, and other handmade items on the footpath. The massive banyan trees that lined KR road provided the vendors, many of whom migrated from Mysore about 50 years ago, with shade. Sap from the tree trunks, mixed with ragi mudde, was used to treat coughs and colds. Their huts were tethered against these massive tree trunks. When the trees were cut down for road widening in the 1980s, the weavers lost their shelter.

Fortunately, rain trees were planted on the newly widened road, and their street lives resumed, tethered to the trees. But with Metro construction a couple of years ago, the trees were again cut - this time for good. With the trees gone, these families lost shelter, and the women lost privacy for personal functions. Bengaluru's streets once generously gave them a home – the city took away that home without even noticing.

Street trees are common casualties in the race for urban development. Bengaluru's streets have now lost tens of thousands of trees. While residents protest in numbers, street vendors, who spend much of their lives under these trees, remain unnoticed. Yet, like the bamboo vendors on KR road, vendors across Bengaluru and other cities find trees integral to their daily lives. The shade from trees relaxes them, and the cool breeze helps them tolerate hot days spent outdoors on polluted streets. They enjoy listening to the birds sing on the branches above. The sap, leaves, twigs, fruits and bark of trees provide cheap, effective home remedies. Tree branches are used as hangers to display items “as though in a mall”, while tree canopies keep fish, fruits and flowers fresh for longer times, and prevent clothes from fading. Trees are highly sought after – the oldest and richest vendors get the best trees, and choice spots are passed on from father to son. A seller of pirated CDs, injured by bikes speeding on the pavement, strategically placed himself next to the trunk of a massive rain tree - bikers swerved to avoid the tree trunk, keeping him safe.

There is a reason why people flock to cities. Despite the pollution, chaos, overcrowding and stress of city life, cities represent magnets of growth, and symbolize aspirations of freedom. In reality of course, living in a city is only liberating for those with the money and capacity to insulate themselves from the worst of the pollution and congestion. In this context, discussions of the “Right to the City” become critical.

This influential idea, first developed by the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1968, says that people from all walks of life need to collectively reclaim their rights to the city.

Whose city is it? Bengaluru belongs as much to its street vendors as to any of us reading this Sunday newspaper. When Bengaluru plans its next assault on street trees – as it will, sadly, all too soon - the city must ask itself a hard question – will “compensatory” replantation take care of the street vendors' right to the city?

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