

The despairing saga of a dying lake

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Bengaluru's largest water body, Bellandur lake, was once a brilliant vista of blue, spreading across more than a thousand acres. Fish caught in the lake supplied one of the largest fish markets in the neighbourhood, and the lake provided livelihoods to a dense patchwork of farmers, cattle-grazers and other residents. The people who live around the lake tell stories of a powerful goddess, who came to the lake in the guise of a woman in need of water and food. In various versions, she cursed the village or blessed it – either way, the lake goddess was the impetus for the creation of a massive lake that would supply them through eternity.

Bellandur was an iconic lake for all of Bengaluru, not just the villages that surrounded it. During World War II, American “flying planes” – Catalina seaplanes – landed on the vast water surface of Bellandur lake. From there, a large canal or kaluve connected the lake to the HAL airport, where the planes would be transferred to and stored for safety. A large Military Grass Farm on the border of the lake, near Agara, provided grass for hundreds of cattle, supplying milk, butter and cheese to the Army.

The lake received water from at least three different lake chains. When the banks of the lake overflowed with water, harvest offerings, animal sacrifices, community feasts and festivities followed, giving thanks to Dugamma, goddess of the lake. To remove the mud that came along with the water, prisoners from the jail were brought in, desilting

the lake in an exercise of community service. When the rains failed, a handful of rice was supplied from each home, and cooked in a communal pot for Maleraya, god of the rains, beseeching him to fill the lake with life-giving water.

That vision of community prosperity, fuelled by working and living together, is now a distant memory. All one can smell is the stench of the lake. The surface is practically invisible, covered by voraciously spreading water weeds, layered by snowy white foam. The rusty metal fence at the boundary is unable to contain the flying toxic foam that lands on the people who travel daily on the road next to the lake.

On the other side of the road, for the past few weeks, environmentalists and schoolchildren have worked together to dig up the soil and plant trees, in a valiant effort to restore the environment. The schoolchildren find sanitary napkins and half rotted bones, toffee wrappers and plastic bottles. They return home, both exhilarated by the planting and horrified to realise the evidence of their demand for chips and cola stays on forever in the soil, poisoning the trees that others will plant.

The lake looks dead, acts dead, smells dead – but can still turn tricks. It has generated immense profits for real estate agents who bought up land near the lake, selling the promise of “pristine” lake views to buyers, and now demanding that the government pay for lake restoration. Local doctors warn of an increase in health disorders in young children living in these apartments around the lake. Despite efforts by a number of committed people and organisations, the plans for a well-designed ecological restoration of the lake seem increasingly remote. A number of proposals for restoration have been floated over the years, many sinking without a trace. They ask for massive amounts of money, and offer one-time spot fixes.

A living lake once signalled prosperity and wellbeing of society, accompanied by thanksgiving to the goddess of lakes. But in the dystopic world of today, a dying lake is far more profitable than a healthy kere. We can pour in the money, resuscitate the lake to the point of almost-survival, then let it degrade again. Ad-infinitum – rinse and repeat.

NEXT STORY



S Natarajan,

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