

A reckless race to disaster

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Some 8,561 trees will be cut down across eight densely wooded roads in outer Bengaluru very soon, leaving them bare and exposed, if the Karnataka Road Development Corporation Limited has its way. The reason? Road widening. Namma Metro Phase 2 will take an additional 1,253 trees. 16,685 trees will be chopped down to make way for the Peripheral Ring Road.

A tree is more than a trunk and some leaves. It is a safe harbour, and an open buffet for birds and butterflies, slender lorises and monkeys. A tree is an umbrella for the migrant street vendor who sells coconut water below its welcome shade. It is a pollution filter for the motorist, stuck in endless traffic jams. The sight of a spectacular spreading canopy and colourful blossoms are balm for the soul.

More than anything, trees are our last buffer against climate change and urban pollution. India records the largest number of deaths from air pollution, having overtaken China in this dubious rat race to the bottom.

The highly controversial steel flyover project, shut down in 2017 after sustained pressure from environmental activists and citizens, seems to be making its way back again in a new avatar, having ditched the steel. The new elevated corridor project will swallow at least 3,716 trees, sacrificed to the insatiable appetite for bigger, grander, infrastructure projects.

Bannerghatta National Park is one of our last remaining green refuges, and an important corridor for elephant movement. In 2018, mining – once rampant and highly destructive to the environment -- was banned in these forests, after years of effort by environmental activists. The ecological response was immediate. The jungles of Bannerghatta soon saw the return of leopards, and large elephant herds. Oblivious to the importance of this heritage National Park for Bengaluru, the Karnataka government now plans to devastate a massive 100 square kilometers of protected forest in the eco-sensitive zone around the park. The denotification will open up a number of stone quarries and make it possible for them to resume work, poisoning the surrounding air, water and soil. All because of pressure from real estate and mining lobbies, who seek to open out these areas for “development”.

At a time when Karnataka and Tamil Nadu engage in heated debate over their fair share of Cauvery water, it makes no sense whatsoever to destroy the forests of Bannerghatta. These forests are essential catchment areas that help funnel rainfall into a number of tributaries that feed into the Cauvery. When the forests disappear, giving way to mines, roads and real estate, the water in the streams will shrink drastically. We know this – we have seen it in the past. But there seems to be no political appetite for strategic planning for forest protection, so that we can invest in protecting and increasing river flows.

When we cut down trees, we lose an entire imagination, a mental world. We reshape our societies and cultures into a very different type of living. We become stressed, irritable, prone to road rage, vicious in the office, snapping at our parents and children when we get home. A new study of 20,000 people in the UK shows that spending just two hours a week in the presence of nature leads to huge improvements in physical and mental health. Our research from Bengaluru’s restored lakes shows that they act as social nodes for people to get to know their neighbours, and for migrants to develop a sense of local belonging that is essential for the future of Bengaluru.

Is this the time to take on projects that will lead to the reckless destruction of close to 30,000 trees in the city, and 100 square kilometers around the one National Park we possess?

Not content with fiddling while our city burns, we are, quite literally, adding fuel to the fire. What madness is this?

Namma Metro
Bengaluru
Karnataka

NEXT STORY

