

Songs of the lake

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All the lakes are dry. The frogs have given birth. The ponds are dry. The crickets have given birth. Why have you not come, O God of rain?" So goes a local song, sung by women living around the lakes of Sarjapur.

When the rains do come, as they have in force this year, they create a problem of plenty. Coorg and Kerala are facing landslides this year, Bombay is dealing with unprecedented rains. It will soon be our turn, if the rains keep on at this rate.

How did people get Gangamma, the Goddess of water, to stay and bless the land with life-giving water? Songs may provide us a clue.

Yelegowda built a small lake, so goes another song. But there was not a single drop of water in the lake for the cows, or the bull. Yelegowda started to worry. He prayed to Gangamma. There was no thunder, no lightning – but magically, it started to rain. Water flowed into the six canals that Yelegowda had built. It flowed out, above the waste weir. Gangamma had come, but refused to stay.

Gangamma demanded a human sacrifice. She asked for the eldest daughter-in-law of Chikkanna Gowda to carry a deepa made of rice flour, offer a goat, and provide herself as a sacrifice. Chikkanna Gowda angrily refused. But his daughter-in-law Honnamma, having overheard the conversation, made up her mind. "Honnamma became one with Gangamma."

Poignant and heartbreaking, these songs are filled with stories of sacrifice – a cost largely borne by the women of the landscape. “Gange, Goddess of the seven heavens”, they sing. “Can our lakes survive without water? And will the canals remain? Fishes survive in the lakes. In the fields, paddy grows with water. Without water, all life will be destroyed, O Gange. The entire universe belongs to you.”

The rural landscape of peripheral Bengaluru described in these songs has transformed into one that is decidedly urban. The canals and ponds on Sarjapur road, once thick with fish, have been lost to roads and high-rise apartments. Paddy fields and wetlands have been taken over by IT companies and malls, and cashew and mango plantations have been replaced by marble and granite tile factories. Where are the kaluves that took the water to the fields? Where are the eleven large open wells that once surrounded Kaikondarahalli lake, absorbing the excess water during the rains and then returning it to the land and its people in summer?

Gangamma, the Goddess of water, and Maleraya, the God of the rains, are described as powerful but capricious, generous but demanding. There is a landscape element to satisfying this demand – clear as an underlying signature. The lakes will fill if the canals are dug. The water will stay if the bunds are built. The lake will hold water if the community gets together to desilt the bottom. Maleraya will consent to shower the land with rains if seven Gowdas of seven villages get together, holding a collaborative community feast – he does not seem to answer private requests.

The rains will come more easily and more often if the forests in Coorg are intact. The waters of the Cauvery will fill if the hillsides of the Western Ghats are cloaked with trees, which channel the rains into the river. The river will flow free if it is not impeded by rampant sand-mining and encroachment. Urban Bengaluru will be primed to receive water not by the marriage of frogs, but by restoring its wetlands, canals, lakes, ponds, and valleys. Gangamma and Maleraya do not want private investment-backed ‘lake beautification’ ventures. They have always responded to the requests of communities, to the needs of the fish and the trees, the grass and the cows, the fruit and the flowers. Without the songs of the community, and the vision of the landscape, there is no hope for the future of Bengaluru.