

Bengaluru | Of heritage lost and found

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DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

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Harini Nagendra, the Green Goblin

We live in a city that is unaware of its heritage, and uncaring of attempts to protect it. So many of the iconic buildings that once characterised Bengaluru have been razed. Buildings like Victoria Hotel and Cash Pharmacy in the Cantonment have been torn down and converted into malls and offices. Sampangi lake and Dharmambudhi lake, created centuries ago by the hard labour of local communities, were filled in, cemented over, and became locations for the Kanteerava Stadium and the Majestic Bus Stand. Cubbon Park and Lal Bagh have steadily lost green cover to buildings, roads, Metro construction, and other activities deemed essential for ‘development’ of the city. The thousands of large open wells that supplied Bengaluru with water in the 1880s are gone, having given way to apartments, offices and malls.

Heritage trees are the worst casualties of our casual disregard for the past. Bengaluru’s large avenues were lined with magnificent rain trees, copper pods, African tulips and Tabebuias. Many were planted decades ago, but some were older than a century. Tens of thousands of such trees were cleared to make way for ‘progress’ – adding underpasses, flyovers, high-speed corridors, and Metro lines to the city. At the periphery, centuries-old banyan and peepal trees were destroyed to make way for widening the ring road and peripheral arterial roads. The casualness with which orders are given for massacre of these giant trees is remarkable – they are not even counted accurately, missing out many trees that are later chopped. What we do not know of, we will not miss – so goes the argument. But it is incorrect.

Heritage trees have extraordinary life histories. On the road from Sarjapura to Attibele stands a magnificent banyan tree that is centuries old. Local residents claim that it is at least 350 years old. This tree has witnessed the rule of Magadi Kempe Gowda, Shahji, Venkoji, the Mughals, Chikkaraja Wodeyar, Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and the British. It has seen the fall of the British empire, celebrated the dawn of independent India and watched the changes in the landscape as the sleepy villages around it gave way to waves of IT capital-infused companies and real estate projects. The tree nurtured generations of shepherds and farmers who grazed their herds, and offered prayers for the rains and

harvest to the local deity whose shrine is tucked within. Birds, snakes and other wildlife make their home in its branches. Walking into the shelter of this massive tree is like walking into a forest. This magnificent, irreplaceable tree was going to be cut down to make way for the road to Attibele some years back. Local residents organised themselves to save the tree.

Other heritage trees were less fortunate. Thousands of such centuries-old banyan and peepal trees have been lost to road widening across India in recent years. Their ecological, social and cultural roles in our lives are irreplaceable. Certainly, these cannot be replaced by the compensatory plantation of saplings in distant locations, as road widening plans promise (they also fail to fulfil even this basic promise).

Just like we need to document and save our heritage buildings and lakes, we need to document our heritage trees. These trees are miracles of nature. Take the centuries-old tamarind tree in the Nallur Amaroy thopu near the Bengaluru airport, for instance. Split by lightning into two parts, it inexplicably survives, thriving and bearing fruit. These trees have borne witness to great events of the past. Each heritage tree has a personality and character of its own and has survived stressful events with incredible resilience. We must identify them and build them into the fabric of the contemporary city.

If Bengaluru is to truly become a ‘world-class’ city of the 21st century, it must move away from the current approach of disregarding the city’s historical roots – instead building on its foundation of ecological heritage with respect and care.

NEXT STORY



Charu Sudan Kasturi,

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