

# Controlling the waters

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Young men wading through chest-deep water to rescue babies. Cars swept away in seconds by the force of rushing water. Submerged apartments and homes and collapsing stormwater drains. Bengaluru's news was full of such stories during last week's torrential rains.

The same rains that wreaked havoc across residential localities in Bengaluru also worked their magic on its keres, kaluves and baavis. Six lakes filled to the brim, a rare occurrence. One of Bengaluru's best known lakes, Sankey lake, filled and overflowed into the outflow channel, for the first time in 12 years.

The monsoons are a blessing and a curse. The legend of Bellandur lake is that of a pregnant woman who cursed the village for not providing her with food and water. Her words brought down a deluge, turning the entire area into a lake. People prayed to the goddess (for the woman was indeed the goddess in disguise). She halted the rains but warned people about the dangers of greed and the disregard for nature, asking them to build a temple in her name and pay heed to her warning.

When lakes overflowed in Bengaluru, communities celebrated. The wells and kalyanis filled up. To thank the goddess for her bounty, residents conducted Gange puje – floating a coracle across the lake with a lit lamp made of rice flour, and a goat -- ending with a community feast, to celebrate the bountiful months of harvest that they anticipated with eagerness.

Gange puje is almost lost from urban memory, until a good monsoon brings it back. Last week, local residents offered bagina at Sankey lake, an abbreviated urban form of what used to be a days-long rural ceremony. Older residents around Rachenahalli lake, another kere that filled to the brim this monsoon, speak with nostalgic affection about the times that they got together as a community in their childhood to request 'Maleraya', the god of rains, to shower them with his blessings at the end of the summer.

The spot where they used to pray to Maleraya is now a small temple on the lake bund. Earlier, it was inside the lake, submerged in water during most of the year. The lake dried up in summer, providing everyone – elderly grandmothers and grandfathers and young babies alike – a path so that they could walk over the dry lakebed, down to the temple, to participate in the communal feast. During the rest of the year, children swam to the partially submerged temple, taking with them offerings that their parents sent. The girls swam, too, tucking in their langas, until they were banned by watchful relatives. They caught fish at the side of the lake, as they waited for their cows to complete grazing. Today, a fence at the inner side of the lake ostensibly keeps out the cows. An odd cow or two still finds its way past the fence, following the path that other cows have trodden for centuries, but which modernity seeks to limit.

Like cows, water finds its way past barriers. Water slides through cracks and gaps, cracking open barricades, collapsing retainer walls, filling basements, converting 'low lying' areas into lakes, and threatening babies, cattle and cars. We cannot engineer solutions to floods, which will become increasingly common in the era of climate change. Maleraya and Gange will not save us – our sins are numerous. We ignore the power of nature, seeking to tame it and alter its course, drive it into safe paths using retainer walls and fences, manage its vagaries by using technologies such as cloudseeding to call down the monsoon and pumps to reduce flooding.

The unpredictability of nature can only be managed by nature – restoring ecological integrity by protecting wetlands, reviving lakes, deconcretising lake bunds and stormwater channels, reclaiming grasslands, and uprooting plantations on lakebeds. Our obsessive belief in technology – not much different in its particulars from blind faith -- will not save us.