

The tragedy is not Turahalli, it is that we are having this conversation

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One of Bengaluru's priceless green spaces was up for grabs this month. Once again, because of the vigilance and swift action of citizens, damage was averted.

Along with peacocks, jackals, mongoose, rock bees and other core residents, scores of birds and butterflies make their home in Turahalli forest. This 600-acre patch, one of the last remnant forest areas in Bengaluru, acts as a bridge to the Bannerghatta National

Park, with many wild animals moving between these two regions. For those living in South Bengaluru, the Turahalli forest is priceless. It provides one of the few remaining opportunities to experience anything even remotely close to 'wild' nature in the city. Small wonder that, even in Covid times, thousands of residents came together for organised protests to save the forest from being converted into a 'tree park'.

Why do we need a forest? What's wrong with having a tree park instead? Those who designed and implemented this effort defended their ideas saying that they were planting trees, creating play areas for children, exercise spaces for senior citizens, and developing 'lung spaces' for the city. Why object to these noble goals?

Objectors point out that Turahalli already has a tree park, which covers over 35 acres. There are barely any people who visit this area. Of course, there aren't. If you were to go to the forest on the weekend, wouldn't you rather clamber up a hilly path to marvel at the rock bees that cling to the base of a boulder in a seemingly gravity-defying stunt, or to gaze in awe at the peacocks that perch on the top of the large trees? Why would you like instead to be forced to march in ordered fashion up and down a neat, brick lined walkway in the tree park, craning your neck only left or right to see trees, lined up in regimental fashion in neat rows and columns? The birds and butterflies prefer the wild part of the forest to the tree park. Why would humans be any different?

Nature is not neat, tamed or predictable. We would not love her as viscerally, as wildly, if our minds and imaginations were not enthralled by nature's wild side. We make do with the numerous tree parks across Bengaluru on weekdays, circumnavigating the park in ordered fashion, clockwise (never anti-clockwise) along well-defined walkways, because we must. Because that's what is left for us in Bengaluru, and we have resigned ourselves to the fact that something is better than nothing.

Yet, on the weekends, our hearts beat for the great outdoors. People who cannot go as far as Turahalli throng to Cubbon Park and Lal Bagh, which still retain vestiges of their wild past -- though these traces of 'wildness' are fast disappearing, with Cubbon Park being thrown open to traffic, and Lal Bagh constantly fighting off efforts to convert it into a large amusement park with musical fountains and loud music.

If all our wild spaces need to be made financially viable, to generate income through ticketed entry fees, theme parks, food courts, and well-landscaped seating areas, we stand to lose something irreplaceable -- biodiversity -- as so many well-informed protesters pointed out, a forest is vastly more than a collection of trees. We also lose something fundamental to our very consciousness and identity as humans if we force-fit nature into our vision of recreational spaces. If vibrant Turahalli becomes another anodyne urban recreational space with bright lights, graveled paths, and neatly trimmed trees forced into rows and columns like good school children on 'March Past', it will be a travesty from which Bengaluru might not recover.

The tragedy is not Turahalli. The tragedy is that we are even having this conversation – to explain what should be obvious. The tragedy is that this is a repeating tragedy. We win one battle, only to find that ten more efforts have begun around us to snatch away our remaining green spaces.

One step forward, two steps back. Yet, Bengaluru does not give up hope. And perhaps in that is the sliver of optimism that we must hold on to.

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Bharat Karnad,

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