

The unbearable loss of giants

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Harini Nagendra,

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As the second wave of the pandemic tears through our cities, it leaves deep wounds in our fabric. This month, Bengaluru lost two giants who were fundamental in shaping the 'Green City'. Someshwar Shyam Sunder, who passed away on April 29 at the age of 90, was one of India's best-known foresters. Sethuram Gopalrao Neginhal, who lost the battle with Covid on May 2, just three days after Shyam Sunder, was another retired forester who was a household name in Bengaluru. The programme they launched in 1982, under a Forest Division specially created for this work, planted 6,56,000 trees in

1983, and 14,43,000 trees in 1984 – i.e., close to 21 lakh trees in just two years – as Shyam Sunder records in his paper, “Urban Tree Planting – Foresters Efforts in Bangalore”, presented to the World Forestry Congress in 1985.

Contemporary discussions about Bengaluru’s environment are filled with nostalgia. I cannot forget hearing 12-year-old children describe, with heartbreaking clarity, how the tree cover in areas like Malleswaram have changed in their lifetime. Yet, we often forget that similar debates were taking place in the 1980s. Shyam Sunder recorded that in 1976, the Urban Land Ceiling Act was brought in “to carve out more space for house building.” By the early 1980s, “the garden city of India was doing its best to shed the adjective.” He castigated the Bangalore Development Authority and the Bangalore City Corporation for being more concerned with providing civic amenities to the detriment of the city’s ecology.

In 1982, when the annual Vanamahotsava function was conducted in Bengaluru, the then chief minister Gundu Rao was disturbed at reports documenting the destruction of greenery. The BDA and the City Corporation responded to the chief minister’s queries saying they could “go all out” and plant 10,000 saplings. The Forestry Department immediately jumped in to say that that this was a pitifully inadequate suggestion. If the government could give them a free hand, they would plant one lakh trees in 1982, and increase this to five lakh trees in 1983.

The rest is history. Neginhal was brought in to take charge of the programme. He came up with innovative strategies. One of the biggest challenges the city faced was that saplings did not survive long, promptly consumed by hungry goats, cows and buffaloes. Neginhal raised saplings for several months in nurseries, planting them only after they were over six feet in height – taller than the head of the largest, most agile, free ranging cow.

The department experimented with various strategies to produce low-cost tree guards at mass scale, trying out bitumen drums (too expensive), iron rods (pilfered by thieves) and brick tree-guards (dismantled by people looking for bricks), and bamboo (eaten by white ants, or collapsing under the weight of cows and buffaloes, who liked to use the poles to scratch their backs). After much trial and error, they settled on a combination of bamboo and lopped Eucalyptus poles, termite-proofed with bitumen, and strengthened by chicken wire.

The afforestation programme was path-breaking in other ways, too, being socially adapted to Bengaluru, and getting everyone on board. Volunteers were appointed as honorary tree wardens, and social clubs like the Jaycees, Rotary and Lions Clubs, industries, public sector organisations and environmental groups provided support and sponsorship. Local residents were consulted about their preference for species. Television and radio broadcasts advertised the programme to the public, who could get saplings free of cost.

Both Shyam Sunder and Neginhal were disillusioned to see the devastation of the trees they had planted across Bengaluru. They planted trees in the millions. Bengaluru massacred these trees, also in the millions, in its misguided obsession for high-speed roads. The roads remain even more choked with traffic than they used to be, but the trees have vanished forever. So have these two giant foresters -- lost to a pandemic that emanates from the human disregard for environmental balance. We live in a sad world, where progress is equated with destruction.

[Covid-19](#)
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NEXT STORY

Slaying a demon called inflation

The April inflation number was probably a key trigger, or something more out on the horizon that caused the discomfort and indicated more pain is coming



[Jagdish Rattanani](#),

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As the price of tomatoes nears Rs 100 a kilo, it is time to bring some of the strong vocabulary on inflation that was in vogue with some of the old-time central bankers. Savak Tarapore, the illustrious former deputy governor of the RBI, never minced words. He wrote way back in 2007: “Tolerating inflation is like dancing with the devil and those who argue against strong monetary measures to control inflation are the sinners of society.” The noted Prof P R Brahmananda had said: “Not caring about inflation is like going into battle without caring for the wounded, the dying and the dead.”

So, the policy repo rate hike of 40 basis points, from 4 per cent to 4.4 per cent, announced at an unscheduled Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting called May 2 and 4, barely a month after the same MPC met and decided to keep the status quo (on April 6-8) is nothing short of a dramatic event. At the April meeting, the MPC knew that Jan and Feb 2022 retail inflation numbers had breached the upper tolerance level of 6 per cent -- they came in at 6.01 per cent and 6.07 per cent respectively. The March 2022 retail inflation numbers, which arrived later on April 12, confirmed the uptrend by coming in at 6.95 per cent. The unscheduled hike in repo rate along with a simultaneous Cash Reserve Ratio hike of 50 basis points to suck out “excess” liquidity, is a strong