

# The devastating loss of another 60,000 trees

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# DH



# DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

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With Unlock 3.0 in place (at least for the time being), on the surface, Bengaluru seems to be inching back to normal. But what constitutes ‘normal’ today? Despite predictions of a good monsoon this year, the rains have been playing kanna-mucchi, hide-and-peek, with us. Climate change is one possible cause; the deforestation in the Western Ghats is another contributor.

Closer home, megatons of concrete have been poured into Bengaluru, adding to the dust and pollution in the air. Many tons of live wood, roots, branches and leaves have been chopped and carted away to clear the road (literally) for flyovers, underpasses, signal-free corridors, metro lines and other infrastructure projects. Urban tree-felling creates urban heat island effects, modifying local climate in areas that are 2-4 times the size of the city. Air pollution is back on the rise.

We still do not know how many trees have been cut in and around Bengaluru in the past couple of years. In a particularly egregious case, several old trees were cut down on Old Airport Road overnight to make way for an underpass at the Suranjan Das Road junction. Some of these were than 50 years old – grand old trees like raintree and copper pod, which can shade up to half an acre of concrete, decrease the road surface temperature by as much as 25 degrees, and reduce air pollution to a considerable degree.

To prevent such fly-by-night felling, Dattatraya T Devare, a trustee of Bangalore Environment Trust, along with BET, filed a PIL in April 2018, more than three years ago. While hearings continue, the High Court has demanded that the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act, which dates from 1976, be followed to the letter.

This involves many aspects. First, the city needs a tree census – something that Bengaluru's citizens have been demanding for close to 20 years. If we do not know how many trees we have, how can we accurately tot up the city's losses? We need a tree census to help us assess whether Bengaluru has kept its promises. For all the millions of trees that have been felled in past projects, authorities promised to plant at least two saplings as replacements. Where have all these trees gone?

Devare now estimates that at least another 60,199 trees will be cut in the next few months, due to projects that involve further tree-felling for flyovers at the Old Airport Road and Ejipura/Kendriya Sadan, the widening of Bellary, Jayamahal and Sankey roads, Metro expansion, and widening of peripheral and surrounding roads. The glorious Jnana Bharati campus of Bangalore University, afforested through great efforts by ecologists, will lose at least 9,000 trees to a new institute.

Citizen action has been a mainstay for tree protection in Bengaluru in the past decades. It remains the way forward for the city. In this, the High Court's recent rulings bring hope. They empower citizens to follow new projects that require unnecessary tree-felling and submit well-reasoned objections to the tree committee, which will then look into this further.

We must also realise that we need to plan for a post-Covid world, which is shaping up to look very different from pre-Covid times. Many corporates have announced their plans to extend work-from-home programmes, saving on rent. A number of apartments across the city lie vacant, with residents moving back to their hometowns, working long-distance. These are the people most likely to have taken private cars to work and back in IT tech parks. Many of the formerly high-traffic areas, such as the Outer Ring Road and Bellary Road, receive less traffic than they used to – and these trends are likely to

continue for some time. We need to urgently commission new traffic studies to assess whether all these projects are actually needed in these new times. Cutting tens of thousands of trees in haste, without a proper study of alternatives, is madness.

*(Harini Nagendra the Azim Premji University Prof prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong)*

## NEXT STORY



Jyoti Punwani,

- MAY 09 2022, 14:16 IST
- UPDATED: MAY 13 2022, 15:33 IST

It took Delhi-based writer-activist Gautam Navlakha 75 days to get court permission to walk in the open in Taloja Jail and get the fresh air he's deprived of in the high-security anda cell he's been consigned to since October. Seventy-year-old Navlakha, one of 16 intellectuals arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case, has been denied a chair despite developing back pain during his two-year-long incarceration. Last month, the Bombay High Court rejected his plea for house arrest and instead directed the Taloja Jail authorities to provide him with whatever medical care he needed.

The court's direction was baffling, considering that Taloja's jailors have consistently denied basic health care to the Bhima Koregaon accused, leading to the death in custody of the oldest among them, Jesuit priest Fr Stan Swamy. The 84-year-old died in a private hospital, where he was admitted on court orders, but his health had rapidly deteriorated after being treated with Ayurvedic medicines for Covid. In violation of jail rules, only three Ayurvedic doctors comprise the medical staff at Taloja Jail.

Yet, the jailors refused to give advocate Surendra Gadling, another of the 16 accused, the Ayurvedic medicines his son had brought for him from Nagpur, which were needed to treat his syncope. The court had allowed these medicines, but the jailors declared that the only orders they recognised were those issued by their superintendent. Earlier, Navlakha was denied the pair of spectacles sent for him from Delhi after his were stolen. Eighty-two-year-old Telugu poet Varavara Rao, in perfect mental health when he was arrested, was deprived of his regular medicines and developed dementia soon after.

Jails come under the state government and Maharashtra's home minister is from the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), a post the party has never let go of. It is inconceivable that the party's head, the astute Sharad Pawar, would be unaware of the way the Bhima Koregaon accused are being treated in jail. He was the one politician who criticised the Pune police for their "misuse of power" in arresting these intellectuals. His efforts in