

Protectors of our city

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The Islamic Botanical Garden in Sharjah contains over 50 different species of medicinal and biodiversity-protecting plants mentioned in the Quran, from figs to palms. A new sacred garden will be set up in Tirumala, to grow species of scented and flowering plants used for worship. But we do not need to travel as far as Sharjah or even to Tirupati to see islands of sacred nature. In 2011, while visiting a range of different religious sites in Bengaluru, we documented over 5,500 trees in 62 different sacred spaces, from churches, temples and mosques to cemeteries serving all faiths. The trees in the cemeteries were the most majestic, inspiring awe as we stood under a massive sacred fig, a large date palm, or a Christmas tree that sheltered the graves of those no longer with us. They protected the graves of the dead from the heat of the sun, as they also sheltered an impressive range of other biodiversity, from kites laying nests high in the treetops to squirrels playing about near our feet – and some of the largest mosquitoes we have ever seen, feasting on our skin.

In a city like Bengaluru, which has lost lakhs of trees in recent years to urban growth, even the much-questioned Forest Survey of India's latest report admits that 5 per cent of the city's forest cover has been obliterated in just 10 years, from 2011 to 2021. The real percentage is likely to be much higher. Of the five mega cities of India, Bengaluru is the worst off – it already has a rather low coverage of trees, having lost green cover steadily since the mid-1990s, all to 'development' and 'economic growth'.

'Development' is an insatiable and greedy master, always seeking new areas to cannibalise. At least 60,000 trees will be cut for 10 infrastructure projects that are coming up in the next couple of years, including the new lines of the Metro and the Peripheral Ring Road. A sacred space stands in sharp contrast – a place of reflection, of calm, of acceptance. A place of thankfulness and gratitude, where we come to terms with what we have, not what we seek.

The sacred spaces of Bengaluru are a rare refuge for biodiversity, providing perhaps one of the few places where we can hope to define a different relationship with nature, and therefore with ourselves. Along with temples, Islamic cemeteries contain the highest proportion of native species in Bengaluru – standing in sharp contrast to parks, where

close to 80 per cent of the trees planted are exotic, or to corporate campuses and high-end hotels, where the greenery requires volumes of water, pesticides, herbicides, and an army of gardeners armed with mowers to keep them manicured.

The Lakshmipuram cemetery in Halasuru comes alive once a year on the day after Shivaratri, when families come to the graves of their loved ones bringing their favourite food with them. The place is vibrant with the keening sound of kites flying overhead. It is one of the many unheralded green spaces in the city, offering essential services like cool and clean air, and biodiversity support. The custodians of these and other cemeteries keep them clean and welcoming, diligently working around the clock to remove garbage and other threats to wildlife.

The community of worshippers in the iconic, 152-year-old All Saints Church strenuously seek to protect a beautiful grove from being razed down for the Metro. A vegetarian elderly priest at an ashwath katte in Cubbon Park buys meat from the local butchers to feed the kites. Grain merchants from different faiths and religions bring sacks of grain to the katte to feed the birds in the mornings.

The custodians of these sacred spaces are proud of their heritage, caring, and fiercely committed -- true protectors of the city. A city built on inclusion, kindness and compassion -- and respect for the nature that nourishes us all. If we lose this Bengaluru, we lose everything.

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[Jyoti Punwani,](#)

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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 and a 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