

# Environment first, dear new government

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Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong. Days and weeks without adequate water supply. Streets choked with water after an hour or two of rain. Piles of garbage in every corner. Smog-filled air. Lakes filled with sewage, their outlets clogged with waste. Outbreaks of malaria and dengue. Heat waves, exacerbated by power cuts and lack of reliable electricity.

Sounds familiar? These are aspects of our daily lives in cities like Bengaluru. We are so habituated to them that we may not even notice these challenges anymore – except in times of crisis, like last year's monsoon, when residents of Bengaluru had to be rescued with tractors and coracle boats. Climate change, coupled with the rapid growth of Karnataka's cities warns us that we are living in dangerous times. For too many years, we have ignored concerns of sustainability, pushing them below other 'more urgent' issues like transportation, infrastructure and economic growth. But how can a city function well when it lurches from one environmental crisis to another?

The new government will have much to do – there are challenges on every front. Will they treat sustainability with the attention it deserves? Bengaluru's urban environment is a badly neglected area that requires urgent attention, on a war-footing. Thousands of trees are going to be cut down in the next couple of years for flyovers, suburban railway expansion, road-widening and railway station 're-development'. Millions of trees have already been uprooted, lifegiving canopies and shade giving way to impervious, heat-inducing, carbon-emitting concrete. Promises of planting 10 saplings for every tree destroyed, made each year, never materialise.

Way back in 1982, two foresters – Shyam Sunder and Sethuram Gopalrao Neginhal – planted 2.1 million trees across Bengaluru. By the 21st century, their legacy lay in shambles, as trees began to be cut down without thought. Bengaluru's lakes, emerald jewels in the state's crown, were filled in, used to build malls and bus stands, apartments and industries. Gundathopes, gomala land and other commons earmarked for parks and play areas were snatched away for real-estate development. Wetlands, which recharged lakes, providing reservoirs and buffers against flooding, were one of the worst casualties in the battle against urban growth. The result: an environmentally dysfunctional city.

The growing climate crisis does not augur well for us. This year, after three years of relatively favourable La Niña weather, El Niño is expected to return – part of a repeated cycle of ocean currents that will see a warming of the waters of the Pacific Ocean. This may seem quite distant to us – why bother about the Pacific Ocean? But the waters of the world are interconnected. When the Pacific Ocean warms, the rest of the world heats up as well. Climate scientists expect that 2023 will be the first year when we will see the world crossing the 1.5°C threshold of global warming – a year when extreme weather events are likely to hit new global records.

What does this mean for Bengaluru? More heat waves, droughts, floods and unseasonal weather. More climate refugees, as the unpredictable weather leads to crop failures across the state and country. More power outages, as the electricity system struggles to cope with a demand for fans and air conditioners. More outbreaks of disease, as the heat promotes mosquito-borne epidemics.

What could the government do? Many different things, of course – invest in public transport, especially better buses and last-mile connectivity, to reduce cars and pollution on the roads. Plant millions of trees again – if we did it in 1982, we can do it now. Connect the lakes, restore the wetlands, recycle and compost waste, remove the garbage choking the streets.

In a city that always seems to be reactively scrambling to deal with environmental challenges, it will be critical for the new government to take sustainability seriously. Unless we plan for a better future, giving central focus to the environment, we have a dark future ahead.