

ONE DAY WORKSHOP

**PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVATING DISTRICT LEVEL PROTECTION
COMMITTEES**

INTRODUCTION

A one day workshop was organized by Action Aid and Environment Support Group (ESG) on the 14th of May 2014 at CSM house. There were around 50-60 participants from different parts of Karnataka like Belgaum, Bangalore, Hospet, Dharwad and Bangalore rural.

The agenda comprised of an introduction by Mr.Prabhakar beginning at 10.30am. Mr. Shubashchandra, Former Hydro geologist, who gave a talk on the geological components of Bangalore city including the groundwater status (past and present), transmission of water to different areas from the water source, followed by a brief question and answer round with the participants. Mr. Leo Saldanha, a trustee of ESG then gave a talk on the lakes of Bangalore, how they are each connected by channels, their present condition, advantages and disadvantages of Lake Development, the downside of privatization of such lakes and how to go about legal actions to protect the lakes by the citizens.

After a short lunch break, the workshop was continued by a group discussion on strategies to overcome the fast depletion and encroachment of our lakes. A brief conclusion was made at the end.

BACKGROUND OF LAKES IN BANGALORE

Bangalore was well known for its numerous lakes and tanks which not only took care of the drinking water requirements of the city but also contributed to the ambience and climate. Today, many of the lakes and tanks in the "IT city" have disappeared and the prevailing ones are highly polluted and encroached resulting in suffocating climatic condition and stench.

One of the main reasons behind the death of several lakes in Bangalore is due to the so called "ownership" of the lakes by the government. The governance and maintenance of the lakes come under the authority of BBMP, LDA and Forest officials which are very easily manipulated by real estate agents, land mafia, the upper class, builders and beaurocrats which acquire and snatch the land away in the name of development. This has also been aided by shifting the responsibility of the lake from local communities to the central government.



Figure 1 Kshitij Urs, Director, ActionAid during the session

One main point that should be noted is that lakes are not owned by the government but should be looked after by them. Local communities dependent on the lake ecosystem should be allowed to benefit from this ecosystem while maintaining the balance of it. Lakes are the common property of the people and should be maintained by them while they reap its rewards.

Process of lake death:

A healthy lake could disappear overnight. At times, in the name of development, slowly lakes are being encroached and finally vanish into oblivion. This may start with the intention of just making a road near the lake for people to network to the other side. Slowly a temple arises which would then need a proper boundary and connecting roads. Debris build up takes place in and around the lake. One by one schools, institutions, 'lake view' apartments, play grounds and business slowly erupt leading to sewage inlet into the lake itself turning it into a nuisance.

ISSUE OF PRIVATISATION- GOVERNMENT ONLY A CUSTODIAN

Be it lakes and grazing pastures or forests, they all come under the purview of the public and constitute as commons. Privatizing of the commons, will affect two sets of communities- firstly, the community that depends on them for their livelihood and secondly, the urban middle class that are indirectly dependent on them.



Figure 2 Leo Saldanha, Coordinator, ESG talking about Privatisation of Lakes

Leo Saldanha discussed this issue of privatization. He talked about how the lakes disappear, once they are left to private control. Urban tanks and lakes, are either commercialized for recreational purposes (parks and jogging areas) or are encroached and heavily polluted. This polluted water seeps into the ground water levels and affects health of surrounding communities, which depend on it for water supply.

This is not the only problem with respect to ground water resources. Problems faced in watershed management in Bangalore, was discussed by K.C Shubashchandra. He talked about the increasing difficulty of seepage of rain water into the ground water table because of rapid urbanization in Bangalore. With most of the city, turned into a concrete jungle either through buildings or roads, only 6% of the rainwater is absorbed. Previously stored ground water has already been exploited and there is lack of replenishment. Another important concern highlighted by K.C. Shubashchandra was that of leakage. 40% of the water supplied, does not reach the city due to transmissional loss.

Wastage of water through commercialization can be observed, in water theme parks and in the hundreds of luxury apartments present all over Bangalore. Encroachment of lakes was another important aspect discussed during the session. Luxury Apartments and Special Economic Zones encroach lakes, divert the water for commercial purposes. They also drain their sewage into neighbouring tanks and lakes.

What is often forgotten is the fact that, lakes are part of an intricate web of canals and are not independent. One polluted lake will eventually pollute, the other lakes in the city.

Contamination of lakes by discharging sewage, seeps into the ground water table. This is, in turn pumped out, by private tankers in the city who supply water to people. This affects public health. This never ending vicious cycle, affects middle-class urbanites, who remain largely unaware of the situation.

The workshop highlighted the consequences of government control over these commons. At best, there could be laws governing them which must be passed with the approval of the public. The government at the end of the day, is only a custodian and must act on the terms of the public.

PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATION – JANUARY 2008

With respect to the above situation, Environment Support Group filed a Public Interest Litigation before the High Court of Karnataka in January 2008. The two main agendas involved protection of tanks and preventing commercialization of the commons. The Justice Patil Committee was constituted to look into the issue, with the assistance of ESG.

COURT RULING

The court decided to bring into place Lake Protection Committees in every district and directed other guidelines for preservation of lakes. They briefly involve-

- Survey of tanks and lakes all over Karnataka must be undertaken. Proper live fencing must be done to demarcate boundaries. Live fencing would include locally useful trees, preferably, bird-attracting, fruit bearing trees. The forest department has been instructed to plant trees and saplings, in the buffer area of the lake.
- There must be no construction within 30 meters of the lake. This will prevent encroachment of lakes, entry of effluents, solids and hazardous waste and pollution. Importance of having sufficient rain water flow, surface water flow was discussed. The lakes and tanks must not have dead water. Fresh water, provides an ecosystem for migratory birds
- Removal of silt and de-weeding will have to be done periodically. Flow of sewage into tanks or lakes must be prevented.
- The court also directed that the commissioner of BBMP shall be responsible for proper development and maintenance of lakes, within the BBMP area.

Strategy Session:

The strategy session was held just after the lunch, with everyone sitting in a large circle making it comfortable for an open discussion. The discussion aimed to bring about a new strategy to fight or face the problems as discussed in the morning session.

The participants were from different backgrounds like- activists, NGO workers, agriculturists, members of various youth clubs. They were not only from Bangalore, but also from Belgaum, Hospet, Mysore and Bangalore rural areas. Issues of lakes from different parts of Karnataka were also addressed. The tribulations of 24/7 privatized water supply in the demo zones- Belgaum, Hubli, Dharwad and Gulbarga was talked about. According to the participants, after the implementation of 24/7 water supply plan, it is observed that there is an increase in usage of water in the agricultural sector. This is because of the shift in water use pattern in the latest agricultural and irrigational system, due to the availability of excess water. Crops which were previously grown, are not grown in these semi-arid regions anymore and water demanding crops like rice are cultivated now. We can now observe the sudden growth and fall of crop yields which have not been very sustainable. Because of the so called “24/7 water supply” the number of bore wells dug up are swelling, which have depleted the water tables drastically. Because of this, in places like Doddaballapur, drip irrigation systems have been adopted not because of the government’s advice, but after facing extreme scarcity of ground water and rainfall.



Figure 3 Strategy Session in Progress

Agricultural systems have flourished sustainably in Karnataka long before the Government brought in schemes. Therefore, there are more chances to find answers for good agricultural and irrigational practices, including the maintenance of water bodies in our local history rather than looking for ideas from foreign countries. An example was given by a PhD student from ATREE. Also a participant in the workshop, she is studying the historical management of water bodies and the current day scenario. The example she stated was the practice of “Tank Panchayat” in the olden days. They included a Panchayat system for each village who managed the water systems there. Whereas, in the current practice, the area of

cultivation has increased and there has been excess utilization of water. This reduces the ground water level and soil moisture, rendering the soil useless after a few years.

Basically, if water the vital element for life is managed well at the village or town level, the agricultural sector will succeed and thereby, result in migration check to bigger cities, which happens due to loss of their produce. This will eventually cut down the burden on cities. Revitalization, rejuvenation and management of rural lakes is therefore very essential.

Historically, Bangalore was very well planned with intricate water supply system by the means of lakes. The Raja Kaluves and the water shed areas can adhere to some action ideas that will help to revive these lakes and the water systems. The conclusion of the day's programme included the following inputs which were put forth by Leo Saldanha. First and the foremost, is to get all the lakes surveyed in the next three months and this will help us get the actual count of the lakes and their current status. The next step is to check the water quality of all the lakes, analyze and published them every quarter. Bangalore District Lake protection Committees to announce one Saturday every month as public meeting day. Ward Committees to be assigned, the responsibility of managing lakes in every ward in collaboration with local neighborhood association. All wards are to develop plans in three months, for green lake boundaries and Raja Kaluves. Lakes that are polluted and/or encroached, to be assessed and the report must be made available to public. Other suggestions included the meeting of the proposing party who want to encroach the lake with public, including the local communities who depend on the lake, so as to come to a mutual agreement. But this idea may not be very feasible because they don't usually stop the encroachment.

Currently, Action Aid is working on this issue and has already given letters regarding this to the BDA, BWSSB and LDA. But since they didn't respond to any of these due to the elections, Action Aid has now gone to the higher authorities like Chief Secretary, apart from having signature campaigns and protests. Action is yet to be taken.

SAVE THE LAKES

The misnomer of lakes being government property, should first be removed and treated as a common to all local communities. Active intervention of citizens and public participation, is the only way out for the lakes to survive. Groups should be made and/or the ward committee of the locality should become active and plan ways to fight for the betterment of the lakes. A formal complaint by as many active members of the locality should be addressed to the BDA, LDA, BWSSP, Forest Department or whichever government body is in charge of the particular lake. If there is no response within 60 days of issuance, a criminal case can be filed against them.

The meeting ended on a positive note, with a commitment to follow up on this issue.

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