



Environmental



Social

&

Governance Initiatives

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ESG in collaboration with #BengaluruMoving launches
'Better Bus Bengaluru'
3 August 2020

Report of the inaugural webinar

In the backdrop of news that at least 33,000 trees are to be felled in Bengaluru for the proposed eight-lane peripheral ring road, ESG, in collaboration with #BengaluruMoving,¹ has launched a campaign called **"Better Bus Bengaluru"**. The focus of this campaign is to highlight how it is possible to make this sprawling metropolis functional without further destruction of greenery, homes, neighbourhoods and villages, and also to make this city a space of ingenuity moving towards carbon neutral mobility.



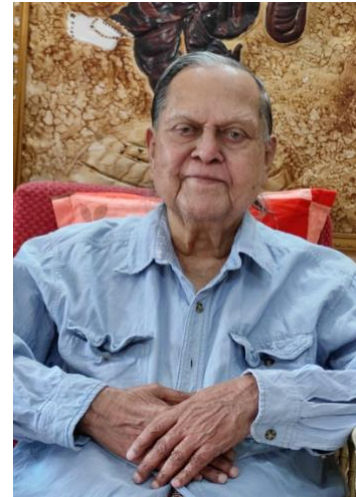
Adjusting to COVID pandemic times, the campaign involves a series of webinars organised to re-visit issues that recall the bygone days when Bengaluru was known as the "Garden City", to one now that is replete with bustling neighbourhoods supported with a "bussing" culture. The inaugural session of the webinar was held on August 3, 2020, 4 - 6 pm on the theme: **"Turning streets green again and making the city healthy for all"**.

Mr. Sethuram Neginhal, IFS (Retd.), who as Tree Officer of Bangalore turned it into a 'green city' during the 1980s, was a key guest with a [special message](#). He launched the webinar series with a passionate message on greening cities. He recalled his time when

¹ For more information about the campaign, please visit: <https://theylacproject.com/bengalurumoving/>



throughout the city there would be tree banks for people to easily acquire saplings. Bengaluru's efforts to green the city were so successful that it became the guiding light for other states to adopt the strategy in greening their urban spaces. Throughout his talk Mr. Neginhal emphasised the importance of educating urban residents, particularly the young, on their role in working to halt the disappearing tree cover and of the need to reclaim cities and regreen them. Mr. Neginhal's pensive words: "Unless public is involved, it's difficult to re-green the city".



Ms. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee of ESG who moderated the webinar, set the tone for a rich discussion highlighting how Bengaluru's massive transformation from a quiet and sylvan city



to the sprawling metropolis was in step with globalisation of India's economy during the early 1990s. As population grew and public mobility demands increased, public transport was underfunded, and thus began the dangerous reliance on private vehicles resulting in the prevailing traffic congestions. Soon, roads were widened and thus began the mass felling of trees, and massive depletion of the city's green cover. This resulted in an increase in heat islands, which along with rising air and noise pollution, and weak attention to build infrastructure for Non-motorised transport (NMT), made walking and cycling an impossibility. Yet, the city appears to have not been alarm enough to sit up and take notice of such extensive deterioration of its environmental qualities. The COVID pandemic, however, has brought focus on the critical importance of making our cities healthy. The task now, she said, is to ensure that out outdoors and indoors are safe, green and healthy for all.

Mr. Pradip Krishen, critically acclaimed film maker and author of the bestseller "Trees of Delhi" focused his attention on the poetic and functional criticality of trees to urban living, a concept wholly lost on 'urban planners' of the day, he rued. Mr. Krishen highlighted how people's outlook





towards trees is changing urban greenery. He said, “People are looking at trees based on their choices, and not the ecology”. Speaking from his experience in Delhi, Mr Krishen said, “Delhi’s trees were initially not chosen based on ecological compatibility to the region’s climatic condition. Trees were chosen based on form, size and uniqueness”. Calling it a fundamental issue, he said that this needs to be addressed given a majority of India’s population will be urban soon.

Ms. Suprabha Seshan, rainforest conservationist who works with Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary and who also is a Trustee of ESG, spoke from her experience of walking across Bengaluru when the city was under lockdown due to the Covid pandemic. Ms. Seshan said,



“This period of 4 months in Bangalore has taught me that most of my work can be done by walking instead of using other means of transport”. Her talk was a nuanced display of all the things one takes for granted when living in cities. As a result we miss out, she said, on “collecting memories of trees, climbers and street dogs” that can provide the rare solace which can be hard to find in our current digital culture.

Ms. Cyprine Odada, a Cycling Consultant to UN-Habitat, urban planner and organiser of Critical Mass, Nairobi, Kenya, highlighted the importance of urban planning and greenery in advancing cycling, walking and other forms of carbon-neutral travel. From her experience of studying and living in Nairobi, Ms. Odada said that the one thing that was not in her urban planning course was “how to make the city-friendly for pedestrians”. The shaping and functionality of a city, according to Ms. Odada, is dependent on how urban planners design cities to interact with pedestrians and cyclists. “There's a misconception that riding bicycles is either for the poor or the very rich. I wanted to use myself,





as a woman, as an example to change these misconceptions and show people that cycling isn't what they think it is". Ms Odada also spoke about how there is a weak understanding among city dwellers of the value trees bring to concrete urban spaces. She said, "The general public feels weak to defend trees".

While on one hand there is a feeling of nonchalance and even disempowerment among the general public to defend trees, on the other, according to Mr. Brijesh Kumar, greening



efforts for the city does not appear to be a priority for urban planning on India. Mr. Brijesh Kumar, now Addl. Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Karnataka Forest Department, should know as he had worked on developing a systematic greening strategy for Bangalore under the guidance of the Karnataka High Court when posted as Chief Conservator of Forests for Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP - Bangalore's civic agency). He observed how holding Urban

Local Bodies as subordinate to the state government can create hindrances to greening efforts of the city: "By the time the budget is passed the monsoon is over! Because of the growing season passing and lack of timely approval from the government we could NOT plant trees. Unfortunately these critical matters are not treated as priority by our government". Mr. Kumar also highlighted the flawed approach adopted to planting trees. He said, "Not every tree is meant for the city". So when plantation drives were carried out in the 1980s and 1990s a number of trees species were introduced that were not suited for Bengaluru.

Ms. Vanaja, Street Vendor in Gandhibazaar, a third-generation vendor selling from under the same old tree and recently elected as member of the Town Vending Committee brought a perspective often found missing in such conversations. She explained what it takes to be running a business under the shade of a large tree. Trees hold more significance over more roads, she said arguing "More trees mean less traffic, shade from sun and rain for the street vendors, the customers, the pedestrians and the cyclists". Ms. Vanaja said, "I had started vending under the same tree under





whose shade three generations of my family has conducted business. But now more people are taking cars, causing traffic congestion, deterring customers and impacting livelihoods of the street vendors”.

There is no better a time than the pandemic to think up ways in which our cities can be made greener, cooler, aesthetically more appealing and also highly functional with minimal carbon footprint. This is a time when it helps to listen to people’s views on how we can regreen our city and reclaim its charm. Be it a tender coconut vendor who satiates the thirst of the weary walker, or a peanut or guava seller who peeps up kids, or the charm of snacking with road side pani puri vendor, such typical living landscapes of Bangalore’s streets need to be revived to make city streets safe to walk, cycle and bus on.

For more details of ESG’s “Better Bus Bengaluru” Campaign, please visit: <https://bit.ly/esg-bbb>

[This report has been prepared by Dr. Sana Huque, Senior Research Associate at ESG. Leo Saldanha, Coordinator, ESG provided inputs.]