

Environmental Social
Justice
&
Governance Initiatives

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Webinar Report: Securing Biodiversity Rich, Healthy, Socially Inclusive and Economically Viable Commons in Bengaluru

Week 5 of “Bengaluru’s Climate Action Plan: Making it Participatory and Inclusive”

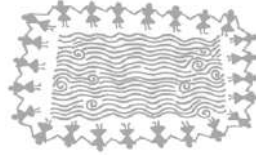
An initiative of Environment Support Group, Bengaluru

Background

Earlier this year, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) voluntarily committed that the metropolis of Bengaluru would take steps to achieve the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement: i.e., to take local action that would help the world contain global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels.

On the occasion of World Water Day, Environment Support Group (ESG) commenced a webinar series to discuss and debate what it takes for Bengaluru to become a climate friendly metropolis. The webinar series is a process of engaging with multiple thematic issues, concerns and imaginaries with leading officials of various State and civic agencies, subject matter experts, youth, representatives of various sectors and residents from diverse sections of the city. And it is also a process of collectivising diverse views and solutions with necessary nuance.

In coming together this way, the steps necessary for effective and just waste management, provisioning adequate water and safe housing for all, ensuring universal public health and public mobility, providing infrastructure that is inclusive, and building energy systems that are earth friendly, along with governance that is decentralised and deeply democratic will be interrogated and pragmatic solutions identified for action. In the process we hope to construct an assemblage of visions of



Namma Bengaluru and how the metropolis can survive with its limited resources for the benefit of present and future generations and the good of the world.

Week 5:



Mr. Anant Hegde Ashisar
Chairman,
Karnataka Biodiversity Board, GoK



Ms. Meera K
Co-founder & Editor,
Citizen Matters



Dr. S. Subramanya
Ornithologist & Wetland Specialist



Dr. Meera Iyer
Convenor, INTACH
Bangalore Chapter



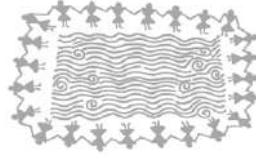
Ms. Lekha K G
Advocate,
Alternative Law Forum



Ms. Satvika Krishnan, Research Associate at ESG, set the tone for the discussion by drawing attention to how healthy, socially inclusive and economically viable commons in Bangalore can be enriched by building their biodiversity value and that it can be a critical aspect of building a resilient climate action strategy for the city. She also highlighted how access to commons can help people to identify and connect with the community at the level of their immediate neighbourhood, as well as the city. She pointed out that in the transformation of

Bangalore from a pensioner's paradise to a heavily built metropolis, the tradition of creating common spaces is being lost. She said:

“During the Mysore maharaja's rule, and also in decades subsequent to India's freedom, networks of roads and commons were so designed and designated that they interacted in interesting ways creating distinctive spaces for sports, music, culture, advancing gardening, building biodiversity, etc.”



The practice of crafting and maintaining of common spaces, as was done before Bangalore became a busy metropolis, needs to be revisited and revived so that the city can become more inclusive while securing itself from vulnerabilities arising from climate change.



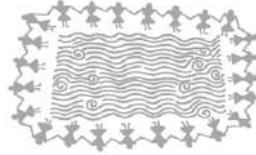
Mr. Anant Hegde Ashihar, Chairman of Karnataka Biodiversity Board, spoke from his experience of being associated with various endeavours surrounding conservation of biodiversity in Karnataka. He said that the *“biodiversity of Bangalore is like an ocean”*. So the question he raised was is it possible to still save the city’s biodiversity or is it too late. He said a movement spearheaded by the citizens of the city is needed urgently and if the need be, recourse to legal action should also be taken to save the biodiversity of

Bangalore. He also spoke of challenges associated with establishing and running Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC). Similarly, the planning departments, despite speaking in favour of adopting Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and other important action plans and models, have failed to implement them on the ground. This failure on the part of BBMP and BMCs clearly indicates that citizens’ have to take up the responsibility of effectively and efficiently running these agencies and make them accountable to the general public.

He gave the example of senior teacher Lalita and her neighbours who created and nurtured a green area in Padmanabhanagar, a neighbourhood in South Bangalore, and transformed it into a biodiversity rich space replete with rare medicinal herbs and many varieties of plants and trees. Later the area was also recognised as a biodiversity heritage site of Bangalore city. This example is contrasted with how the lakes were treated in Davangere in the name of rejuvenating them. The Davangere Municipal Mahanagara Palike completely destroyed the natural lakes in the city by pouring tonnes of concrete in them in the name of lake rejuvenation. In this context he said:

“Lakes have to be kept natural and they have to be left alone. The concerned authorities should be pressurized to work in a way that does justice to the lakes.”

Importantly, Mr. Ashihar stressed on involving educational and cultural institutions in the efforts of saving the natural commons of the city. Therefore, his intervention focused on getting people from various levels - neighbourhoods, wards and institutions - to engage with the administration and participate in maintenance, protection and conservation of biodiversity spaces in Bangalore.



Mr. Ashihar put forward his thoughts in Kannada which was translated by Ms. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee of ESG.

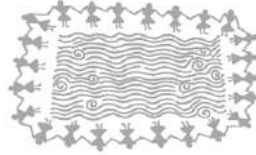


Ms. Meera K, Co-founder & editor, Citizen Matters began her address by thanking ESG for initiating such a dialogue and said that when we talk of commons we focus mostly on lakes, parks, forests etc but she drew attention to the emerging third space of commons which are the malls, spaces like Café Coffee Day, Starbucks etc. Such spaces reminded Ms. Meera of the *somarikattes* or *Ashwatkattes* near temples that enabled conversations and regular gathering and was accessible and affordable to large sections of society in

the past. For Ms. Meera the shopping complex in Jayanagar would be that third space where every evening people would throng the place to meet, hang around besides undertaking the activity of shopping.

Ms. Meera explained how Bengaluru has traversed from having spaces in the form of *somarikattes* to planned layouts, planned parks and mini-forests that represented some form of urban greenery perceptible even 15-20 years ago. Unfortunately, such green spaces continued to fade away from Bengaluru as it expanded into a mega-city and what followed was unplanned growth and development, Ms. Meera ruminated. She highlighted how even now a lot of greenery is found within gated communities, but these are accessible to only an exclusive set of the population. In this backdrop she posed the question: *“how do we ensure that everybody in the city has access to these kinds of commons or third places?”*

According to Ms. Meera not just green areas, but having community spaces in the form of playgrounds, Libraries, performance spaces, museums is very crucial. She drew attention to the lack of museums and theatres in the metropolis that houses over 12 million people and exclaimed that the kind of population Bengaluru has, there is a requirement to imagine and construct more of these community spaces. She believed that such places act as co-learning spaces and must be friendly for women and children to attend or participate. Ms. Meera said that the parks of Bengaluru are however neither great examples of biodiversity nor profess inclusion and cited the example of a guarded environment in Cubbon Park. Another critical thing to think about when we discuss commons for Ms. Meera is the associated sense of well-being that most people miss out on, due to lack of accessibility to commons in their respective areas. She also thanked ESG for pointing out about livelihoods and the informal economy and how a significant proportion of the population depends on informal jobs associated with open spaces like street vending, food carts and so on.



“Commons bring people of the city together. It gives an opportunity to mix people from various communities...In a public park you will find people from a diverse set of communities; people from across caste and class economic status and so on and that is important for us to broaden our minds also. Otherwise we are just limited and living in our own silos”

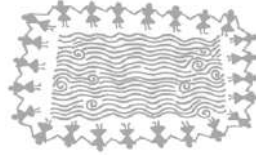
She pointed out the segregation that exists in Bangalore in terms of housing within neighborhoods etc. and remarked that the *“commons have become an uncommon resource in Bengaluru.”* The kind of experience people had during lockdown with parks and animals should be felt at all times by the residents, Ms. Meera felt. She also spoke about how the *Tragedy of Commons* is a common term in economics but here the tragedy is the poor way the commons are being imagined and attended to. She asserted that it is easy to blame the governance agencies and models but at the end of the day, government is a reflection of the people.

“It is we the people who are electing them. Perhaps we failed in education; children don’t learn the linkages between environment, health, economy and also the way we behave and treat our commons...We don’t know how to respect nature.”

Ms. Meera also shed light on how the pressure of real estate and speculative growth is inescapable in Bengaluru and the defining aspect is being able to fix the issues associated with this industry. She stressed that on one hand we witness a huge influx of migrants into the city who continue to live in slums and under tin sheds but on the other hand we continue to build huge housing complexes to symbolize the city’s growth and asked *“Where has this led us really?”* Ms. Meera also brought up the aspect of urban aesthetics; a westernized approach of manicured gardens, less fruit trees but more of fancy palms for elevating sense of design. She explained how this false sense of aesthetics is making the young generation abhor natural elements and prefer substances like tiles over soil etc.

“It’s not like there is no money. But if you look at BBMP’s budget for nature, greenery, for commons, it is very very limited.”

She posed several other questions regarding how we can move forward and solve this burgeoning issue of decreasing urban commons and referred to Elinor Ostrom’s principle of negotiation. She stressed that the Bengaluru Master Plan 2030 must include decentralized planning and she also asserted the importance of having the governance infrastructure that could facilitate this and called for large scale neighborhood participation in participatory decision making in projects that concern their respective areas. We must make sure that the government incentivizes



sustainable solutions, disincentivizes manicured gardens and encourages urban forests and wooded areas and applauds people doing the right thing, she remarked. She drew attention to the fact that the per capita green space per person in the city is just 2 square meters and called it **“ridiculous and unfair”** and called for innovative ideas on opening up spaces for the larger citizenry. She concluded by saying that we can't keep on complaining and that it was high time to think outside the box and fix the issue.

Dr. S. Subramanya, Ornithologist & Wetland Specialist began his intervention saying

“The problem with Bangalore is that there are more lake experts than lakes themselves, fortunately I'm not one of them since I understand lakes through birds”.

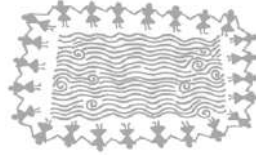


Subramanya's association with birding goes as far back as 1987. From then till 1996, the Birdwatchers Field Club of Bangalore went around Bangalore and surveyed over 130 lakes by identifying and counting every bird present on each lake. Through these experiences he developed an understanding of how birds interact with lakes and how this process is crucial to sustain the biodiversity of any lake. He then spoke about how he is currently fighting the lake development model which is not biodiversity friendly.

Moving on to other aspects he spoke about how lakes found in rural areas of Bengaluru are functional ecosystems that have shallow basins with varying depths unlike most lakes found within the city limits.

“Today we've lost most of the birds that were found in Bengaluru's most famous lakes. Before there used to be tens of thousands of ducks and today we've lost most of them, we don't even get to see 10-100 ducks in a lake in Bangalore.”

He went on to explain that this phenomenon can be attributed to the change in habitat. As before villagers would cultivate on the bunds of the lake, coexisting with the vegetation and silting processes of the lake. Also he added that there was no sewage entering the lakes back then and the lake would be surrounded by a large catchment area. He then explained how the current lake development model is flawed by saying that the present day lake's catchment areas are completely destroyed due to encroachment by apartments and gated communities in Bangalore. He then elaborated how prevailing design demands maximal investment as it



promotes unnecessarily deep desilting of lakes, thus increasing the cost of effort due to transportation of silt elsewhere and dumping costs. So to save costs, recourse is taken to building islands inside lakes hoping to attract birds. But this is not how wetland ecosystems function. As a consequence, such lake development models in Bangalore have contributed to more than 90% loss of biodiversity. This is making it difficult to go back to the structure these lakes had before 1996. Unless the old models of lakes are brought back and the current lakes are restructured, their continuing ruin is certain.

Dr. S Subramanya spoke about his experience being on the committee of a biodiversity park and explained the flawed attempt to convert reserve forests into biodiversity parks:

"Who gives us the right to plant trees in a forest area, like Gulmohar, Cassia, Samania saman and so on?"

Referring to a tree planting program that was hosted by an NGO in Turahalli's forest, he said there is an ardent need to ask our own selves if we can focus on choosing the right models when it comes to sustaining biodiversity and urban spaces in the city.

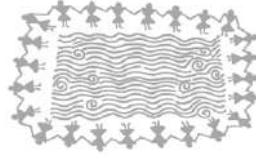
"To sustain biodiversity of a particular area, a forest survey of the area is essential. To remove the invasive vegetation, revive old water ways, build check dams and finally allow nature to take care of itself".



Dr. Meera Iyer, Convenor, INTACH commenced by making a case for the importance of cultural heritage within a city. She referred to the [judgement](#) passed by Chief Justice Raghvendra Singh Chauhan, from the Telangana High Court in a case that involved demolition of a 150-year-old building in Hyderabad; quoting a few lines from the judgement, she said:

"The government has also ignored the fact that the identity and character of a city is defined by its heritage and architecture. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to preserve, conserve and restore the heritage buildings of the cities... While it is important to plan for the future, it is equally important to protect, to preserve and to promote the past."

She expressed her happiness over such sentiments from the judiciary and went on to explain the history of the city which is littered with examples of mistreatment of most aspects of living heritage. She cited the example of Karaga, the city festival

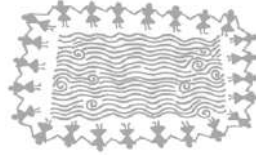


which is attended by thousands of people every year to celebrate the city's gardens. In one of the rituals, the Karaga, the bearer goes through the city travelling from one religious place to another and across houses which according to Dr. Meera is a celebration of sorts for the 'garden-city' that Bengaluru is famously known for. She highlighted the crucial role the *keres* (lakes) play in such religious events, the grandeur of which has been reduced to a swimming pool today because the outlook towards lakes today has changed from places of cultural importance to sites for real estates. She stressed that the idea of cultural heritage within the city is not looked at sufficiently, and where related concepts of sustainability, climate resilience are discussed. The greater part of such discussions are around environmental aspects, societal interventions and economic issues, pointed out by Dr. Meera. The cultural importance within a city is being greatly overlooked and remains unrecognized both by citizens and the state. This is because conservation of heritage sites is not a priority for urban dwellers, who tend to concentrate more on the economic value of assets.

She focused on two specific aspects as to why it is important to consider and care for living and cultural heritage. One is that many heritage spaces can double up both as cultural centers and public spaces and cited the example of the Fort High School, which is a prominent cultural site for a month-long music festival after Ramnavami. She went on to point out that sites like these hold the potential of being multi-functional. She named a few other spaces - Cubbon Pete market, Malavalli market, Johnson market - which are all heritage spaces not just in terms of their architectural existence alone but as multi-functional spaces. She questioned the lack of imagination to use these heritage spaces to organize and host cultural events and convert the space as a cultural hub for the area. To make her point she explained how the Murphy Town market used to have a reading center which was demolished even though it held an important place in the lives of the people around the area.

Another aspect of how heritage is perceived, she noted, is the policy of gating them. For example, some heritage sites, like Bangalore Fort, are fully or partially inaccessible, with mindless rules and timings that prevent an exploration of the historicity of the place. While management problems exist, they are not insurmountable, and there is a persistent need to reclaim these heritage sites as integral to the Bengaluru experience. Dr. Meera believes that heritage should be cared for when talking about climate resilience because it lends the city an identity and character, promotes a sense of belonging to the city.

“Economic development without cultural well-being is going to lead to rootlessness and that’s a bit of a failure. In order for people to feel part of something bigger, in order for people to identify with a city which is



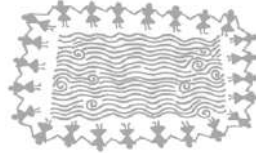
so important for them to be participatory citizens, we need to preserve and promote our cultural heritage.”

In the discussion that followed, Breanne Coelho, an intern at ESG, asked Mr. Subramanya for his views on aeration and bioremediation techniques for restoring lakes and biodiversity. Dr. Subramanya remarked that aeration would have negative implications for biodiversity as the process makes a lot of noise, disturbing water birds which nest and roost in lakes. Instead of aeration or bioremediation, the focus should be on simply allowing clean water into lakes, instead of the sewage which currently flows in.

A question posed to Ms. Meera K was if she could cite instances of tragedies of commons being turned into victories through citizen action in Bangalore. Ms. Meera replied in the affirmative, noting that Bangalore is well known for its active citizen engagement. She highlighted that Puttenahalli lake, Kaikondrahalli lake and several other parks and lakes across the city have been conserved and protected by citizen groups. But in the long-term, she felt that leaving the onus of conservation to ordinary citizens was not feasible, as they must constantly fight against various forces to protect common spaces which are dear to them. “It is high time that the government steps in and takes responsibility for the conservation of these spaces”, she asserted.

Joining in the discussion, Ms. Meera Iyer seconded Meera K’s views on Bangalore’s active culture of citizen engagement, noting that it extends to heritage as well. She mentioned the citizen’s movement of the 1980s which valiantly strived to protect the High Court building in Bengaluru from being demolished. However, she also pointed out that most such conservation efforts in the city are elitist, and don’t really make space for the participation of lower classes.

Making a brief intervention in the webinar, Mr. Vasanth Mysoremath drew light to a proposal by Indian Railways Stations Development Corporation to protect the heritage value of railway stations throughout India, something which he felt was just eyewash for the commodification of precious lands in the midst of cities and the creation of concrete jungles. In response to this, Ms. Meera Iyer mentioned that on behalf of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, she has recently signed an MoU with the South Western Railways to restore 4 century-old railway stations in Bangalore, namely Devanahalli, Doddajala, Avathihalli and at Nandi Hill. For these four stations at least, the intention is to maintain their heritage and not commodify or concretise them. However, at the same time she acknowledged that in many other parts of the country, railway stations and other public monuments are losing their heritage value.



ESG will continue the webinar series “**Bengaluru’s Climate Action Plan: Making it Participatory and Inclusive**” next Monday, 26th April 2021 (6.00-7.30 pm on Zoom) addressing the theme: “**Making Bengaluru Energy Independent**” where we explore the way forward for the metropolis to revamp its built environment, turn to open architecture and net zero energy buildings, so energy dependency is massively reduced. More details on this webinar series can be accessed at www.esgindia.org. A recording of the webinar is accessible here.

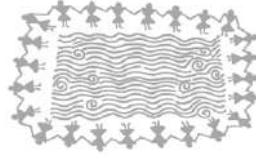
Speaker Profiles

Mr. Anant Hegde Ashisar, Chairman, Karnataka Biodiversity Board, Government of Karnataka.

Mr. Anant Hegde Ashisar is the present chairman of Karnataka Biodiversity Board. By profession, he is a progressive farmer, respected environmentalist and committed to social service. He has more than four decades of experience in working for the cause of conservation of natural resources, both at grass root level and policy advocacy fronts. He was the chairman of *Western Ghats* Task Force (WGTF), constituted by Govt. of Karnataka during 2008-13, as a special purpose committee to design and implement conservation actions in Western Ghats of Karnataka. In this capacity, he initiated govt schemes like, “*Devara Kaadu Samrakshana Yojane*” (Sacred Grove conservation scheme), “*Karavali Hasiru Kavacha Yojane*” (a scheme for arresting beach erosion in sea front) etc. He is also responsible for establishing and empowering grass root level organizations Village Forest Committees (VFCs), School Eco-clubs, tribal groups etc for the cause of forest protection and sustainable development. His lifelong commitment for the cause and contributions are recognized by many civil society felicitations and awards like “Parisara Shri Award” the Environment Award of Karnataka Govt. in 2003.

Ms. Meera K, Co-founder & editor, Citizen Matters

Meera is the co-founder of Citizen Matters, an award-winning digital news outlet that covers critical urban issues, ideas and solutions for South Indian cities. She also helped initiate Open City, an urban data platform, and Co Media Lab, a community newsroom and resource center for Bangalore journalists. Meera was named an Ashoka Fellow in 2016 for her work in community media. She was also selected an International Centre for Journalists Knight Fellow in India in 2017, who reinvented Indian newsrooms' storytelling around critical health, gender and development issues by introducing new data and multimedia elements to their reportage. An experienced professional and entrepreneur with experience in technology, media, open data, she facilitates citizen engagement and social change.



Dr. S. Subramanya, Ornithologist & Wetland Specialist

Dr. S Subramanya is a leading ornithologist and scientist, and was a senior faculty at the University of Agriculture Sciences, Bangalore, from where he retired in 2018. Besides studying various facets of birds, he specialises in studying heronries, wetlands, water birds and threatened birds. He has been part of ESG's PIL effort in W.P. No. 817/2008 & 38401/2014. As part of the latter litigation, he highlighted how Bangalore's loss of wetlands has contributed further in threatening survival of rare species that had flown thousands of kilometres from Siberia, Mongolia and Eurasia over the mighty Himalayas in search of food and habitat. He has drawn concern to the pollution, encroachment and over-engineering of lakes into 'soup bowls' that have destroyed their ecological vitality and diversity. His efforts presented in form of reports have been taken note of by Chief Justice Oka

Dr. Meera Iyer, Convenor, INTACH (Bangalore Chapter)

Dr. Meera Iyer is currently the Convenor of the Bengaluru Chapter of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and also a partner at Carnelian. Meera has a PhD in Forest Ecology from Michigan State University. She has worked extensively on conceptualisation, research, writing and design for interpretation of monuments and protected sites. Her work focuses on raising awareness and appreciation of the city's heritage. As an independent writer and researcher, she has over 200 published articles on heritage to her credit. With varied interests including conservation, forest ecology, heritage, and culture, she takes delight in travelling to historical sites and spearheading preservation activities of natural and built heritage.

[This report has been prepared by Ashwin Lobo, Karthik, Sana Huque and Shrestha Chowdhury, Research Associates, ESG with inputs from Anjali Dalmia, Breanne Coelho and Sneha]