

# CONTESTED GOVERNANCE OF WETLANDS IN BANGALORE

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*Urban commons such as water bodies are increasingly becoming part of various narratives, be it in the popular realm as well as academic. This is spurred on by increased instances of flooding in places like Bangalore and extreme pollution leading to dystopian sights of lakes on fire and towering sheets of foam. Contestation around these commons play out at various levels, be it at the local, involving land and claims around it; jurisdictional, between different government agencies and mind spaces of various groups interested in raising the flag on restoration.*

The water bodies of Bangalore, the lakes or more accurately the irrigation tanks or *keres*, as they are referred to in the vernacular, and associated lands such as the wetlands and drylands have been under increased scrutiny in the last decade and a half. This comes from pressure on land as Bangalore is sought to be transformed into a global city attracting global finance and investments. In this scenario there is high level of contestation over these water bodies and associated lands among various groups who claim stakes in their management. This includes a range of players from those at the local level to those at the city and state levels, both state and non-state actors. As these water bodies come under the focus of various groups including those from civil society, the government has been obliged to set up committees to look into their state, such as the Lakshman Rao committee in the 1980s, the Ramaswamy committee in the 2000s and in more recent times, a legislative committee on encroachment of lake beds. The findings of such committees and their discussion in the public fora have revolved around concepts such as pristine lakes, encroachment, good/bad governance and particular notions of urban commons.

The natural lake perspective which got impetus from the Forest Department involved in managing the *keres* in the 1980s and was taken forward by a part of the scientific community and nature enthusiasts. These included interest groups such as the bird watching community, whose approach and concerns regarding the *keres* were limited to the

ecological aspects of these water bodies. The flora and fauna, especially the bird population became the centre of focus. Over the centuries of their existence, the *keres* took on some of the natural features of a lake and started playing the role of a habitat for various flora and fauna, especially birds. This corresponded with decline in usage of *keres* by local communities due to various factors such as pollution, disappearance of some of the water bodies and in some cases denial of access. Fractures in the land-water relationship due to particular forms of urbanization delineated these water bodies as stand-alone ones and started to be managed in this manner. The *keres* started being narrativised exclusively as habitats of birds and thus everything related to the *keres*, now rechristened lakes, especially maintenance and management, were to revolve around the conservation of the bird population. This exclusive approach of water bodies located in densely populated areas, then led to conflicts between the forest department and various non-naturalist, livelihood groups such as fishermen, washer men and fodder collectors around access and usage.

While the naturalists limited their concern to the bird population and its immediate ecosystem, another group of people, such as academicians and urban planners concerned with the city as a settlement that needed to be macro managed, saw the problems in the *keres* as arising from lack of proper planning. While these water bodies have been locally managed and maintained for a long time, these groups now saw the lack of focus from the authorities who have taken over the management function of these spaces, especially in making plans and implementing them. The planning discourse focused on the notion of how specialized groups of people such as planners and academicians were best equipped to have a macro view of the city and the water bodies that are contained in them.

Another group whose approach was in a way linked to the above mentioned groups was concerned with heritage structures. This group saw the tank system as a heritage from the past that needed to be preserved in that manner. While focusing on the historical importance of these spaces, they sought to protect the *keres* as almost structures that are ideally not to be tampered with, the idea being that innovations of the past could point to strategies of renovation in the present.

What was lost in these discourses and discussions are the intense contestations that surrounded the use of land around these spaces which did not lend themselves easily to these cosy and easy categorizations. The usage of land around these spaces was closely linked to the uses

of the water bodies. As was recorded by BL Rice (1897) in the Mysore gazetteer, these practices went back in time and included the use of various forms of tenure in the maintenance of the *keres*. As was observed by Rice in the 1890s, some communities were responsible for maintaining the bunds that checked the flow of water from the *keres*. In fact he even noted that within this also there was a subdivision of labour and reward in the form of land grants. For example, a particular community maintained the bullocks that were used to ferry the silt used in strengthening the bunds. They were in turn awarded land either in the wetlands or in places close to the *kere*. The wetlands downstream of the *keres* have been used to cultivate rice and sugarcane. Thus there existed a strong link between land and the water body, which is perhaps lost in the discourses to see and protect these as exclusive water bodies with fixed boundaries, although fluid boundaries of this system were once a norm where the water bodies waxed and waned depending on the seasons of the year. This notion is lost in an urban setting where spaces are sought to be fixed with clear demarcations. This idea of the fixedness of the boundaries of these spaces then gave rise to various restoration and protection strategies from groups such as naturalists, urban planners, academicians, activists etc.

In this context, a study was conceived to delve into the contestations around the water bodies and associated lands in Bangalore, with a focus on their governance. The focus of the study was to understand the practices and processes that drove the shaping of these spaces. Thus the attempt was to understand the influence of social practices and processes including politics on the water bodies in the changing setting of Bangalore city. This was a little after the size of the city corporation's jurisdiction increased by more than thrice in 2006. Two locations were chosen in the peripheries of Bangalore city; one which was recently included into the Bruhat Bengalooru Mahanagara Palike's (BBMP, the Bangalore city corporation) jurisdiction and one which is still outside the limits of the BBMP. One was governed by the city administration structure whereas the other was within the administrative boundaries of a Gram Panchayat (GP).

Field visits were undertaken and ethnographic research methods used to collect data. Detailed interviews and group discussions were conducted with a variety of respondents ranging from locals which included land owners, agriculturists, politicians, administrators, livelihood seekers around the water bodies such as shepherds, fishermen etc. Detailed observations were made and recorded using photographs. Land records such as RTCs (Records of Rights, Tenancy

and Crops), land titles, revenue maps were also collected, which along with resources such as online maps gave further insight into the data collected through field work.

The major findings from this study are detailed below under various headings corresponding to the topics covered.

## THE COMMONS DISCOURSE

The discourse surrounding commons such as the lakes or *keres* in Bangalore in the last thirty years or so, i.e., from when forest specific government agencies were entrusted maintenance responsibility, has been that of looking at these spaces as pristine natural spaces which are reservoirs of flora and fauna and thus to be protected from human intervention. Once this approach was taken, the focus was on centralized planning of these spaces as key to their protection and maintenance. This discourse then enabled the fixing of various faults plaguing these spaces, such as diminishing of area, pollution etc on the lack of or improper planning. However the field research pointed out to a more complex situation which included the displacement of local control over resources as well as high level of contestation due to the changing nature of land as a resource in Bangalore.

## PRACTICES OF LAND IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE KERES INCLUDING TENURES

The *kere* system of Bangalore dates back to several centuries, indicated by the inscriptions such as one found near Agara (Rice 1905), and was primarily focused at irrigation functions (Srinivas 2004). Various communities in the village shared tank maintenance tasks. These ranged from de-silting, bund maintenance, canal maintenance (Rice 1897). Memories of these practices still exist in the field sites visited. The practices of such maintenance were linked to a land tenure system called the *inam* system which the respondents shared knowledge and information.

The various *inam* tenure lands identified during the study include service *inams*, *thotti/neergunte inams*, *poojari inams*. Service *inams* included land granted to those who provided services to the village such as hair cutting, disposal of carcasses, playing of the *tamte* (a particular drum) during announcements and special occasions. *Thotti/neergunte inams* enabled those who maintained the *kere* and the canal system to

be granted land in return for their services. *Poojari inams* were given to the priestly class, which in this case was the *Lingayat* community, for their services. Some indication came from the interviews that the 'upper' castes cornered more fertile land such as the wetlands in this process. Thus the influence of the caste system on the land grant process seemed to exist. The maintenance of the tanks was thus closely linked to practices on the land around the tanks.

The tanks and associated lands that exist have been classified into various categories. These include the wetlands or *gadde jameen*. The wetlands exist in the moist region downstream of the tank and below the tank bund. Due to the moist nature of this land water heavy crops such as sugarcane and paddy were cultivated. In the field visit, in only one of the two sites, some part of the wetlands is still cultivated on. The other main categorization of such land is the dry land, which existed near the tank and was normally used for grazing and even cultivation of crops such as ragi. Much of this land was classified as *gomala* land which meant it was common land meant for grazing. Interviews with government officials suggested that the extent of this land was calculated using the number of cattle existing in the corresponding villages. This also meant that a reduction in the number of cattle left this land open to be converted, which is what has happened in the field sites. Some part of the *gomala* land of one of the villages has been converted into various properties such as a jail, police quarters, slum resettlement colonies etc. This in effect has alienated the land from the villagers which contributed to some level of contestation and attempts of the legal variety (such as a PIL filed by some villagers) and claims using religious and political symbols and devices over the land.

The contestations over land visible now in the field sites seem to have increased in the last fifteen years or so. This has very direct linkage with the changing profile of the larger area, i.e., south/south-east Bangalore. The location of the Electronic City in the south and the Information Park in the east where Information Technology companies are located, has fuelled real estate speculation in this area. The field sites have recorded the impact of this on both the wetlands and drylands. Much of the wetlands in one of the field sites has been converted into various gated communities and the other, has been bought up by a local real estate dealer, showing that agriculture as a practice was not seen as viable as real estate. The Reddy community which is a dominant land owning community in this area is seen to be engaged in real estate development through process called joint development where they retain control over the land by developing it jointly with the new owners. This has

also meant that larger real estate groups have had a lesser chance to intervene in the real estate business in this area. Housing societies which have come up in one of the field sites also provide the possible entry of various real estate interests into the area. Instances of conflict between the dominant Reddy groups and other caste groups over land were shared by some of the respondents where takeover of land by the dominant groups at earlier periods are now being countered by 'lower' caste groups such as the Dalits. Political formations such as the Dalit Sangharsh Samithi (DSS) have provided Dalits political as well as logistical support in cases of land contestations. Legislations such as the Prevention of Transfer of Certain Lands Act, 1978, have been invoked by SC/ST groups to reclaim lands which were sold or acquired from them at earlier times.

City level interests in the land issue are seen to be reflected in this area through legislative measures as well as government schemes. These include the Bhoomi project for computerization of land titles to facilitate the maintenance of land records at the district level, which in turn gave access and information to city and state level real estate players, of land holdings in these peripheral areas. The Bangalore Development Authority's Comprehensive Development Plan or Master Plan, which is a comprehensive plan of land use, was also subject to manipulation by interested and influential forces. This was done by influencing the extent of the green belt in these outlying areas. The green belt is meant to be a geographical area around the city limits where there are restrictions on built up area and land development. This model has been influenced by such models in European cities aimed at checking urban sprawl. This has, according to respondents in the field sites, been bent and changed through the pressure of local and city level real estate interests to facilitate real estate development. In one case, where government establishments such as the central jail and police quarters came up on the *gomala* land of a village in the field sites, which was also on the green belt, government orders to overrule green belt regulations were issued. Devices such as Bhoomi and the green belt thus enabled powerful interests in manipulating the development of land.

## FROM KERE TO LAKE

Committees such as the Ramaswamy committee and the more recent Legislative Committee on Encroachment of Lake Beds that were set up to look into encroachment into government land including the *keres* have come up with findings of local encroachments into these spaces.

However the very notion of encroachment seems problematic as the way it has been constructed seems deliberately simplistic. The notion of encroachment can be problematised by the following example from a field site. A board near the *kere* of one of the field sites informs that close to two acres of land have been encroached by local villagers. Locals on the other hand, indicate that the level of the *kere* water started reducing from the last 17-18 years, which meant from the years 1998-99. The catchment of the *kere*, like the rest of Bangalore has an interconnected nature where one *kere* is connected to the other in a chain through canals and wetlands. Upstream of the *kere* here points to the Electronic city, an Information Technology hub and surrounding areas, located in the south of Bangalore. The change in land use which facilitated extensive built up area has affected the catchment of this *kere*. Therefore it would be limiting to be critical of the urge of a local who sees the size and the extent of the *kere* deplete continuously over the years and then stake claim on some of the land. The origins of encroachment in this case need not be local even though the impact is.

Discourses surrounding the *keres* in Bangalore which are seen as pristine natural spaces ignore the historicity and overlook the local effort in the production and maintenance of them. Local maintenance of the *keres* has been in the last few decades or so replaced by centralized maintenance by agencies such as the Forest department and the Lake Development Authority, who through their focus on the flora and fauna of these spaces were responsible in contributing to the natural and pristine lake discourse surrounding these water bodies. The survey, through the Ramaswamy committee, the Legislative Committee on Encroachment of Lake Beds and earlier the Lakshman Rao committee, has come to be used as a tool for reshaping the *keres* and associated lands. The *keres* used to have fairly fluid seasonal boundaries depending on the extent of water in them. This has now changed to reflect a fairly static boundary as surveyed and demarcated by government agencies. What has also contributed to this is the almost continuous discharge of sewerage into the *keres* giving them the appearance of perennial water bodies. This and the fixed boundaries thus broke the continuity that existed between water and land and thus shaped management practices. What was also noticed in the *keres* of the field sites as well as others is the re-engineering of the *kere* structure. The physical form is tampered with by building structures such as the 'ring bund' which as opposed to the traditional bund, runs all around the *kere* thus playing a role in containing it. Dredging of the tank bed to shift the depth from near the bund to the center, has contributed into what is critically referred to as 'water bowl' structures. This structure thus helps to contain the

*kere* and free up the wetlands for development. Fencing of the *keres* and restriction on entry and use has meant that many livelihood users such as fodder collectors are prevented from accessing the *keres*.

Adding to this is the complexity in the institutional overlap in the management of *keres*. In areas outside of the city limits, the size of the *keres* determines who maintains them. *Keres* whose size is below 20 acres is managed by the Gram Panchayat, those between 20 and 40 acres by the Zila Panchayat and those over 40 acres by the Minor Irrigations department. All the *keres* within city corporation (BBMP) limits are being managed by the city corporation. The Lake Development Authority's objective of maintaining *keres* in the district has now been sidelined as they failed to live up to the task and seemed more interested in privatizing the maintenance of the *keres*. Apart from these bodies the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) has the task of managing sewerage which is let out into the *keres*. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) has the job of monitoring pollution in the water bodies. This proliferation of government agencies for the management of the *keres* has meant that there are problems with jurisdiction, responsibilities and coordination. In a recent development, a new authority has been set up with statutory backing, the Karnataka Lake Conservation and Development Authority. However this authority did not exist during the time of this research project and therefore had no impact on the findings.

With the increasingly vocal civil society groups keen on seeing the *keres* as natural lakes and places that needed to be protected from various interests, the discourse in the last two decades (since the Forest department was drafted into maintain the *keres*) has been on seeing these as natural public spaces which must be used for recreation (walking/jogging on the paths on the ring bunds around the *keres*, boating etc), as aesthetic spaces and for the preservation and conservation of flora and fauna. These interests and corresponding voices have meant that the *keres* got converted in popular imagination and policy directives, into lakes. This further meant that those who sought to earn their livelihood from these spaces such as fodder collectors, fishermen were seen as encroachers of a different kind and from whom the lakes needed to be protected.

## **RESETTLING THE CITY IN THE PERIPHERY**

As has been touched upon earlier, common lands such as the *gomala* lands or common grazing lands in the field sites have been transferred

from local uses and users to government and other private users. These include government institutions such as the Bangalore central jail, government staff quarters, private layouts and slum resettlement colonies. This has induced a sense of alienation in the people from the villages in the area and has led to contesting claims on these lands.

In one of the field areas is located the Slum Clearance Board's relocation colony of slum dwellers. This is situated on the gomala lands of one of the villages and has over 250 houses constructed and more being constructed. Members from a slum near city railway station in Gandhinagar in Bangalore were relocated here in 2008. Many of them who are occupied as freelance plumbers, electricians, construction workers etc found this relocation distressing. This dislocated them from the center of the city and from the bus stand located there and thus compromised their mobility. Due to the distance of the relocated colony many of them have to use one-third of their daily wages on transport alone. Access to government hospitals and schools has also come down drastically resulting in increased spending in these areas.

In addition to this, their housing claims have also been disturbed. They have been allocated houses but not the title deeds, which will be handed over only once they complete the payment of monthly installments towards the house, which is expected to take fifteen years. Their names have been removed from the electoral rolls from the Gandhinagar ward in the city and not been added to the rolls here. This has further eroded into their political and voting claims. The relationship that they have built with the local corporators in the Gandhinagar area also comes to naught and they find it difficult to build bonds with the local political class as they are seen to be in contestation over land with the locals.

## CONCLUSION

As the city of Bangalore continues to sprawl and take over neighbouring villages (as was last seen in 2006), the local gets subsumed in the narrative of the metropolis or more recently that of the smart city. Older city areas are also getting reworked in the process by the production of space in manners that serve this macro and centralized vision of the city. The role of urban commons such as the lakes or *keres* of Bangalore are also then being relooked at under this paradigm. Local contestations which have informed the production and re-creation of these spaces are being labeled as illegalities and sought to be dealt with through committees'

informed by particular notions of legality. The legal as a category that is fluid and responsive to situations and contexts on the ground is something that is being overlooked in this process. Master plans that seek to wipe out local contestations labeled as messy, work in tandem with this and seek to create a city of dystopian order.

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