

Urban commons and public interest coalitions: Learning from the restoration of Bangalore's lakes

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Jayaraj Sundaresan finds that public interest coalitions help sustain urban commons and can be an effective antidote to policy practices that favour privatisation.

In the face of current policy paradigms that aim to enhance private capabilities, struggles by organised collective actors to restore and build public commons – shared resources on which social life depends – are becoming more frequent. The role played by collective actors in restoring lakes in Bangalore offers a useful case study to examine how such collectives transform everyday governance outcomes.



During my PhD fieldwork in Bangalore in 2009 and 2010, I came across many public servants frustrated by their helplessness in the face of many private-interest coalitions that inhabit the governance space. For instance, when I sought permission to research the city's lakes, an officer informed me that the government had decided to deny such requests since researchers only identified problems that administrators were already aware of: "What point is there in your telling me things I already know? Further, you'll write about our lakes and create a bad image of Bangalore around the world." Another officer was provoked by my use of the phrase 'lake administration'. "There is no lake administration in Bangalore," he said, "just the land mafia."

These frustrations stem from the fact that Bangalore's lake system has been seriously damaged in recent decades. Hundreds of lakes used to dot the region, of which only a small number survive. Varying in size from less than an acre to hundreds of acres, the lakes are linked across Bangalore's natural valleys through man-made drainage canals. Initially, many of these lakes were developed to irrigate farmlands and as water source to city and the adjacent villages. Many of the lakes were often named after the villages since they were an integral feature of the settlements—located within the regional drainage system, every lake was integrally connected to its inlet and outlet, canal networks, catchment area and edges. Since they are a shared resource on which the city's microclimate and the regional drainage system depend, Bangalore's lakes can be understood as commons at both the local and regional level.

The destruction of Bangalore's lakes has had a significant impact on the urban socio-ecology—serious flooding, rising mercury levels and fast-depleting ground water are the obvious consequences. Moreover, since Bangalore's

human settlements have developed in response to its hydrological profile – that is, the city’s topography and drainage valleys – the lakes have long played an important role in the community life of local residents and have given rise to particular socio-cultural and ritualistic elements in associated village settlements. Their gradual destruction has disrupted not only some of these local social processes, but also the urban ecology at a regional scale.

Private interest networks have long captured many governance functions in Bangalore, thereby frustrating public interest-oriented officers like the ones quoted above. But emergent, informal network coalitions concerned with the public interest outcomes are proving effective in restoring public commons in Bangalore, particularly the lakes.

Both these networks consist of members from within and outside government and operate using vernacular as well as formal modes of governance. However there is a stark difference in the outcome of their activities: rather than produce or sustain urban commons in Bangalore, the private interest networks have filled or sold the lakes for a profit, earmarked them for private residential development in city master plans, or leased the lakes to corporate firms in the name of maintenance. Conversely, public interest coalitions manage to contest such privatising tendencies in the master plan using legal and political means: informal networks develop neighbourhood vigil groups, run public awareness campaigns, raise money to restore the land to lakes, and closely engage with and monitor the planning and design of the restoration. (A detailed analysis of these public interest coalitions appears in [the article “Planning as commoning” in the Economic and Political Weekly.](#))

[Successful restoration projects](#) – for example, the Kaikondanahalli, Puttenahalli and Mestripalya lakes and the Sankey Tank – demonstrate the efficacy of public-private coalitions that seek to restore, rather than privatise, urban public commons. Interestingly, these informal coalitions create opportunities for many planning and public administration officials, who earlier expressed collective helplessness, to participate in public interest solidarity networks, engage in public interest urban development and thus reclaim their role in governance.

The usual tendency in Indian academic literature is to dismiss such collaborative efforts to restore commons as a form of elite and middle-class activism. However, that is a narrow reading of these efforts, especially since public spaces such as Bangalore’s lakes are frequented by all social groups, and provide a welcome breathing space, especially to those who live in more crowded areas in the city. Moreover, flooding in Bangalore primarily affects low lying areas that are inhabited by the city’s poor, more than the rich or middle class. In a city that faces acute water shortages and where water bodies support many forms of local livelihoods, class analysis seems an inadequate way of understanding activism. More robust analytical frameworks are certainly called for in Bangalore’s case.

What is clear, however, is that Bangalore’s public interest coalitions are a testament to the power of organised, collective actors fighting for public interest outcomes in the management of urban commons. Practices of such problem-based coalitions provide valuable lessons to improve the governance of public commons instead of resorting to policy paradigms that promote private capabilities at the cost of the public.

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