

Course Name: An Introduction To Urban Ecological Heritage: Theories and Applications

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Example 2: The Puttenahalli Lake

Puttenahalli, one of the smallest lakes in Bangalore, is situated at the southern part of the city. The lake is about 13 acres in size and she thrives of rainwater and excess treated water from an apartment complex nearby. The lake was on the brink of extinction as she, like many other lakes of the city, was turned into a cesspool of garbage and sewage. But today, she is home to over 450 trees, more than 80 species of birds, butterflies, fish, crabs, water snakes and insects. What's the story?

This is the building where it all started. Here leaves the chairperson of Puttenahalli Neighbourhood Lake Improvement Trust, Usha Rajagopalan. When she first came here, she saw that the lake was drying. It was shrinking with sills and pollutants. Then she launched a campaign in 2008 to restore the lake.

Well, it started basically because of a desire not to see this lake dry up. Bangalore used to be called Kalyana Nagara, you know, city of lake, tanks. And with rapid urbanization, haphazard urbanization, tanks were the easiest to be built upon. You know, lakes, especially when livelihood was no longer dependent on water, like earlier the tanks were built, basically they were irrigation tanks. And the area under cultivation reduced.

So obviously the tanks became redundant. So very many lakes have lost their identity, their presence completely because they are now either the bus station or games village or golf course, things like that.

In June 2010, the PNLIT was registered under the Indian Trust Act 1882 to assist BBMP in rejuvenation initiatives and maintenance of the Puttenahalli lake. PNLIT specifically took over maintenance plans and initiatives as the BBMP fell short of post-rejuvenation maintenance of the lake. In May 2011, the BBMP formally handed over the maintenance of Puttenahalli lake to PNLIT, who made the maintenance expenses such as upkeeping the garden and walking trail, salary of the security guards, primarily through voluntary donations from the locality, and CSR; ie, Corporate Social Responsibility funds. Tree plantation program is arranged by the Trust at regular intervals to introduce children with gardening and cleaning the lake areas.

This is the palm tree who has seen it all. The palm tree is sitting over the BBMP maid island over the lake. The palm tree has seen how since 2008 the lake has rejuvenated, how the flora and fauna have grown and enriched the space.

During 2010 and the years that followed, residents were invited to plant trees, provide suggestions on lake maintenance, and donate to the cause of the involvement. The people responded to it under the PNLIT's advocacy for community responsibility. In 2012 and 13, PNLIT organized a program for the local children regarding plantation of trees around the lake.

So that in a sense actually shows two things. One is how much of an effort we have to take continuously to make the community contribute to the welfare of the lake, either with the money or with the volunteerism. Secondly, it shows that the interest in the neighborhood is growing. That is why they continue to donate money to the lake.

The rejuvenation of this lake happened, started sometime in 2008-2009, but I started coming here into this lake around 2014 or so. What happened was the Trust conducts all these community events. So I started attending these events and then in the year 2014, the Trust organized a Kere Hapa, which is a lake festival.

So I volunteered for the Kere Hapa. The next year, Usha Rajagopalan, the chairperson of the Trust, she invited me to join the Trust. During the initial stage, PNLIT created a connection to the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage board in order to ensure that sewage doesn't enter the lake. In 2011, BWSSB began laying underground drains near the lake and PNLIT members succeeded in diverting the drainage system to make the lake sewage-free. Karnataka Pollution Control Board approved a proposal to get excess treated water from a nearby sewage treatment plant to fill the lake with clean water.

The forthcoming plans of the PNLIT include the Development of an arboretum that accommodates native species of plants. Exercise place and playground for children, including children with disabilities And a composting unit at a corner of the garden But what are the real costs?

The slums beside the lake have been an issue for PNLIT, especially because the slum area is expanding. There are about 405 houses that sit close to the walking track of the lake and also above the underground drainage channels. During the shifting of underground sewage pipelines, tensions developed between BWSSB, PNLIT and slum dwellers who were asked to move to other areas. BWSSB constructed the pipelines towards the water site and bypassed the slum areas as a final solution.

So one of the biggest issues I already mentioned about the illegal settlement, and it began with some 30-40 houses way back in 2010. They were not really dependent on the lake for

livelihood. It was because the lake was in such a bad shape, they just moved in and their numbers started growing.

One side of the lake is open, we cannot secure that place because of encroachment on that side. So people come in, even late in the evening or in the night, and in the morning we find broken bottles along the path. And rehabilitating this encroachment is a priority.

In 2014, the BBMP allocated some funds to the slum board with the support of PNLIT and the slum board arranged for temporary housing for the slum dwellers. In 2015, the slum dwellers were called over to the allocated area, but they didn't turn up. Instead, they filed a petition in the High Court rejecting the slum board housing as it was located at distance from their work areas in the city. The petition was dismissed following a decision that the encroachers would not be granted any land. It created a huge blow on the slum dwellers.

After that, the PNLIT launched a petition on the relocation of slum dwellers and the last two hearings generated an order of eviction from around three lakes including Puttenahalli.

The Uppaloka Eta, with this assistance, we got revenue department allocated two and a half acres of land in a place called Betadasanapura, about 8 kilometers from here. They agreed to shift when they are given alternate housing. So After obtaining consent letter from each of them, BBMP allocated funds to the slum board and slum board built temporary housing to begin with. This was in 2014. In 2015, February, when they went to call them over to allocate the shed numbers, they didn't turn up. What they did was to file a petition in the High Court, rejecting the slum board housing and saying that they wanted individual plots of land. Now, I believe there is an order that encroachers will not be given land. If at all, notified slums will be given the slum board housing. But because of our intervention, this is not a notified slum, because of our intervention, we got them the housing and after that they rejected it and that was a big blow.

Now, for two years we went from one department to the other because the judgement had said within 12 weeks the authorities had to take a decision on the slum dwellers' representation whether to give them land or not. And they didn't take the decision. So, two years later, that is last year, March, we filed a petition saying that the government has not acted on the early judgement. And last two-three hearings have been very, very hopeful for us that the court had ordered for eviction of encroachments in two lakes called Subrahmanipura and Begur. And they have also included Puttenahalli as the third lake.

On the 20th of July, the court had given six weeks for encroachments to be removed from Subrahmanipura and Begur. So, I am hoping that our lake will also be taken up. The next hearing is on 1st of September.

The lake-based initiatives of PNILIT, brought the neighbourhood citizens together. But are all the residents included? Are all the communities involved? Are all the children encouraged to plant trees? The social-ecological space which provides an environmental support, more specifically an environmental refuge to the individuals and communities around the lake has stayed apart from a large section of the residents living by the lake. Puttenahalli observes and interrogates about their rights and ties to the space.