



**NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**PERSPECTIVES IN
INDIAN DEVELOPMENT**

**New Series
39**

**Unruly Commons: Contestations around
Sampangi Lake in Bangalore**

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**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2014**



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Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN :

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com



Unruly Commons: Contestations around Sampangi Lake in Bangalore

**Hita Unnikrishnan
Harini Nagendra**

Abstract

Common pool resources (such as lakes and green spaces) are particularly contested in the urban context, representing unruly environments. Lakes in Bangalore provide a particularly illustrative example of such messiness in environment, social use and in governance. These lakes, initially created by local communities to support agricultural and domestic uses, find their role transformed in the urban context. They support a highly diverse set of user groups often with conflicting interests, deriving benefit from different consumptive and non-consumptive characteristics of the resource. This heterogeneity creates a landscape of contestation where different stakeholders seek to maximize stakes through selectively highlighting different positive traits of the resource. Using an example of a “lost lake”, Sampangi Lake within Bangalore, this paper draws attention to landscape changes around the lake as depicted in maps between 1884 and the present day and relates changes in and around the lake with archival data between 1883 and 1935. These documents demonstrate how environmental characteristics of the lake such as the availability of water, location of siltation and the seasonality of the lake generated different challenges and opportunities for user groups such as gardeners, polo players and brewery owners, resulting in contestations that needed resolution by the colonial government of Mysore. These disagreements are representative of deeper

underlying conflicts between commons as recreational resources, and as provisioning sources that are essential for local livelihoods. Such conflicts continue to resonate in Bangalore's lakes even today, though with a different cultural manifestation and with changes in governance. The paper ends with a reflection on how resolution of these differences for governance provides a reflection of unequal power relations between different traditional and "modern" user groups.

1. Introduction

Roughly about the sixteenth century onwards, the south Indian city of Bangalore witnessed surges of migration from the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu of a class of gardeners—the *Vanhikula Kshatriyas*.¹ While they would ultimately gain fame for their efforts in landscaping the prominent parks of the city, these people also gave rise to the annual nine-day celebration—the Karaga festival in the city (S. Srinivas, 1999). Celebrated till the present day, the famous Karaga festival relies on a set of water bodies within the city, three of which no longer remain part of the landscape.² This study revolves around one of these lost lakes—the Sampangi Lake, which carries with it a heritage of heterogeneity, conflicts and politically oriented resolutions between different groups of people each of whom viewed the resource through different and often unique perspectives.

The city of Bangalore is one of India's fastest growing metropolises. It also goes by the names of "Garden City" and the "City of Lakes" owing to the fact that it was planned to include numerous gardens and tanks by both its founders and successive generations of rulers.^{3,4} These

¹ S. Srinivas, (1999). 'Hot Bodies and Cooling Substances Rituals of Sport in a Science City'. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 23(1), 24–40.

² S. Srinivas, (2004). *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in India's High-tech City*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, pp. 43–51.

³ H.S. Sudhira, T.V. Ramachandra, & M.H. Subrahmanya, (2007). 'Bangalore'. *Cities*, 24(5), 379–390.

⁴ T.V. Annaswamy, (2003). *Bangalore to Bengaluru: Urban History of Bangalore From the Pre-historic Period to the End of the 18th Century*. Bangalore: Vengadam Publications.

lakes as the tanks have come to be called today face numerous threats in the form of encroachments and pollution in the form of sewage and industrial effluents.⁵ In a city that faces a severe water crisis, this decline of surface water sources only exacerbates the problem and could pose a risk to the future sustainability of the city (H.S. Sudhira, T.V. Ramchandra and M.H. Subrahmanya 2007; T.V. Annaswamy 2003).

The tanks or lakes in the city of Bangalore date back to centuries and were built with a view to support the once predominantly agricultural lifestyle.⁶ Evidence is present for their historical significance in the form of inscription stones that have been found around them. For example, an inscription found near the Agara Lake dating back to AD 870 reads: “Be it well. In the victorious year of the Srirajya, under Satyavakya Permmadi’s Kaliyuga Hanuman, Nagattara - the Irvvuliyur Odeya, Irugamayya’s son Sirimayya, fixed sluices to the two tanks, had the Eastern tank built and obtained the ‘bittuvatta’ of the three tanks....”⁷ The lakes of the city are examples of co-produced social ecological systems and form an interconnected system over the three watersheds of the city. They were engineered so as to provide maximum water retention to a city otherwise prone to water scarcity.⁸

Alongside rural lifestyles, the city also witnessed rapid urbanization that accelerated with the establishment of a British Cantonment in the city from 1809.⁹ The Crown was the sole decision maker in matters of the city between 1809 and 1881. However, in 1881 the state of Mysore to which the city belonged was classified as an “assigned tract” to be administered by the Wodeyar Dynasty (B.L. Rice, 1905). Thus

⁵ Krishna Gowda and M.V. Sridhara, (2007). ‘Conservation of Tanks/Lakes in the Bangalore Metropolitan Area. Management of Environmental Quality: *An International Journal*, 18 (2), 137–51.

⁶ H. Nagendra, (2010, September). ‘Maps, lakes and citizens’. In *Seminar India* (Vol. 613, pp. 19–23).

⁷ B.L. Rice, (1905). *Epigraphica Carnatica volume IX: Inscriptions in the Bangalore District*. Mysore Government Central Press, Bangalore.

⁸ H.S. Sudhira, T.V. Ramachandra & M.H. Subrahmanya, (2007). ‘Bangalore’. *Cities*, 24(5), 379–390.

⁹ N.P. Gist, (1956). ‘Ecology of Bangalore, India: An East-West Comparison’, *Social Forces*, 35, 356.

two powers were vested with administrative rights over the city until Indian Independence in 1947. This created an interesting situation especially in the context of common pool resources such as the lakes. Thus these tanks also evolved with a rich history in terms of interactions between these strongholds of power as well as with local communities who depended on the water bodies for various purposes.

Lakes in the city today also form urban commons with access and appropriations from them managed by local communities, yet they are state-owned. As a result, they support often diverse and heterogeneous user groups such as washermen or fishing communities, each with different perceptions and needs with respect to the resource.^{10,11,12} The ecology of these lakes has therefore been shaped in response to different social conceptions and the needs of different groups of actors. Given that the resources are centrally owned and appropriated by the community, the preference for including or excluding certain groups of actors is unique to that resource and is also a specific process that is impacted by the process of urbanization. Consequently, within the same landscape, some lakes still support a great diversity of uses as urban commons, others cater to some specific ecosystem services and some others have lost their character as a water body, and instead have been converted into malls, sports stadiums or bus shelters.¹³ As a developing nation, it may seem like this is a process unique to our present times, yet as history bears witness, similar challenges to manage complex lake ecosystems have existed since the colonial period. It is also highly interesting to observe that the measures adopted to deal with these challenges draw strong parallels with modern decision making.

¹⁰ R. D'Souza, & H. Nagendra, (2011). 'Changes in public commons as a consequence of urbanization: The Agara lake in Bangalore, India'. *Environmental management*, 47(5), 840–850.

¹¹ H.S. Sudhira, T.V. Ramachandra, & M.H. Subrahmanya, (2007). 'Bangalore'. *Cities*, 24(5), 379–390.

¹² J. Sundaresan, (2011). 'Planning as commoning: Transformation of a Bangalore lake'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 46(50), 71.

¹³ Krishna, Gowda and M.V. Sridhara, (2007). 'Conservation of Tanks/ Lakes in the Bangalore Metropolitan Area. Management of Environmental Quality', *An International Journal*, 18 (2), 137–51.



Using the Sampangi Lake as a case study, this paper attempts to demonstrate the historically unruly nature of the lake commons and conflicts arising from the heterogeneity of actors who are part of the landscape. We also attempt to document the official responses to conflicts and demonstrate the parallels with those adopted in the contemporary time.

2. Study Area: Sampangi Lake

The rapidly expanding city of Bangalore comprises of the city core which includes the erstwhile colonial boundaries of the city, the middle zone and a recently incorporated peripheral zone. The core of the city as it existed in the colonial period comprised of two distinct zones—the British Military Cantonment and the Pettah or the larger city. The Sampangi Lake is located central to both the Cantonment and the City and it was this centrally placed location that played a role in many of the debates that raged around the lake. The Government Proceedings of the State of Mysore No. 16404-5/LF 233.92, dated 6th April 1895 notes:

The central position of the bed of the Sampangi Tank with the city on one side and the Civil and Military Station on the other and especially its close proximity to the Maternity and St. Martha's Hospital on one side and to the road leading from the crossing of the South Eastern Corner of Cubbon Park to the Lalbagh which is largely frequented by visitors to the latter places and to inhabited houses...

These words hold true for this lake even today by virtue of its position within the core of the city. The lake bed is situated to the eastern edge of the city, very close to the famous Dharmaraja Temple. Another of the city's important landmarks, the Cubbon Park, is also situated to the north of the lake bed. This central location is also partly responsible for a change in character from a water body to an indoor sports stadium.

3. Methods

By documenting the colonial history of the Sampangi Lake, this paper attempts to chronicle the heterogeneity of people dependent upon the lake as well as present details of a saga of conflicts that culminated with the water body transforming into a sports stadium leaving behind a small pool of water to support the annual Karaga festival. In order to do this, we combine modern geospatial methods with information from archival sources, Survey of India toposheets, published in the years 1885, 1935 and 1973 along with recent images obtained from Google Earth. These images and toposheets have been analysed on a Geographic Information System (GIS) platform to create maps that document changes in the landscape between these different time periods. The skeletal information provided by these maps is then supplemented with government records archived in the Karnataka State Archives located within the city, between the years 1893 and 1935. This method enables us to both visualize the changes in the landscape between different temporal periods, while at the same time allowing us to get a detailed glimpse into everyday conflicts and resolutions that were part of it. At the same time, by documenting different responses to management challenges, we can draw implications for contemporary decision making around urban commons.

4. Results and Discussion

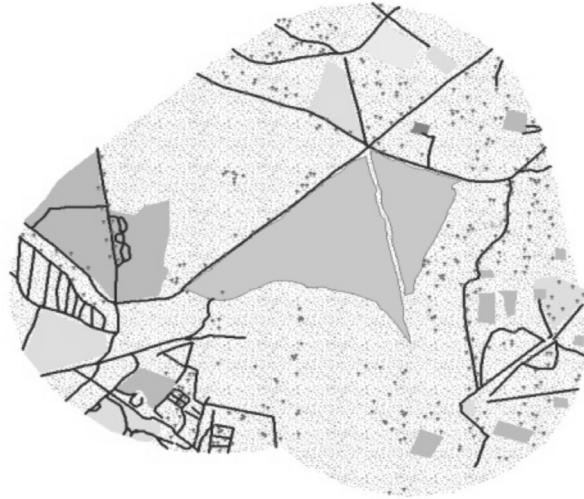
4.1: *Change as documented in maps*

Figures 1–4 document the transformation that this landscape has undergone over time between 1885 and 2013.

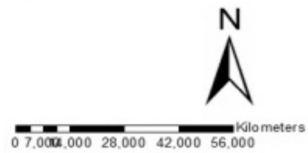
In 1885, the lake was a fairly large water body with large open spaces around it. Two hospitals, the St. Marthas and the Maternity existed in close proximity to this lake and have persisted till the present day. A brewery was present towards the northeastern arc of this lake. A few residential areas and educational institutions formed the major built portion of the landscape. Cultural elements such as a cemetery and places of worship were also present.



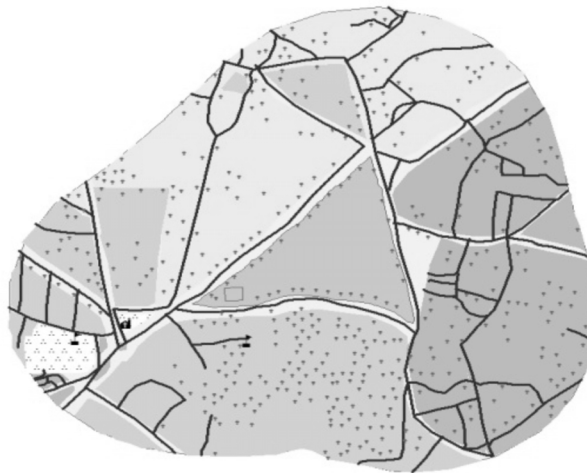
Sampangi and its surroundings - 1885



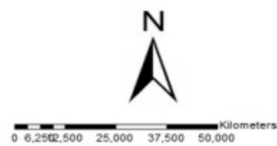
- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| Sampangi Lake | Tennis Court |
| Open land | Settlements |
| Public buildings | Trees |
| Brewery | Roads |



Sampangi and its surroundings - 1935

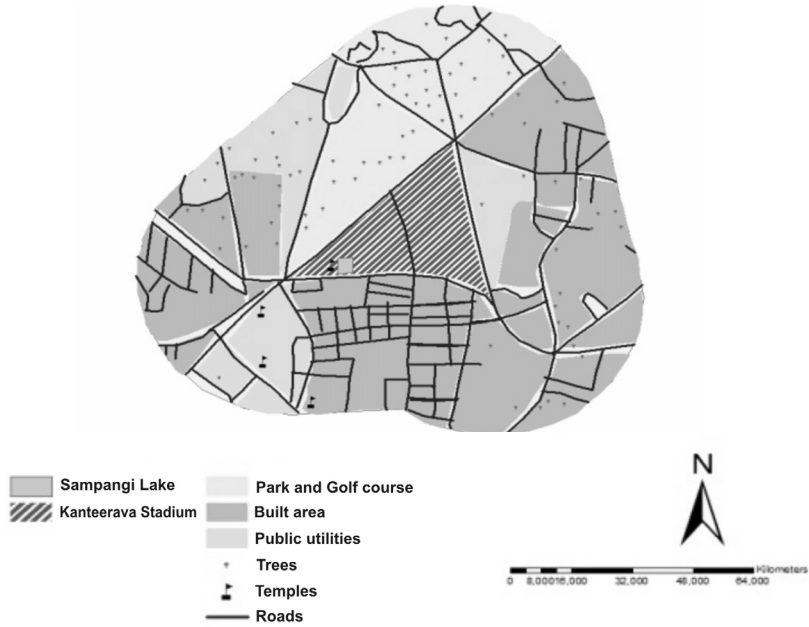


- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| Sampangi Lake | Fallow land |
| Park and Golf Courses | Trees |
| Religious_1043 | Churches |
| Public utilities | Temples |
| Residential area | Roads |

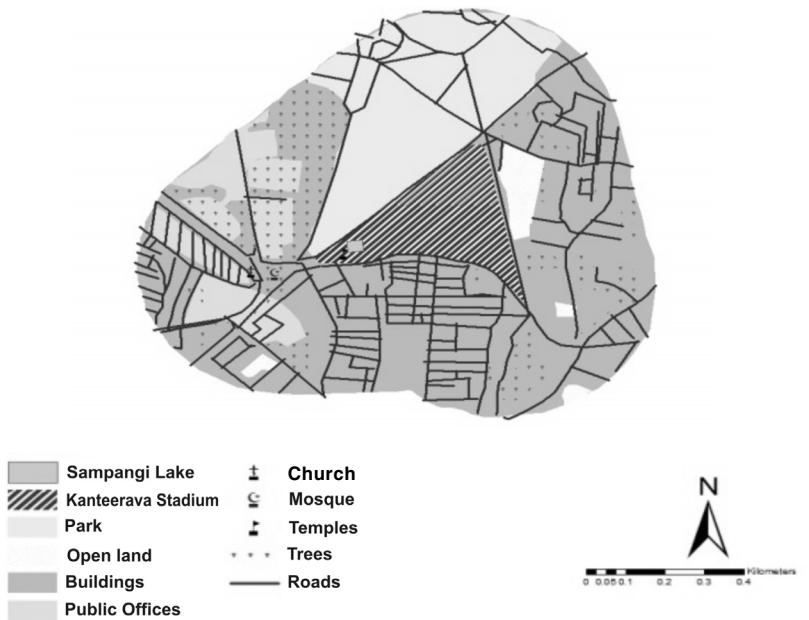




Sampangi and its surroundings - 1973



Sampangi and its surroundings - 2014



Figures 1–4: Sampangi Lake in 1884, 1933, 1975 and 2014



After a gap of about fifty years, in 1935, we observe an increased connectivity in the form of roads and a larger portion of the area being urbanized into residential localities and public amenities. The lake itself seems to have been drained and converted into a playground while the area immediately surrounding it on the western side developed into a golf course as well as a prominent park. A small portion of the lake seems to have been fenced off and a temple built next to it. It is in this portion that the annual Karaga festivities occur to this day. Tree cover also seems to have drastically reduced in these intervening years.

Post Indian independence and in 1973, the urban cover has increased largely on a commercial basis and it now becomes difficult to differentiate between residential and commercial spaces. The lake bed except for the small pool has been transformed into the Kanteerava Indoor Stadium. Tree cover has declined further in this gap.

Between 1973 and 2013, the area has undergone further urbanization and has become a commercial hub of the city. During this period the Kanteerava Stadium has also undergone extensive renovation. Tree cover mostly exists in small pockets represented by the park and other institutions around the landscape.

4.2. Sampangi Tank in the pages of history

Srinivas (2001) has to some extent provided a glimpse of the changing landscape around Sampangi Tank in her treatise on the annual Karaga festival. According to her, the Sampangi Tank as in the late 1870s was an area known for its horticultural achievements.¹⁴ The areas to the north and south were famous for gardens carefully cultivated by the Vanhikula Kshatriyas using water from numerous wells around the lake that remained productive due to recharge from the nearby water bodies (*ibid*). These communities were also agriculturists who would supply vegetables to the city market, even including non-indigenous varieties such as the cauliflowers and grapes once the British Cantonment came to be established within the city (*ibid*). Around 1957,

¹⁴ S. Srinivas, (2004). *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in India's High-tech City*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, p. 57.

cattle fairs were reported to have been held in the tank bed, suggesting at least a partial drying up of the lake.^{15,16} The area around the lake also seems to have been drastically transformed into housing colonies or government offices in this period. All these studies agree with the observations made in the maps depicted in Figures 1–4. It also appears that between 1884 and 1935, there was a sweeping change in the area surrounding the lake and therefore this period in history was scrutinized using archival documents.

4.3. Evidence from archival documents

The drastic change of landscape between 1884 and 1935 was investigated using archival documents which were available in detail between 1884 and 1912 as this period seemed to mark intensive debate regarding the status and utility of the lake. Analysis of documents reveals an arena of actors with different power equations all seeking to maximize their stakes in the resource. We learn that the lake had two feeder channels that fed a series of neighbouring tanks (Millers Tanks I, II and III) that in turn provided water to the Civil and Military Station up to 1896, when it started receiving water from the Hesaraghatta reservoir. The earliest correspondence on this lake involved a dispute in 1883 between the Civil and Military Station regarding the supply of water to the adjacent tank from these feeder channels (File number 354 of 1909, Municipal). There is no documentation, however, available on how this debate was resolved. In the year 1884, two significant resolutions were passed that prohibited the deepening of the tank bed. Order No. 15401/LJ 205–93 dated 16.03.1884 prohibited the burning of bricks in the bed of Sampangi Tank on sanitary grounds. Order No. 926–26^{1/2}/LJ 233–92 stated that “the deepening of the bed i.e., the making of raw bricks be stopped. There is not much use in deepening the bed as the passages for supply of water to the tank had been blocked up”. These orders were passed through the Senior Surgeon and Sanitary Commissioner who was of the opinion that “the burning

¹⁵ S. Srinivas, (2004). *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in India's High-tech City*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, p. 59.

¹⁶ K.N. Venkatarayappa, (1957). ‘Bangalore (A Socio-Ecological Study)’, *Sociological Series No. 6*, Bombay: University of Bombay Publications.

of bricks in the locality is unobjectionable provided all useless debris is cleaned up and the place is not fouled”. Based on this, the board again resolved that the making and burning of bricks may be allowed in the bed of Sampangi Tank.

Following this event, a representation from Mr. Lee, the Sanitation Engineer stated that

- a) “It is not desirable or necessary to store any water in the tank.
- b) Its feeders have been cut off and
- c) The present beautifully levelled tank bed should not be allowed to be dug into unsightly pits to be hereafter used as latrines.”

The petition also drew support from an earlier ruling dated 2nd July 1892, which observed that “the sinking of wells or any other extensive excavation for any purpose whatever are prohibited within an area which includes the Sampigehalli Tank bed”. What this meant for the aforementioned farmers and horticulturists, we may never know; however this ruling certainly meant that brick making which derived mud from that tank bed would definitely be severely impacted.

The response from the President of the Municipal Council to this second petition stated that “Mr. Lee’s fears as to the bed of the Sampangi Tank being converted into rubbish pits were unfounded, but that as the Hesaraghatta Scheme would bring in a plentiful supply of water, the deepening of the bed might be stopped.”

It is to be noted here that these concerns were representative of a broader outlook of the aesthetic qualities of the resource being perceived as more important than their traditional or utilitarian ones. Also this representation came at a time when plans were already afoot regarding water supply from another source to both the city and the cantonment. This brings to mind another contemporary trope that runs across all government decisions even in the contemporary period—that of giving precedence to the finding and implementing of technical solutions to perceived problems with lake management and governance. In this case, the issue was of providing adequate water

to both the cantonment and the city and as we will see further, this is a recurrent theme that occurred in many dealings with the lake. Coming to the events occurring in the late 1800s around the lake in question, the Government Proceedings dated 6th April 1895 No. 16405-5/LF 233.92 further went on to state that “The Government observes that the Sampigehalli tank bed is included in the areas prescribed by the Chief Commissioner’s Notification No. 188 dated 24 October 1872 within which all lands are reserved for public purposes and the erection of buildings and excavations without previous sanction of the Government are strictly prohibited.” Further, the notification also goes on to declare that “the tacit acquiescence of the Government in the leasing out of the tank bed for grazing purposes by the municipality does not imply permission to injure and disfigure the tank bed by digging holes and pits”. This statement is also reflective of larger disputes regarding the use of the tank bed of this seasonal lake. While the above grounds for petition clearly value the aesthetic, we also observe an implicit criticism of the use of the tank bed for grazing by local communities. Arguments were also made regarding the feasibility of deepening the tank further due to fear of inundation of the bungalows of “Major Wahab, Dr. Gay and the Campbells” by this act.

It is also interesting to note within this correspondence that the deepening of the tank bed was sanctioned at a time of scarcity. In a letter from the President of the City Municipal Council to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Mysore, we read that

During the scarcity of 1891–92, Government sanctioned the deepening of the bed of the Sampangi Tank as relief work but when sanction was granted, the season of scarcity had passed. Also, then the scheme of water supply had not matured and so it was felt necessary to deepen the bed as the springs of wells in the neighbourhood depended on the water in the tank.

Despite these arguments, on the 5th of April, 1895, Order No. 16404–5/LF 233–92 by B.V. Narasimmiyengar, the then General Secretary of the Government of Mysore directed that the municipality should not permit the excavation of earth in the bed or its injury and disfigurement, both terms laying emphasis on the aesthetic nature of

the lake. Emphasis also is present on the nature of technical solutions that found its way into famine relief and water supply. We do not observe any correspondence regarding how communities themselves managed their resources in these scarce times.

The next cycle of events begin in 1903 with the routine inspection of the Dewan of Mysore in Mysore and Bangalore towns. File No. 1084071 (1–2) of 1903 documents papers relating to the removal of Lantana and filling in of the pools in the City of Bangalore and Chamaarajnar. In his inspection, the Dewan, Sir P.N. Krishnamurti says

I noticed the growth of Lantana and a number of pools where water stagnates for months together. I was not surprised that the complaints I heard now and then about malaria prevailing in the locality were well founded. The President should at once take steps for filling up the pools and for the removal of rank vegetation in the city.

Around the same time correspondence was in place regarding the merits of deepening channels to the tank. File No. 354 of 1909 (Municipal) records that in 1903, owners of lands below the tank bed had complained that the feeder channel of the tank had been diverted in many cases during its course thereby depriving the tank of its full supply of water. These cultivators had complained that the tank had filled that year having had no supply of water during the previous twenty years and that the overseer was cutting the bund and emptying the tank “to their ruination”. The petition which was signed by over fifty members of the community read as follows:

“To Krishnamurthi B.L., K.C.I. E. , Dewan of Mysore, Bangalore,
28 April, 1904

Most Respected Sir,

The humble petition of the undersigned, most respectfully showeth:

That your honor’s petitioners are the owners and cultivators of lands situated on both sides of the Sampigehalli Tank Bangalore.

The difficulties which your honor's petitioners have been experiencing for the last 20 years for want of water for the maintenance of crops owing to the tank being deprived of its various supplies are such as cannot be described in words.

The petitioners bring to your honor's kind notice that the main source from which the Tank is fed has been diverted in different directions as specified in the Plan herewith submitted (not there in the file), thus depriving the Tank of its feed on which your petitioners fully depend for their maintenance.

The various diversions referred to are as follows:-

- A. Turned
- B. To No. 1 Millers Tank
- C. to D...Channel closed
- E.To No.1, Miller's Tank
- F.To No. 1, Miller's Tank

Under these circumstances the petitioners humbly beg that your honor will be graciously pleased to inspect the places in person and hereafter order for such arrangements being made as will allow the Tank to receive its full supply from the channel. For which act of kindness your humble petitioners will in duty bound ever pray for your long life and prosperity”.

This petition sparked a response from the Commissioner, Mr. H.H. Sparkes, who was also the President of the Bangalore City Municipal Council (BCMC). He mentioned that “owing to an apprehension of breach of bund and the complaints of owners of bungalows, two feet of water was let out as a precautionary measure”. In the same document he recommended that steps be taken to construct a *kodi* (waste weir) to the tank.

In 1904, the President of the Civil and Military Station submitted a proposal to reconstruct the *kodi* of the tank crossing the Richmond

Road and to drain away the overflow of the tank to the east of Sampige Road. The proposal further went on to state that “this would reduce the capacity of the tank from 43 to 16 units, which will be opposed by the owners of land below the tank as it would affect the supply of water in the large wells below”. An internal memo in the relevant files of Government of Mysore simply mentioned that “Proposals to construct the kodi have been advocated not for the safety of the tank but for saving a brewery and other buildings that have sprung up in the bed of the tank from being flooded over.” Thus the proposed kodi was deemed unnecessary. It thus becomes clear that this proposal was made towards protecting various buildings including the brewery that had come up on the bed of the tank. The Government of Mysore further replied to this proposal in October 1904 stating that as both the city and cantonment have an alternate source of water supply, it was therefore reasonable to stop diverting the water from Sampige Tank to its neighbour and to deepen the channels as per wishes of the petitioners. A clear bent towards the vested interests of the horticulturists and the revenue generated from their activities is seen here.

The response to this in March 1905 from the Resident highlighted the shallow nature of the tank as well as its gradual silting as a basis for arguing that the tank would not be able to take up the quantity of water flowing in if the feeder was closed and would eventually flood the cantonment. It was therefore in his view a more viable alternative to protect the buildings that had recently come up in the bed of the tank. The correspondence reads as follows:

The corresponding reply from the C/M Resident forwarded to the Government of Mysore by the First Assistant mentions that

- “a) Two outlets in the feeder were never closed in 1883 and that it was not definitely settled that they be closed.
- b) The Station Municipality had no desire to press claims to supply for Millers Tanks from those outlets.
- c) The Sampige Tank was shallow and gradually silting up.
- d) Whatever may have been the extent at one time, its limits in



those years were not considered beyond Jail Road. Therefore the brewery on the north of Jail Road needs to be protected.

- e) If outlets in the feeder channel had to be closed, steps should be taken to prevent the tank from overflowing in the Station Limits.”

Further correspondence between March 1905 and July 1906 only raised further questions, the most salient of which was that the Durbar of the Maharajah of Mysore was unable to agree that the said brewery required protection. According to them,

such protection could only be to the prejudice of the recognized rights of the garden owners who held lands under the tank, and whose rights to water for irrigation purposes predated the construction of the brewery. The proprietors of the buildings erected them in the bed fully knowing the risks and they could not be protected at the expense of the garden owners who paid heavy assessments to the Government.

The First Residents reply to this rejoinder takes into account that the tank should get its full supply of water, and that diversions which are not required for supplying the Civil and Military Station do not appear to have been intended to operate nor on occasions of heavy rainfall do they operate to interfere with such supply or to prevent the tank from filling up to full capacity. The reply goes on to state that

therefore there are no objections to the diversions being closed. But the tank has gradually silted up, so when water fills up; it covers extra ground which has not been shown on any map as having been part of the tank. While it will affect gardeners and owners of low lying lands below the bund, there is also sufficient ground to consider the interests of the brewery and other buildings which have no protection against floods and which have been constructed on land that is not shown to be part of the lake.

An inspection was then commissioned. This inspection carried out by the Chief Engineer, Survey and Settlement noted that in the oldest map of Bangalore dating to 1864, the area occupied by the brewery



was a paddy flat irrigated by wells with no tank above. Further “there was no appreciable silting of the tank over 40 years”. Based on this inspection an estimate for the work (to reconstruct the kodi) involved was prepared in 1906 and the sanction given in August 1907.

In November 1909, in letter No. 2105 dated 17.11.1909, Colonel Smyth, the Sanitary Commissioner draws attention to the “malarious swamps on the eastern side of the road to the east of Sampige Tank” while recommending that the capacity of the tank be increased and the formation of pools be prevented. Between 1909 and 1912, estimates and solutions to this poured back and forth with the then Chief Engineer, Sir M. Visveswaraya proposing a “rough and ready solution would be to induce the owners of the bungalows both in the C and M Station and in the City limit to contribute one third costs, balance being shared from funds in the two municipalities in proportions to be decided later”. Around the same time in 1910, newspapers also printed reports of intensive flooding due to incessant rains.

While these issues were being deliberated upon, D.O. Letter No. Fr. 1948 dated 05.01.1911 documents the petition of Captain A. Campbell Ross of the XX Deccan Horse to the Private Secretary of His Highness the Maharajah of Mysore towards “getting a portion of the Sampige Tank, which is the Regimental Polo Ground drained”. The letter from Captain Ross written on behalf of his entire regiment asks His Highness, the Maharajah of Mysore

could do anything towards getting a portion of the Sampige Tank which is the regimental polo ground drained. The tank is very full and therefore there is no opportunity to play before the Regiment leaves. The city municipal authorities have informed us that as the Polo Ground is the highest part of the tank, the draining would still leave sufficient water at the ends of the tank to supply the gardens below the bund throughout the year.

The D.O. No. 1948, Letter to T. Ananda Rao, Esq., CIE, the Dewan of Mysore from the Palace, Bangalore forwarded Mr. Campbell Ross’s earlier letter with the directive to “kindly make and let me know whether anything can be done to drain the polo ground without injury to the wetlands under Sampige Tank”.

This letter further sparked an intense debate questioning how a polo ground came to be leased out in a tank bed. Letter No. 1763 dated 9.01.1911 from the Vice President of the City Municipal Council to the Deputy Commissioner of the Bangalore District, states

- “Out of a total area of 35 acres, 13 *guntas* (1 *gunta* is approximately 1,089 sq. ft) of tank, 16.5 acres are fit for polo playing.
- Out of this, 4 acres, 16 *guntas* are in the permanent enjoyment of Mr. Brown having been given by the government as compensation.
- The remaining 12 acres belong to the municipality. This was let out for grazing yearly for an annual rent ranging from Rs. 120–Rs. 362.
- In May 1894, at the request of the Military Secretary to the Government the tank bed was unconditionally placed at the disposal of that officer to be used as a polo ground.
- In September 1898, the tank bed was leased out to another polo team at a yearly rent of Rs. 200 and further passed into the hands of the Deccan Horse.

In the meantime the proposal to deepen the tank bed and raise the level of the tank neighbourhood by taking material from the tank bed was being examined through a letter sent to the Sanitary Commissioner in File No. 122 of 97–98. In connection with this the C and M Station proposed that “the supply channel from the North entering the tank through the C and M Station may be deviated so as to run entirely on Durbar Land”. A committee was appointed to inspect the locality and submit the relevant documents. The letter further mentions that

it is not known how the settlement of this question would affect the polo ground. The question of deepening the tank emanated from Col. Smythe who first proposed that the portion wanted for a polo ground might be retained as such and the rest of the bed deepened. He subsequently stated that his proposal involves the treatment of the entire bed including the leased polo ground, which would doubtless have to be dealt with later.



In the letter, the government also refused to sanction the opening of a waste weir to the tank as it would affect the vested interests of landowners below the tank. In order to improve the supply to the tank, the government also sanctioned estimates for improving the feeder channels of the tank by cutting off supply to Millers Tank.

Another minor “discovery” during this period of debate around the Sampangi Tank was that a portion of the tank bed measuring about 4 acres and 16 guntas was leased out to Mrs. Brown “having been given by the government some years back to a Mr. Brown in exchange for what the government took from him in Nandidroog”. No further information is available on what became of this land. However a letter dated 11.2.1911, from the Secretary to the Maharajah of Mysore does ask for an inquiry into the papers relating to the “ownership of Mrs. Brown” of a part of the Sampige Tank.

With the furore created over the apparent discovery of the polo club having sprung up on the tank bed, and the failed negotiations over the brewery, attention reverted back to the source of malarial infection from the tank. A demi official letter dated 26.01.1912, No. 563/Enc 4 from the Hon’ble Resident in Mysore to the Dewan of Mysore states that

no doubt that the tank itself has silted up to a considerable extent and therefore water from the eastern side of the road is unable to escape into the tank and the swamp thus formed is largely due to the capacity of the tank having been reduced. Therefore the whole of the area on both sides of the road is admittedly a source of malarial infection. Thus, Mr. Visveswaraya’s argument that the entire advantage from the drainage of the tank will accrue to the Cantonment will seem to fall to the ground.

The letter goes on to state that

in April 1911, there was an outbreak of malarial fever in bungalows which the city authorities have permitted to be erected within the limits on the low ground south and west of Sampangi Tank. The existence of malaria is a threat to

the health of the station and the city. Therefore there is an urgent necessity of removing a source of infection which threatens both the city and the C and M Station alike. If examined from this aspect, the Durbar will realize that the proposal is of mutual benefit and will cooperate with the municipal commission of the C and M Station in finding a remedy.

A letter from the Public Works Secretariat to Mr. Puttanna Chetty, the then President, the municipality, dated 15.11.1910 submits a request to obtain from the Deputy Commissioner, “after best enquiry” a clear statement as to

- a) The exact cause formerly taken by the surplus water of the tank.
- b) How the old water way came to be constricted and the outlet raised.
- c) Whether the original channel could be reopened without injuring vested rights.

The letter stated that an answer to these questions would enable the department to suggest a remedy with respect to diverting the channel from the Civil and Military Station.

In view of this letter, two conferences were held regarding the measures to be adopted for the safety of the buildings near the tank. These conferences were mentioned in D.O. Letter No. 246, dated 24.11.1910 from the Deputy Commissioner, Bangalore District to the Chief Engineer in Mysore. The Deputy Commissioner in his letter refers to his inspection of the city where he “noticed that the channels situated within the city municipal limits were being excavated by the Sanitary Engineering Department to drain off the surplus water”. He expressed concerns that the “deepening of the said channels to a greater depth than their former level is likely to inundate the compounds of private bungalows and damage property, and thus give rise to complaints from them”. He further instructs the Sanitary Engineer to see that the “channels are not interfered with beyond the clearance of silt”.



The decision arrived at in these aforementioned conferences was

- a) To drain the portion of the Sampangi Tank to the north to RL 42.
- b) To retain water in the southern portion at its present level of RL 44.

Accordingly estimates were prepared and work sanctioned. No further correspondence regarding the tank is available from this point onwards till about 1935. During this period, as seen from the maps, the tank seems to have been drained and converted into a playground. Archival records document the existence of File Numbers 154 of 1935 (22 and 26) regarding the ownership of the tank bed as well as the ownership of the tank itself. However, the authors were unable to trace this file in the archives.

Further correspondence regarding the conversion of the tank bed into a stadium is unavailable. However research has shown that the process of bringing the National Games to the city in 1997 involved a politically fraught renovation of the Sri Kanteerava Stadium and the sacrifice of yet another tank into a housing society (Heitzman, 1999). The small surviving pool of the Sampangi Tank was further relegated into the little known features of the city with this development.

It is thus seen from this paper that there have been a multitude of actors in this small landscape. The gardeners, polo players, municipality, the grazers, owners of wells, residents of bungalows near the lake, the Civil and Military Station indirectly receiving water, breweries and the people compensated for by the government. Each of these groups highlighted different aspects of the lake and ultimately the ones with greater political power triumphed. The debate also reflects a trend that has pursued into the contemporary time—the power of the recreational over the utilitarian. A trend observed not least because the utilitarian needs the provisioning services of the resource and often has lesser bargaining power in the larger scheme of things.

5. Discussion

An analysis of these sources of information reveals tropes that occur throughout the narrative and play out even in the contemporary time. We have identified these common threads and discuss them in further detail here. These recurrent themes are:

- a) Multitude of actors with vested interests
- b) Difference in political clout among actors
- c) The precedence of the recreational over the utilitarian
- d) The perceived importance of providing technical solutions
- e) Silence with respect to community participation and adaptations.

Each of these themes is further discussed below:

5.1. Multitude of actors with vested interests

Any urban common resource, both historically and in the present time have harboured a great diversity in actors who seek to access, appropriate or manage the resource. In the case of the Sampangi Lake, between the years 1884 and 1935 the actors included institutions represented by the British Civil and Military Station and royalty represented by the maharajahs of Mysore. This duality is highly interesting given that the maharajahs of Mysore, while being independent powerful entities by themselves, were certainly within the control of the Imperial Crown, by virtue of the subsidiary alliance between themselves and the British that came into effect after the Fourth Anglo Mysore War. This relation is further complicated by the presence of separate municipalities within the kingdom and the Station. The geographical position of the lake that enabled it to be a source of water to both the British Cantonment and the state controlled Pettah also seems to have given way to contestation between these key stakeholders with regards to the amount of water made available to each of them. As we have seen earlier, the Sampangi Tank fulfilled the needs of the city directly, and also met the needs of the cantonment



indirectly through the disputed feeder channels to the three Millers tanks downstream.

Alongside these larger institutions, we also see the stakes presented by gardeners, polo players, breweries, bungalow owners, brick manufacturers and compensated individuals in this narrative. While the actors are diverse, with one focal point of interest, it is very clear that each of them values only that aspect of the resource they most benefit from. In other words, there is a multitude of actors, each with their own vested interests in the landscape and each seeking to maximize his own stakes in the larger process of decision making. For example, while gardeners and brick manufacturers were concerned about the provisioning of water and mud from the lake, the owners of bungalows quite clearly favoured the aesthetic and recreational value of the resource.

In contemporary times too, we have situations around lakes where interests of different groups of actors such as fishermen, washermen, real estates or recreationalists converge upon a particular lake, but differ in terms of the actual utility of the resource. Within the city of Bangalore, lakes also come under multiple jurisdictional entities such as the Bangalore Development Authority, the Forest Department, Minor Irrigations etc., each of whom favour certain aspects of the resource most relevant to their undertaking.¹⁷ While the municipality may concern itself primarily with the recreational and aesthetic value, the fisheries may give importance to the provisioning of fish from the lake. The final outcome of these subtle battles is influenced by the unique social-ecological system that the lake represents, as well as the unique and political bargaining power of each stakeholder.

5.2. Differences in political clout among actors

As with all lakes in the city, Sampangi Lake also saw a clear hierarchy among its stakeholders. The colonial regime was clearly more powerful in the politically fraught space as one can glean from the

¹⁷ H. Nagendra, (2010, September). 'Maps, lakes and citizens'. In *Seminar India* (Vol. 613, 19–23).

information that the bed of the lake was used as a polo ground and that part of it went as recompense for the acquisition of lands. That in the minds of the Civil and Military Station, the welfare of gardeners dependent upon water from the lake for their livelihoods was secondary to aesthetic and real estate concerns is also clear within the narrative. Even within the Government of Mysore, the primary concern remained with the revenue that the horticulturists brought in and not really the gardeners themselves. Among the other key stakeholders, the needs of bungalow owners taking precedence over the local gardeners is clear by the instance in which water was let out from the lake solely for fear of flooding the houses and brewery on the banks of the lake. This scenario of events calls to mind present day systems of lake privatization which also exclude the more marginalized people who use the resource but lack the means to pay for accessing them.¹⁸ Many modern landscaping activities around lakes also keep in mind the needs of the more influential members of the community while inadvertently excluding the marginalized.

5.3. Precedence of the recreational over the utilitarian

Another interesting feature of this historical examination of the Sampangi Lake has been the dominance of recreational and aesthetic values of a lake that govern major decision-making bodies. For example, the baking of bricks using mud from the bottom of the lake was objected to on the basis of it creating “unsightly pits” that may later get converted into garbage dumps. The use of the lake bed as a playground in the 1930s and its subsequent conversion into a state of art indoor stadium only seem to reinforce this concept.¹⁹ This line of thinking which gives precedence to the recreational benefits of a resource persists till the present time and has manifested itself in governance policies relating to lake management. An example in place

¹⁸ H. Unnikrishnan, and H. Nagendra, (2013). ‘Privatization of commons: Impacts on traditional users of provisioning and cultural ecosystem services’. Paper presented at Kitafuji, 2013, International Association for Study of Commons.

¹⁹ J. Heitzman, (1999). ‘Sports and Conflict in Urban Planning The Indian National Games in Bangalore’. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 23(1), 5–23.



would be that of the privatization of four lakes in the city—an event protested against by environmentalists and residents welfare associations, but nevertheless implemented.²⁰ An unfortunate outcome of privatization is the exclusion through payment of marginalized communities who derive sustenance and spiritual benefits from these lakes.²¹ Privatization increased the recreational value of the lakes by installing in place tree-lined jogging tracks, parks, food courts and playgrounds within the area around it. However, as these are all commercialized operations, their true value as urban commons seems to have diminished.

5.4. Technical solutions to managerial problems

The first impulse of decision makers when confronted with problems around lakes is to use technology as an aid in providing solutions. Sampangi Lake seems to have been no exception. Numerous examples are present within the narrative described earlier, where technical solutions have been sought for to either combat flooding or fears of inundation or to provide water to meet the city's needs. In the contemporary period as well, it is not surprising that community methods of adaptation to these very concerns have been paid minimal attention. For a water scarce city, it is indeed remarkable that the numerous open wells have not been paid adequate attention by authorities. Neither have community histories about deepening the tank beds by excavating mud and further using that mud to create a bund for containment of water been heeded.

²⁰ Public Interest Litigation (WP No. 817/2008), 2008, filed by Environment Support Group and Leo Saldanha against privatization of lakes in Bangalore available at <http://www.esgindia.org/projects/events/campaign-against-lake-privatisation-bang.html>, accessed on 14 October 2012 and information also available at <http://www.cseindia.org/content/cases-protection-lakes-27>, accessed on 25th October 2012.

²¹ R. D'Souza, (2006). Impact of Privatisation of Lakes in Bangalore. Centre for Education and Documentation, Bangalore available at <http://www.doccentre.net/index.php/privatisation-of-lakes-in-bangalore>, accessed on 31 December 2013.

*5.5. Silence with respect to community management and participation*

The documents within the State Archives, while silent on community management of the lake, does document an instance of community participation through a petition for the release of water into the tank. The petition as discussed earlier was signed by more than 100 members of the Tigalar Community of gardeners who were impacted by the diversion of water from the Sampangi Lake. It is not unreasonable to suppose therefore that these communities had their own ways of managing water supply from the resource within their own spaces. Today too, there are instances where communities are managing common lands around the lake for various purposes ranging from cattle grazing to accommodating nomads. However, these carefully managed spaces too face threats from encroachments and the rapidly expanding real estate markets. As the Sampangi Lake shows, these silences and gaps in information about local needs and resources with respect to the community may also play crucial roles in entire large scale transformations of the landscape.

As this study has demonstrated, a study of historical events around commons can provide valuable insights into the nature of problems they face. It can also provide interesting information about how decisions to resolve these challenges were made. The historical outcome of these crucial decisions and the interplay of various extraneous factors involved can also provide valuable guidelines to decision makers in the present time.

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