

## **“What's Happening in Bangalore? Meeting the challenge of Protecting Lives, Livelihoods, Public spaces and Our Commons!”**

A full-day, public workshop entitled “What's Happening in Bangalore? Meeting the challenge of Protecting Lives, Livelihoods, Public spaces and Our Commons!” was held on Saturday, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009, organized by Environment Support Group (ESG), Hasiru Usiru and CIVIC Bangalore. The purpose of the workshop was to build public awareness about the fundamental problems behind infrastructural development in Bangalore today, and to demonstrate how the public can and should have a say in development if changes are to occur for the benefit of all.

### **Introduction**

The workshop was introduced by Divya Ravindranath of ESG and Vinay Sreenivasa of Hasiru Usiru. Vinay began by giving a brief overview of the reasons for holding the workshop. He explained that the governing agencies in the city have stated that their goal is to turn Bangalore into a city like Singapore or Shanghai. However, no one has asked the people of Bangalore what they themselves would like their city to be. Vinay proposed that in a democracy the general public must have a say in decision making and must have common rights over common spaces. We are united by the fact that we all want our voices to be heard.



Divya went on to describe Hasiru Usiru as a loose association of different groups and individuals that have been trying to communicate and engage with public officials about infrastructure projects over the last few years. She described the PIL filed last year by ESG and CIVIC that emphasized the needs of pedestrians, senior citizens and children with respect to roads, and most importantly public involvement in planning and implementation of projects, highlighted critical needs that are being ignored in favour of facilitating the movement of cars and the interests of the elite.

### **Public Spaces**



Bhargavi S. Rao of ESG gave a presentation on the multiple uses that public spaces are put to within Bangalore. She talked about public spaces as the venue for festivities, which has grown difficult with increasing restrictions on space. She talked about public space as a space for shoppers, for people to hang out with friends, for children to play. She spoke

of public spaces as a support for livelihoods and a space for protest and rallies, for movements to begin. She talked about how public space provides a home for the homeless, space for animals, and space for communication in the form of billboards, ads, art, public messages and so on.

She posed the questions: who has the right to public spaces, and how safe are they? What happens when public spaces are barred to the public by gates and locks, when trees make way for concrete? She talked of the ornamental, gated parks springing up in the city, where people are not allowed to walk on the grass. She talked of public spaces being filled with garbage as traditional methods of waste disposal fall by the wayside.

In the ensuing discussion, Leo Saldanha of ESG added that a densely populated and crowded city such as New York has its streets filled with vendors and musicians, but no one there sees this as something needing to be cleaned up. In Bangalore, no one in authority has bothered to ask all levels of society what they want and need and to then work with that complexity.

### **Living Heritage**

Sheshadri, a botanist, spoke of the different types of heritage trees and sacred groves found within Bangalore and its environs, and the need to protect them. He described two types of sacred groves, gunduthopus (gathering sites) and devara-kaadus. He gave some of the different types of heritage trees, including Ficus trees (such as banyans), Madhuca, Syzigium, and tamarind. He described a tamarind tree near Devanahalli that is a thousand years old. He also described a 400 year old banyan tree in Basaveshwaranagar that made the news recently when it collapsed due to negligence, its aerial roots having been chopped off. He also mentioned a banyan tree lost on Hosur Road recently due to road widening efforts there.

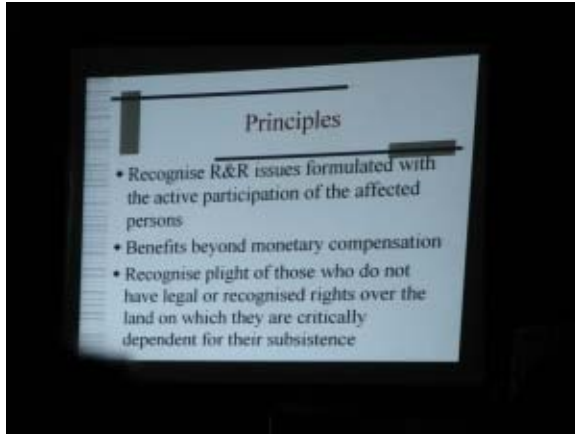


Sheshadri emphasized the need to identify and document heritage trees, gunduthopus and devara kaadus in Bangalore and its surrounding areas, as they are rapidly being swallowed up by the city's growth. He described the tradition in South Karnataka in which newlyweds plant a branch from a Ficus (fig) tree and nurture it. He made a call for volunteers to help him document heritage trees and sacred groves.

Sheshadri also discussed how government organizations often select the wrong trees to plant in cities. For instance, banyan trees are not suitable as avenue trees but they are sometimes planted as such. He spoke of some of the benefits of trees within cities, such as how they act as carbon sinks and reduce temperatures.

## Impacts on lives and livelihoods

Kathyayini of CIVIC and Selva, editor of Slum Jagathu, each gave presentations on the displacement of communities by infrastructural development work in Bangalore.



Kathyayini spoke about the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy, 2007. She said that this policy applied to any project that displaces a settled community. Under it, displaced people must be resettled not merely with Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) and monetary compensations, but also rehabilitated socially. All alternatives must be considered, and if displacement is still found necessary a social impact assessment should be conducted. For this, a commissioner should be appointed for

rehabilitation and adequate land and budget allocated for resettlement. The statistics of all people whose livelihoods are impacted should be obtained. The results of this social impact assessment should be published before displacement happens, and comments called for and considered. For people unable to find a new job, a lifetime pension should be provided.

She spoke of how the Japanese Bank (funding agency for Bangalore Metro) gives money on the condition that social and environmental guidelines are adhered to by the borrower. Screening forms must be filled out to say how far the borrower has succeeded in following those guidelines. Where no national standards are available, international standards (such as those set down by the World Bank) should be followed.

Kathyayini then spoke of how this applied to the current road widening and metro work going on in Bangalore. The official claim by the BBMP is that no one is being displaced by road widening. When she asked the Metro authorities for the screening form they had provided the Japanese Bank, they never gave them to her. They claimed that the environmental impact report for 2007 and after would not be filed until later, in effect until after the damage had been done. She spoke of the basket weavers on KR Road, dislocated by the metro and thrown out without resettlement as being fundamentally violative of applicable policy and law.

Selva, the editor of Slum Jagathu, then spoke about on the structural problems of the current paradigm of development that leverages the interests of a few over many. He talked of how planning should occur keeping the needs and living conditions of all people in mind. As an example of the government's planning policy ignoring the urban poor, he spoke of how the policy once was that if a person had a house, they should plant a tree.

As a poet once said, what this seems to mean is that one can only have a tree if one has a house. It forgets those who have no houses, those for whom a tree might *be* a house.

He spoke of how profit-driven urban development policies are detrimental to all. For the poor they mean a loss of the right to life, while for the middle classes they mean a loss of any say in development. Essentially, the policy is that if you're in the way of profit you must go. He talked about two slum demolitions, one at Hosakerehalli in Veerabhadra Nagar and the other at KR Road. A slum at Hosakerehalli was demolished to make way for the NICE Road. Goondas came and took away everyone's belongings, keeping four people at the police station. On KR Road, basket weavers who had lived there for 40 years were displaced. The Metro chief claimed that the basket weavers did not come under rehabilitation regulations because they were without titles, and therefore it was the not BMRCL's responsibility to take care of them. On Avenue Road, there will be rehabilitation for the shop owners after road widening, but no compensation for workers or street vendors.

Selva spoke of how Infosys got a lot of praise for building public toilets in Bangalore. However, for the poor the situation changed drastically: Infosys toilet charity had made the poor pay Rs. 2 every time they had to answer nature's call.. He criticized the corporate-driven development going on in the city, speaking of slums destroyed by NICE for the road widening without any regard for people's rights. He said that power should go to the people, not corporates, when it comes to BBMP elections. He also argued that while the poor thought the middle classes were in power, the very presence of so many in the audience from the middle classes who articulated their helplessness in progressively intervening demonstrated that middle classes were as powerless as the poor in charting the course of development and administration of urban areas.



In the ensuing discussion, a question was addressed regarding mafias planting slum dwellers on land and then subsequently demanding compensation when those slum dwellers are kicked off the land. Clifton Rosaria a lawyer in Alternative Law Forum spoke of how in Delhi, cars parked on the street take up three times as much land as slums. In Bangalore, as per the AT Ramaswamy commission report, about 50,000 acres of land are being encroached, but none of that includes slums. Further, some 30% of the population lives in slums, but that takes up only about 4% of the total land area. Therefore, the fundamental problem here is not that slums take up excess space or represent illegal encroachment.

### **Planning and Design**

Vijay Narnapatti, an architect, spoke on urban planning and Bangalore's development. He described how Bangalore's infrastructure is in a mess, with some ten different



agencies coordinating poorly between traffic, sewage and so on. There is public concern over these problems. However, there is not enough public awareness about the projects being implemented by the BBMP and BDA to solve these problems, with no one quite knowing what is being done until the project has started and nothing can be done to stop it. Projects ought to be reviewed and critiqued by the public before they are begun.

According to the planning document for Bangalore, 500 roads are slated to be widened ultimately, and 91 at the moment. However, Vijay questioned whether roads are congested simply because they are too narrow, or if there might not be other factors at work and therefore other methods for decongestion that can be used. He spoke of the road widening plans for Avenue Road, a piece of living heritage which no Bangalorean would want to lose. He claimed that it does not make sense to widen inner city roads that are already well developed, or to cut down half the city's avenue trees merely to facilitate car flow.

With proper planning there are better solutions available. For instance, a broader use of public transportation would dramatically cut down on congestion, both through reducing vehicular traffic and reducing the space needed for parking. Roads need to be developed so that they are accessible to all people, not just people driving cars. Instead, there are now many roads in Bangalore where the footpath has been eliminated. Development should keep accessibility to the elderly and disabled in mind.

Instead, contracts and money are becoming a greater concern for planning authorities than people. For example, before Sheshadri Road was widened Hasiru Usiru came up with alternative solutions to the road's problems. These included a plan to accommodate all considerations without widening the road, and another plan that described how it could be widened in a more logical fashion. All such proposals were ignored, however, and the road widening proceeded as planned.

Leo Saldanha of ESG further described the problems with the road widening project in Bangalore. When a road is widened without planning for pedestrians, it devalues life. People will inevitably be injured because of such policies. He gave the example of Bellary Road, on which 54 people died in the first few months after the road was widened due to the lack of pedestrian crossings. Plans to widen Avenue Road will destroy a 450 year old heritage that is part of



the soul of the city, akin to destroying Chandni Chauk in Delhi.

Leo described the approach to infrastructure projects in the city as a surgeon being given a live body to operate on, killing the patient and then asserting that the operation still succeeded. Congestion in Bangalore is caused by far more complex problems than a lack of road space, and should be dealt with in a way that understands that complexity. Road widening is an expensive (at 4,500 crores), lengthy and ultimately only temporary solution to far deeper infrastructural and societal problems.

## **Law and Public Policy**

Sunil Dutt Yadav, an advocate working with Hasiru Usiru and ESG, gave a presentation on law as an instrument of social change and justice. He described the laws we are trying to uphold regarding city planning and development as the basic minimum standards needed to protect people. They are as basic as “you should not commit murder.” He explained that that conception and planning for road widening projects are faulty. The highest court in the state should not have to tell the BBMP that they must follow the



Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act, or the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act. This is, however, precisely what has happened. The verdict of the High Court was that the BBMP could go ahead with the road widening project so long as they complied with the law. And what the law dictates is a stringent procedure for such development projects, involving public participation. It demands that the people be listened to.

The three main legislations that govern urban development in Bangalore are the Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act, the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act and the Comprehensive Development Plan document for Bangalore (CDP). According to the Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act, road widening, or for that matter Metro proposals, should only be implemented after their draft and final plans are developed per the CDP and in consultation with the public. The draft of the planning scheme should be circulated so that objections can be filed. In this way, the opinions of the common person can be heard. Even if the end result is that people must lose their land and livelihood, the process must still be made fair.

Sunil spoke of how the CDP of Bangalore, 2007-2015, said that Sheshadri Road would be widened to 100 feet. However, this information was not made accessible to the public in the planning stage as it should have been. He mentioned the widening of the road to the airport, after which many died due to the lack of provisions made for pedestrians. His comment was that if people have to die in a project before changes are made, something fundamental is wrong.

As an example of the success of the legal process, he talked about the Lakes petition. Multiple lakes in Bangalore, including Hebbal Lake and Agara Lake, had been given over to private enterprises that planned to turn them into resorts. The interim order of the court halted development of these lakes. The logic was that the public commons cannot be taken out of the public domain for commercial exploitation. Sunil compared the mortgaging of Lalbagh to Japan Bank to mortgaging one's house and using one's wife as security. What happens if one defaults on the loan?

In the ensuing discussion, it was explained by Sunil and Leo that Lalbagh was acquired as an industrial development zone, which is how state property was mortgaged off to a foreign entity. An Ordinance was promulgated to amend the Parks Act and declare Lalbagh an industrial zone. This ordinance should have been tabled before the legislative assembly within the next six weeks if it was to become an amendment. However, it was never tabled and the ordinance ultimately lapsed, but yet portions of Lalbagh were still sold to the metro authorities at market rates. The selling off of Lalbagh was done both illegally and non-transparently, with even the Governor having been lied to on the matter.



The Parks Act applies to all open spaces that have been notified as parks. Once notified as such, a park cannot be used for any other purpose. Sunil explained that anyone can give a representation for authorities to come and inspect an open space and notify it as a park. There is no minimum space requirement for parks.

Leo described how more trees are cut in Bangalore than are recorded cut, which might be a sign that the timber mafia is involved. For instance, on Sheshadri Road only about 70 trees were reported cut, when some 250 trees had been counted there earlier by members of Hasiru Usiru. Leo said that it is therefore a good idea to record the number of trees along a road and write to the Tree Officer with that number, keeping a copy of the letter for future record.



### **Focus Group Discussions**

The discussion on Urban Forestry, led by Sheshadri, came to the conclusion that the group would collect all tree cutting orders and inspect those trees. If the trees were found to be healthy, efforts would be made to save them. The group decided that more endemic trees should be planted in Bangalore, and seeds of endemic species

would be given to nurseries in Bangalore. The decision was made to make trips to identify heritage trees and build a database. The group could then work with government bodies to have these trees declared heritage trees.

The discussion on Governance and Legal Action was led by Leo and Sunil. It came to the conclusion that the fact that decision making in the city is in the hands of a few needs to be rectified. Public workshops need to be held to counter ABIDE and its unconstitutional interference with city administration and planning. A people's manifesto needs to be composed in time for the BBMP elections, with a wide variety of communities brought in to contribute. Candidates should be spoken to, and independent candidates from citizens groups supported.

The discussion on CyBaNa (which stands for Cycling + Bus + Nadiyodu, Kannada for "walking"), led by Dasarathi, went over two issues that stand in the way of more people using public and non-mechanized transport. One is the issue of personal risk: it can be dangerous to be a pedestrian or bicyclist in Bangalore's traffic as it is today. The other issue was that of a culture of people wanting to own a private vehicle. Private vehicles can be seen as a status symbol, which makes it hard to convince people to use public transport. People should, however, be encouraged to use public transport as much as they use cars. This could be done through streets plays, web events and Critical Mass events for walking.

The discussion on Public Spaces was led by Bhargavi and Vijay. It went over the issues of how public spaces can be used as cultural spaces for neighbourhoods, and how such spaces are becoming unusable and unsafe for children and the disabled. The city needs to implement planning measures to make public spaces more accessible. The question was posed: who decides what a public space is? It was decided to meet again as a group the following week to continue the discussion.

The discussion on Affected Communities was led by Divya. This discussion kept as its focus two affected communities, those of basket weavers on KR Road and traders on Avenue Road. It was decided that affected communities should network among themselves. The basket weavers on KR Road have been in Bangalore for forty years, but have no land rights. A protest was to be held outside the metro office soon, and Japan Bank called to inform them of the problems faced by these communities displaced by projects using their funds. The KR Road basket weavers would meet with their union leader to learn about compensations and related issues, accompanied by two people from Hasiru Usiru. The Avenue Road traders would try to have more festivals, and attempt to educate people on the history and culture of Avenue Road.

