

Working Paper 602

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Reinforcing Exclusion? Power
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Published and Printed by: Institute for Social and Economic Change
Dr V K R V Rao Road, Nagarabhavi Post,
Bangalore - 560072, Karnataka, India.

ISEC Working Paper No. 602

June 2025

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ISBN 978-93-93879-64-6

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Working Paper Series Editor: **Sobin George**

REJUVENATING THE COMMONS OR REINFORCING EXCLUSION? POWER DYNAMICS AND MARGINALISATION IN THE ECO-RESTORATION OF BENGALURU'S LAKE

Akash Jash*

Abstract

This paper examines the restoration of Kempambudhi Lake in Bengaluru, showing how environmental projects framed as ecological improvements can become sites of exclusion and contestation. Grounded in urban political ecology and based on qualitative fieldwork, the study traces how power circulates among various actors – including state agencies, corporate entities, environmental NGOs, and local communities – within complex socio-political terrains. It finds that caste, class, and migration-based divisions within civil society limit meaningful participation by the urban poor and traditional users of the lake. These fractures create conditions for a dominant state-corporate-NGO alliance to advance capital-intensive restoration strategies that emphasise beautification and marketable aesthetics. In the process, social and ecological justice concerns are sidelined.

Keywords: Urban Lake, Ecological Restoration, Urban Political Ecology, Power Geometry, Bengaluru

Introduction

Ecological restoration¹ has emerged as a key strategy in managing urban ecological spaces, particularly in Indian cities grappling with rapid urbanisation and environmental degradation. These projects aim to restore ecosystems, enhance sustainability, and improve aesthetic appeal. However, critical scholarship has increasingly questioned the purported inclusivity of eco-restoration, highlighting how such initiatives often subordinate the needs of marginalised communities to broader urban beautification and investment-oriented goals (Coelho, 2020; Sen *et al*, 2020). This study examines Kempambudhi Lake as a

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Acknowledgements: I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Lekha Subaiya, for her consistent guidance and encouragement in this research. I also thank the members of my doctoral committee and research panel for their thoughtful feedback, which helped refine this paper. I am thankful to Riya Bhattacharya for her assistance in preparing the maps. I thank Nagarjun K B for some of his insights on this paper. I am indebted to my colleague, Veena K. Bhat, for helping me in conducting some of the field interviews. I acknowledge the contributions of Ms. Bhoomija C. S. and Ms. Uma Giddappanavar, whose help in translating Kannada-language interviews into English was vital to the clarity and accessibility of this study. My appreciation extends to the Mythic Society for providing access to historical records and maps, which were instrumental in situating this research in its proper historical context. Finally, I express my heartfelt gratitude to all the participants in the fieldwork. I also acknowledge the valuable suggestions and constructive comments provided by anonymous reviewers, which helped strengthen the arguments and clarity of this paper. This paper represents the views of the authors and is the product of professional research. The author is responsible for any errors found in the paper. All usual disclaimers apply.

¹ Ecological restoration in urban environments involves efforts to revive degraded ecosystems within the constraints of urbanization. In urban contexts, eco-restoration demands engagement with socio-political and economic dynamics, intertwined with city development processes (Ingram, 2008). As such, urban ecological restoration is not solely an ecological endeavor; the perceptions, values, and actions of diverse urban stakeholders shape it. These socio-ecological interactions significantly influence the trajectory of restoration efforts, with urban residents' attitudes – ranging from contestation to ambivalence – playing a pivotal role in reshaping urban landscapes (Ingram, 2008).

site to investigate how eco-restoration can potentially transform ecologically sensitive areas into contested social spaces, replete with exclusions and unequal power dynamics.

The analysis examines three phases of the Kempambudhi Lake restoration – pre-restoration, restoration, and post-restoration – to reveal the interactions and power dynamics among diverse actors, including middle-class residents, temple authorities, migrant slum communities, environmental activists, political parties, corporate entities, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government institutions. By mapping these interactions, the study highlights how competing interests, shaped by caste dynamics, migration patterns, encroachment, and party politics, mediate the trajectory of eco-restoration projects. These findings highlight how such projects often function as instruments of exclusion despite their framing as inclusive sustainability initiatives.

The article is structured in sections as follows. The first section situates eco-restoration within Bengaluru's environmental governance trajectory, tracing its evolution through state-led initiatives and civil society activism. The second provides an overview of the study area and methodology, incorporating in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, oral histories, and spatial mapping. The third introduces the theoretical framework, adopting Urban Political Ecology (UPE) to analyse the 'geometry of power' shaping eco-restoration initiatives. The fourth presents the findings, mapping the restoration process and actor roles. By examining these interactions, the analysis reveals mechanisms through which eco-restoration produces contested spaces and exclusionary practices.

The fifth section situates these findings within a broader discussion of state-market-civil society interactions, identifying two key drivers of exclusion: fragmented civil society engagement and the consolidation of state-corporate-NGO interests. It argues that these factors shift the eco-restoration's focus from inclusive environmental sustainability to elite-oriented urban beautification. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these insights, contending that the socio-political exclusions embedded in eco-restoration projects necessitate a critical re-evaluation of their impact. By exposing the hidden 'geometry of power' within these initiatives, this study contributes to ongoing debates on urban sustainability politics and the uneven transformation of ecological spaces in contemporary India.

Eco-restoration – An Environmental Discourse in Emergence

The contemporary framework of eco-restoration in India has evolved in response to the ecological consequences of accelerated urbanisation since the 1970s. This period witnessed extensive land acquisition for infrastructure and housing, leading to significant environmental degradation. These trends intensified following economic liberalisation in the 1990s, as urban development became increasingly oriented toward accommodating expanding industrial and residential demands (Nagendra, 2016; Unnikrishnan *et al*, 2016).

In Bengaluru, lakes have emerged as key sites for ecological restoration. One of the earliest institutional efforts was the Laxman Rao Committee Report (1985), which identified encroachments by public and private actors as a major threat to the city's lakes. In response, the committee advocated for the transformation of lake environments through recreational and beautification interventions, such as tree parks, walkways, and picnic areas, as both a deterrent to encroachment and a means of enhancing

ecological and aesthetic value. The environmental concerns articulated in the report helped catalyse the emergence of civil society activism around urban environmental issues.²

However, the discourse of ecological restoration (eco-restoration) has also been shaped by another axis: the nexus between the state, its institutions, and global capital. Aided by partnerships with international financial institutions such as the World Bank, state agencies have promoted a new urban environmental regime.³ This regime is characterised by technocratic interventions, such as biodiversity parks and eco-restoration initiatives, that align with a vision of cities as strategic sites of global investment and capital accumulation (Coelho and Raman, 2013).

In Bengaluru, the discourse of eco-restoration has been shaped by the intersection of these two forces: civil society's environmental activism and the neoliberal state's environmental regime, underpinned by global capital interventions. While these forces occasionally converge, such as in shared demands for environmental accountability, they remain fundamentally in tension. The neoliberal state's focus on enhancing urban aesthetics for capital accumulation often clashes with grassroots movements advocating for inclusive and socially just approaches to ecological restoration.

In Bengaluru, these dual forces – civil society environmentalism and contemporary environmental governance by the State – have come to shape the contours of eco-restoration in complex ways. This article investigates how interactions between the actors from the state, market, and civil society shape the execution of eco-restoration projects on the ground; it focuses on the tensions that arise between diverse, often localised imaginaries of lake spaces and the standardised, technocratic visions embedded in dominant eco-restoration frameworks.

Theoretical Framework – Urban Political Ecology

We have adopted Urban Political Ecology (UPE) as the theoretical framework for this study. Attempting to adopt a 'provincialised' notion of UPE in the context of South Asia that looks at the city from the perspectives of marginalised urban residents who appropriate urban spaces for their ends (Pieterse, 2008; Lawhon *et al*, 2014; Adelina, 2024), and reframes the role of the state and identifies several "grey zones" in governance where citizens and market forces interact to manage urban ecological spaces, this theoretical framework, in our study, provides a nuanced lens for interrogating the socio-political and environmental dynamics at play.

It allows for examining the practices and interactions through which diverse social and political actors – including middle-class residents, environmental activists, NGOs, corporate entities, and state institutions – reshape urban ecological spaces. By accounting for the multiplicity of socio-political actors

² The report played a role in broadening the public debate on the urban environment, enabling civil society organizations, such as CIVIC and ESG, to become increasingly prominent in advocating for urban environmental issues. Although these movements were predominantly middle-class² in composition, they played a significant role in pressuring the state to reimagine its governance strategies.

³ The integration of environmental sustainability with economic growth emerged in the late 1990s as global institutions like the World Bank and the IMF incorporated environmental concerns into their development frameworks. Driven by advocacy from environmental organisations, this shift led to policies balancing conservation with economic priorities, initially in large-scale projects and later in urban spaces facing ecological threats. For a detailed discussion, see Goldman, M. (2001). The Birth of a Discipline: Producing Authoritative Green Knowledge, *World Bank-Style. Ethnography*, 2(2), 191-217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661380122230894>.

and forces involved, the analysis encourages reformulating how power is understood beyond the notion that power is primarily created and operated through capital accumulation and class relations.

Furthermore, a provincialised UPE approach helps analyse shifts in environmental imaginaries by examining how different actors' interactions with the lake change over time. By focusing on the diverse environmental practices, values, and contestations surrounding the restoration of Kempambudhi Lake, it reveals the uneven social relations that shape access to and use of the lake's socio-ecological resources. This is crucial for understanding how and why urban residents experience vastly unequal conditions, and what such uneven access means for communities historically dependent on these critical ecological spaces.

Study Area and Methodology

Kempambudhi Kere holds a prominent place in Bangalore's historical and cultural landscape. Oral histories attribute the lake's name to Kempamma, a woman who, according to popular narratives, sacrificed herself to ensure the tank's successful construction after repeated failures. Kempamma, believed to be the daughter-in-law of Raja Kempe Gowda, is remembered as a figure of devotion and sacrifice, and the tank was named in her honour.⁴

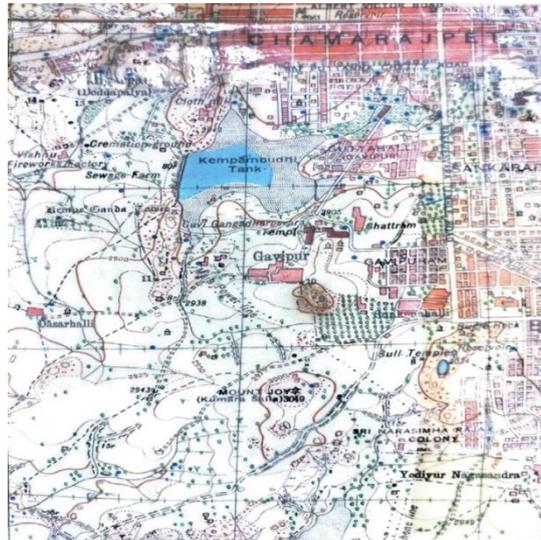
The tank gained further prominence in the early 20th century when the colonial administration incorporated it into urban planning efforts. The establishment of the Basavanagudi Extension, part of post-plague urban renewal initiatives, transformed the rural landscape around KempambudhiKere.⁵ The original Gavipuram village gave way to new neighbourhoods such as Basavanagudi and Chamrajpete, reflecting the city's broader transition towards urbanisation during the 1920s and 1930s.⁶

⁴ This narrative appears to be undocumented in any formal sources. It was recorded during our interviews with local residents living in the vicinity of the lake.

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of post-plague town planning, see Stephens, J. H. (1914), *Plague-proof Town Planning in Bangalore, South India*, Methodist Publishing House, India. For a discussion on the Basavanagudi Extensions, readers may refer to Iyer, M. (2022), *Discovering Bengaluru: History, Neighbourhoods, Walks*, INTACH Bengaluru Chapter, India.

⁶ Kempambudhi Kere faced severe degradation during colonial urbanization, with a 1943 report labelling it an unsanitary "hotbed of typhoid, intermittent fever, and smallpox" due to sewage inflows and municipal neglect (L.R. Committee Report, 1985). Post-independence urbanization in the 1950s saw informal settlements and continued pollution, while oral histories suggest agricultural use persisted until the 1970s, when grazing lands were converted into parks under Bangalore City Corporation's urban greening initiatives (L.R. Committee Report, 1985).

Figure 1: The Kempambudhi Lake Area in the 1930s with Urbanisation Happening and New Built-up Areas Coming Around the Lake.



Currently, Kempambudhi Lake spans 47 acres, and diverse communities inhabit the area surrounding it. The Brahmins and the Vokkaligas have traditionally resided in the area. The local Madiwala community, known as Dhobis (washermen), still resides around the lake but has largely ceased its active use since the 1990s. Several old temples, which have long been connected to the lake, also occupy parts of the surrounding area. Approximately 20 years ago, a Dalit migrant slum emerged near the lake, with residents purchasing plots and settling permanently in the area. The recent restoration of Kempambudhi Lake has not led to substantial changes in the area’s demographics or built environment. Instead, the restoration has altered how residents interact with the lake, significantly transforming their relationships with this important socio-ecological space. The paper will further explore these changes and their broader implications.

Figure 2: A graphical Representation of the Present Land Use Map of the Kempambudhi Lake Area. The Map has been Created with the Help of Riya Bhattacharaya



Location: Kempambudhi Lake
 Government Body – Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (709 sq km, 8.4 million approx.)
 Area – Chamrajpet, Bangalore
 Voting Population – 40000 (approx.)

Vegetation Cover
 Builtup Area
 Lake Area

I have adopted a qualitative methodological framework with different methodological tools and techniques.

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)–For the individual interviews, I adopted a purposive sampling strategy, selecting participants who were directly or indirectly involved in the Kempambudhi Lake restoration process. This included a diverse group of stakeholders such as government officials responsible for the execution of the project, representatives from environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) and corporate entities that provided funding or auxiliary support, residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods, and specific communities—such as the Dhobi community – who have had long-standing, livelihood-based associations with the lake.

I have used a structured Interview guide to conduct the individual interviews. The structured interview guide facilitated inquiries into participants’ access to the lake, their roles in restoration, governance practices, and evolving perceptions of the lake within public life. Additional focus was placed on challenges to traditional rights and the socio-ecological implications of restoration efforts. A total of 22 individual interviews were conducted with stakeholders such as residents, visitors to the lake, local political actors, environmental activists, corporate representatives, and government officials between March and May 2024. These interviews were held in Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, and English, with interpreters facilitating cross-linguistic communication. All interviews were transcribed into English by me, with support from professional transcribers where needed.

The data were manually coded by me, guided by key research questions: (1) What roles did various actors play in the rejuvenation process? (2) What environmental vision underpinned the restoration project? (3) How were traditional communities engaged or excluded? (4) How did civil society actors intervene? and (5) What constituted the perceived success of the restoration?

Focused Group Discussions (FGDs)–Two sessions were conducted with the Madiwala community and Dalit migrant slum residents. One FGD was held with seven members of the Madiwala community, and another with four Dalit migrant slum residents. These discussions focused on the lake’s governance, restoration impact, and anticipated changes in access and rights. FGDs were conducted in Kannada, Tamil, and Hindi, supported by interpreters to ensure accessibility.

Oral Histories– Oral histories offered valuable historical perspectives, revealing shifts in community-lake relationships, landscape transformations, and the imaginaries tied to the waterscape.

Mapping– Finally, mapping was employed as a supplementary tool to enhance the analysis. I utilised the Survey of India Map from 1935, which includes the Kempambudhi Lake area, to provide a historical perspective on the lake. To understand the contemporary context, we referred to a present-day land-use map of the area, which enabled us to analyse current spatial arrangements and land use.

Ethical Clearance and Compliance

I conducted this study by established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru, before the commencement of fieldwork.

All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and provided their verbal or written consent before participating in interviews and focus group discussions. Participation

was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Translations and interpretations were conducted with respect and accuracy to preserve participants' voices. The study adheres to the principles of academic integrity and responsible data management, ensuring the protection of participant information and the ethical use of field data.

Different Phases of Restoration

Kempambudhi Lake, historically integral to washermen, horticulturalists, and temple communities, suffered severe ecological degradation due to pollution, encroachments, and routine maintenance neglect. This deterioration severed local ties to the lake, eroding its historical significance and ecological vitality. By the early 2000s, the lake had become a neglected urban space, plagued by waste disposal, illicit activities, and unauthorised encroachments, further marginalising it within Bengaluru's landscape.

Concerned about the lake's declining state and the loss of its cultural and ecological heritage, local environmental and social activists initiated restoration efforts. The degradation of centuries-old stone sculptures symbolised broader neglect, catalysing civic mobilisation. This led to the formation of the *Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti* (Saving the Kempambudhi Lake Movement Association), committed to reclaiming the lake from pollution and encroachment. A former leader of the Samiti recalled,

"Of late, we came to know about the condition of it [Kempambudhi Lake], and we started to move. Then we formed a committee also to save the lake".⁷

Between 2005 and 2007, the Samiti organised protests, rallies, and legal interventions, engaging the community to demand government action. They filed RTIs to delineate legal boundaries, challenged the Karnataka Slum Development Board over unauthorised settlements, and exposed political corruption in land encroachments. After three years of sustained activism, the government formulated a comprehensive restoration plan for Kempambudhi Lake.

In the restoration period (2013–2017), the governmental agencies took primary responsibility for the restoration of Kempambudhi Lake, undertaking activities such as fencing, removing encroachments, constructing walking trails, and developing wetlands and recreational parks. Simultaneously, the government agencies addressed sewage inflows by installing a Sewage Treatment Plant (STP).

During the later phases of restoration, private organisations – one for-profit and one non-profit – became involved through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The corporate entity provided financial resources and labour for supplementary restoration efforts, including tree planting and the installation of gym parks and benches. These interventions were carried out in collaboration with government institutions and an Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation (ENGO). However, all private interventions ceased following a High Court ruling that prohibited the commercial utilisation of critical ecological resources.⁸

⁷ Excerpt from the interview with an ex-leader of the Association taken during the fieldwork.

⁸ In March 2020, the Karnataka High Court observed that agreements transferring lake maintenance to private corporations required legal scrutiny and directed the State Government to halt such agreements until further orders while allowing corporate funding for lake rejuvenation. For more details, see Environmental Support Group

Despite the continued engagement of state actors, corporate entities, and the ENGO, civil society participation, once central to pre-restoration activism, diminished significantly during this phase. This shift raises a critical question: why was civil society's involvement marginal during the restoration process? The subsequent section examines the interactions among stakeholders and evaluates the broader implications of these governance dynamics.

The post-restoration period witnessed that a successfully restored lake is struggling with inadequate management. A key development was the March 2020 High Court ruling, which, in response to Public Interest Litigations (PIL) filed by environmental activist organisations, nullified agreements between government institutions and private entities, thereby creating a governance vacuum. With the withdrawal of private actors, responsibility for maintenance fell solely on government institutions, whose inefficiency in day-to-day management has led to persistent issues such as garbage accumulation, neglected desilting, and the deterioration of heritage features.

Participation of Different Actors in the Restoration Project

Environmental Activists

In the pre-restoration phase of Kempambudhi Lake, the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti played a prominent role in mobilising public opinion and initiating action against the lake's visible degradation. At the heart of their activism was a campaign against so-called "illegal encroachments," which they linked to a collusion between political actors and land mafias. According to members of the Samiti, this nexus facilitated the drying of the lake bed and its subsequent parcelling into plots sold to marginalised Dalit migrants. As one member alleged:

"The ex-MLA with his people made the lake dry by digging channels into the lake, and thereafter he made farm-size lands and sold them to people for securing votes".⁹

This framing of 'encroachment'¹⁰— as the root cause of ecological decline — gained traction in the media and public discourse. However, the narrative was deeply problematic. It erased the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the migrants, who had acquired land believing it to be legal and settled in good faith. By portraying these residents as illegitimate outsiders and threats to the environment, the Samiti positioned middle-class environmental concerns as more legitimate and authoritative.

(ESG), available at: <https://esgindia.org/new/resources/media/no-mous-with-corporate-entities-for-lake-maintenance-karnataka-high-court>.

⁹ Excerpt from an interview with one of the leaders from the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti.

¹⁰ Encroachment has become the dominant legal framework for addressing slums, particularly after the Almitra Patel judgment (2000), prioritising spatial illegality over housing vulnerability (Ramanathan, 2006; Bhan, 2016). Slums are framed as nuisances (Ghertner, 2015) and sites of criminality, corruption, and failed urban planning (Baviskar, 2011; Bhan, 2016; Bhuvania, 2016). This juridical framing often results in court interventions reinforcing a bourgeois environmentalist vision of a clean and orderly city (Coelho, 2020).

Figure 3: Some of the Media Coverage about Saving the Kempambudhi Lake during 2006-07. The Samiti's Focus on 'Illegal Encroachment' Quickly became a Rallying Cry in Media Coverage, but Its Narrative Largely Ignored the Nuances of How these Marginalised Groups Came to Occupy the Land.



Figure 4: A Few Photos of the Kempambudhi Lake Suffering from a Degrading Condition, as well as the Informal Settlements taking Place on the Lake's Southern Bank.



In their efforts to 'reclaim' the lake, the Samiti engaged with state institutions and made use of Right to Information (RTI) mechanisms to demarcate lake boundaries. These actions further entrenched the marginalisation of the Dalit migrant community. One activist recounted:

"Meanwhile, these people [the migrant slum] started constructing their own houses. They were all outsiders, not local people. We went to the Slum Board, started digging things, even filed an RTI, and then got all the right information. They showed me the

plans also. I questioned them and told them that this was a historical lake. According to the Monument Act [of 1960], you should not dig anywhere in and around 100 meters of the lake. Despite the act being there, how can you violate this? Then they kept quiet”.¹¹

Yet this approach was selective. While informal settlements by migrant communities were publicly targeted, other encroachments – particularly by nearby temples – were conspicuously overlooked. Despite their equally ambiguous legal status, temples were never called out or challenged, exposing a clear alignment with dominant religious and caste interests.

Similarly, the Samiti’s environmental vision failed to engage the Madiwala (Dhobi) community, the traditional users of the lake with deep ecological and cultural ties to the space. Their absence from the leadership and campaigns of the Samiti speaks to a broader failure to build an inclusive environmental movement.

The Samiti’s activism, while effective in compelling the state to act against corruption and visible neglect, reflected the wider contradictions of middle-class environmentalism in urban India. Rooted in concerns over aesthetics, legality, and heritage, such activism often sidelines the lived realities and rights of marginalised groups.

Participation in the Nearby Temples

The temples located around Kempambudhi Lake played a visible role in the lake’s restoration efforts, aligning themselves with the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti and advocating for the revival of cultural practices such as the Teppotsava (Float Festival)¹². The temples’ framing of environmental degradation often revolves around maintaining the lake’s ‘purity’, which serves to align religious and cultural beliefs with ecological concerns. However, this notion of ‘purity’ has also been instrumentalised by the temple authorities to position themselves as protectors of the lake while simultaneously framing the Dalit migrant slum as a source of pollution and degradation.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the temple situated on the lake’s southern bank, which shares an access route with the adjacent Dalit migrant slum. The temple authorities have repeatedly expressed discomfort with this spatial proximity, characterising the slum not just as a source of physical pollution but as a social contaminant. The head priest stated,

“Who would like to visit a sacred place, crossing unclean paths and people? All classes of people were dumped here [the slum] irrespective of backwardness, caste, language, etc. They have all kinds of people there, from robbers to good ones. They always keep the path unclean. Because of that not only that the lake gets encroached

¹¹ Excerpt from an interview with one of leaders from the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti.

¹² Teppotsava, or Theppotsavam, is a Hindu festival celebrated in South India, where the temple deity is taken on a ceremonial boat procession (teppa) across a temple tank. At Kempambudhi Lake, this tradition featured the idol of Dodda Basavanna, adorned with flowers and lights, and marked the culmination of the Basavanagudi Kadalekayi Parishe. For more details, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theppotsavam>

and damaged but people also stopped visiting the temple and areas around. Earlier 10,000–15,000 people would come here weekly.”¹³

This account exposes how caste-based prejudices have been rearticulated through environmental discourse. The slum is portrayed not merely as an encroachment on sacred space but as a threat to its spiritual and social order. The invocation of “uncleanliness” extends beyond hygiene, tapping into deeply embedded anxieties about caste purity and spatial proximity to marginalised communities.

The construction of a wall during the restoration process, which now separates the slum from the lake, has only intensified the tensions. The temple authorities view this wall as a double-edged sword: ostensibly built to protect the lake from further encroachment, the wall now restricts the slum’s access to the lake, but it also limits the temple’s direct connection to the water.

Further complicating the issue is the selective application of encroachment laws. Though government authorities once marked the temple as an encroacher, enforcement was quietly relaxed. The differential treatment underscores the asymmetries of power that structure restoration processes where temples are absorbed into the narrative of cultural preservation, while marginalised groups are cast as obstacles to ecological renewal.

Local Residents

The area surrounding Kempambudhi Lake, located in Basavanagudi – one of Bengaluru’s oldest neighbourhoods – has undergone significant demographic and economic shifts since its integration into the Bengaluru MahanagaraPalike (BMP) in the late 1990s. Over the past two and a half decades, rapid urban expansion and intensified commercial investment have reshaped the character of the neighbourhood.

One of the most visible transformations has been the sharp escalation in land values, driven by increased commercial investments and urban expansion.

Land rates (average estimates in Rs per sq. mt) as per guidance value estimation

Location	1997-98	2016-17	2023-24 (Current Value)
Nanjambha Agrahara	5130	21500-37600	47000

Source: Bangalore Realtors Association India

This rise in land values catalysed the out-migration of older, propertied families who sold their properties to capitalise on inflated prices. The transformation of housing patterns accompanied these changes, as traditional, spacious homes gave way to multi-story residential structures. A returning resident remarked –

“A lot of open spaces have been bought, and new models of housing are coming up. So, generally, the population is increasing around the lake. That is what I feel, mostly three to four-floor houses. That is what you will see everywhere here. Earlier, it was a place with large, spacious houses with large trees lining the inside of the compound.

¹³ Excerpt from the interview with the head priest of the temple on the southern bank of the lake. The interview has been transcribed from Kannada to English language.

This was quite calm and peaceful. I can see the change happening on my street. Ours is the only house still on just one floor. Everywhere it is just towering over houses now".¹⁴

These transformations have not only altered the built environment but also weakened the community's historical engagement with the lake. The earlier generation of residents, many of whom were involved in civic efforts to restore and protect Kempambudhilake, have largely moved away. In their place are newer residents who, while using the lake as a recreational space, often lack awareness of its socio-ecological significance or the struggles that shaped its restoration. Field interviews revealed a noticeable disconnect between this new population and the lake's past, underscoring a broader decline in neighbourhood-based environmental stewardship.

Participation of the Washerfolk Community

Despite their historic ties with the lake, the washermen community, traditionally known as the Dhobis, remained largely invisible during the pre-restoration mobilisation led by the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti. Their exclusion deepened when the formal restoration process began. Framed as an ecological intervention, the project led to the demolition of the Dhobi Ghat under the justification that washing clothes contributed to the lake's degradation. This act erased not only a functional space but also a livelihood practice rooted in the community's identity and daily life. While other stakeholders increasingly viewed the lake through the lens of aesthetics and recreation, the Madiwalas had always seen it as a site of labour and survival.

During the survey phase of the restoration, several Madiwala households were declared illegal encroachments and demolished. Although a few were offered temporary resettlement through government housing schemes, many continue to live in uncertainty, waiting for permanent accommodations. Thus, rather than restoring community ties to the lake, the eco-restoration process actively severed them. It disempowered a group whose daily lives and cultural practices had long been interwoven with the lake. For state institutions and middle-class residents, the lake increasingly became a recreational amenity and a driver of property value – its function redefined through zoning regulations that banned traditional washing practices while encouraging walking paths, viewing decks, and birdwatching.

Janki Nair's (2005) observation that urban open spaces reflect conflicting values depending on who is using them resonates deeply here. At Kempambudhi, the use value of the lake, embodied by the Madiwala community's working relationship with it, has been systematically replaced by its exchange value, benefiting more powerful urban actors. The result is a landscape that appears restored, but remains socially exclusionary.

¹⁴ This excerpt is from an interview with a long-term resident of the Kempambudhilake area, who lived in the locality for several years before moving abroad at the beginning of the decade for several years. Having recently returned to the area, the resident now visits the lake regularly, providing valuable insights into the changes in the neighbourhood and its relationship with the lake over time.

The Migrant Slum and Restoration Dilemma

The Dalit migrant slum located along the southern edge of Kempambudhi Lake emerged as one of the most contested spaces during the lake's eco-restoration. Although the community has roots in the area stretching back over 60 years, their settlement near the lake intensified in the mid-2000s, a time when the lake was severely degraded, polluted, and partially dried up. Given the lack of basic services in their informal housing, residents relied on the lake for daily domestic needs such as washing and sanitation. Their use of the lake reflected practical survival rather than recreational or aesthetic intent.

However, as demands for the lake's rejuvenation grew – first from local activists and later from state and corporate actors – the slum's proximity to the lake became a point of tension. The everyday practices of slum residents came to be framed as incompatible with the emerging vision of a 'clean' and recreational urban lake. The contrast between the slum's use value of the lake and the exchange value pursued by middle-class residents and environmentalists revealed deep social divides.

Initiated with the Samiti's campaign, later during the restoration phase, the ENGO, being involved in the community mobilisation, further escalated the conflict by accusing the slum of being a major impediment to the lake's successful restoration, citing what they described as malpractices and illegal activities taking place in the lake's vicinity.

Although the slum was not forcibly evicted – a fate common in other urban restoration projects – the wall and broader governance practices effectively severed their access to the lake. For residents, this has meant negotiating both the right to remain in their homes and the right to be recognised as legitimate stakeholders in the lake's future. Despite holding land titles and being part of the local electoral polity, they are consistently framed as outsiders in environmental discourse. An official involved with the lake's administration stated:

"The local slum is a problem there. They do bad things there. We always keep an eye on them."¹⁵

Such perspectives are indicative of a property-centric model of environmentalism, where informal settlements are routinely cast as ecological threats (Coelho, 2020). The persistent framing of the slum as a nuisance by government bodies, NGOs, and resident associations alike has left deep scars. Residents face a compounded marginalisation shaped by caste, class, informal housing status, and limited political leverage. While the lake has been physically transformed, the eco-restoration has come at the cost of further alienating those who live closest to it, yet remain furthest from its imagined future.

Role of Governmental Institutions in the Eco-restoration of Kempambudhi Lake

Multiple government agencies were involved in the lake rejuvenation programme, each playing distinct roles during different phases of the project. With these agencies assuming command, the local civil society initiative, Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti, gradually faded from the scene. Its dissolution marked a pivotal shift: state institutions now absorbed the momentum and moral authority once held by non-state actors. In the absence of meaningful civil society engagement, the state was

¹⁵ Excerpt from the interview with the officials of the Kempambudhi Lake maintenance program.

free to reorient the project toward its vision, one that fused environmental sustainability with urban aesthetics. The resulting model of restoration emphasised recreational amenities such as landscaped parks, walking trails, and wetlands, aligning with upper- and middle-class imaginaries of a “world-class” lakefront.

However, the state’s approach to issues of encroachment and pollution reflected a more tactical form of governance. Like certain civil society actors, government institutions cast marginalised groups, particularly the Madiwala washermen and the Dalit migrant slum, as obstacles to ecological improvement (Baviskar, 2011; Mathur, 2012; Ghertner, 2015; Coelho, 2020). Yet, rather than resorting to overt eviction, as seen in many other Indian cities, the Kempambudhi project adopted subtler methods of exclusion. Some homes belonging to Madiwala families were razed, but full-scale displacement was avoided. In the case of the slum, the state revised the lake’s boundaries to accommodate the settlement, effectively formalising it.

This measured strategy allowed the state to sidestep direct confrontation while still asserting control. By extending partial benefits such as land rights, temporary housing, or tanker-supplied water, it offered marginalised communities a place within its governance framework, but only on terms set by the state. These concessions did not validate the communities’ historical or cultural claims to the lake. Instead, they served to neutralise resistance while erasing longstanding relationships with the waterbody.

In this balancing act, the state managed to satisfy competing interests: it responded to elite environmental concerns, contained potential dissent from affected communities, and maintained its authority over urban space. Yet the deeper logic of the restoration was not ecological rehabilitation, but statecraft. The restoration process became a vehicle through which the state reasserted its legitimacy, reorganised access to resources, and produced a sanitised, commodified version of nature.

Local Political Parties and the Eco-restoration of Kempambudhi Lake

The involvement of local political parties in the eco-restoration of Kempambudhi Lake highlights how urban environmental governance is deeply intertwined with political power. In the pre-restoration phase, political actors were alleged to have engaged in corrupt collaborations with real estate developers, enabling illegal encroachments that sought to commodify parts of the lake for electoral and financial gain. Although initially confronted by civil society organisations such as the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti, these politicians reoriented their roles once the state formally took charge of the restoration. Shifting from obstructionists to collaborators, they began to function as key intermediaries – translating state directives into local action while securing their political relevance within the restoration process.

This strategic repositioning allowed local politicians to align themselves with the state’s broader agenda of urban beautification and environmental management. At the same time, they played a crucial role in mediating the social tensions that arose from the displacement threats and disruptions experienced by marginalised communities, including the Madiwala washermen and the Dalit migrant slum residents. For these groups, elected representatives became essential actors in negotiating access, protection, or compensation amidst an increasingly exclusionary restoration process. As field accounts

reveal, slum residents, in particular, depended on local MLAs to counteract the marginalising practices of both civil society actors and ENGOs during the project's implementation.¹⁶

Interestingly, political actors became indispensable to ENGOs themselves from time to time. The neighbourhood association, formed in part of a community mobilisation project around the lake, reflected the intersection of politics and civil society. The involvement of local politicians thus transcended mere opportunistic engagement; they became vital players in sustaining the balance of power among state, market, and civil society actors. Their strategic positioning enabled them to act as negotiators, facilitating the state's objectives while also regulating tensions between various non-state actors involved in the project. In doing so, they reinforced the state's authority in executing the eco-restoration and, in effect, maintained the power relations that allowed for the state's broader goals of urban development to be realised. By navigating the complex socio-political landscape of Kempambudhi Lake, local political parties ensured that the eco-restoration was not merely a technical or environmental project but one deeply embedded in the politics of urban governance.

Corporate Organisation and its Participation

There were a few for-profit corporate organisations that engaged with the lake's restoration process, undertaking secondary tasks such as organising recreational amenities and conducting maintenance (plantation, wetland management). Funded through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, this involvement exercised greater control over the restoration process by the corporate actors.

In our interaction with a particular organisation, it is seen that, leveraging their financial resources, the organization employed labourers to carry out regular maintenance tasks, with "maintenance" becoming a critical keyword in their narrative of involvement. This term served to justify their extended presence in the eco-restoration process, positioning themselves as indispensable to the lake's post-restoration upkeep. As a corporate representative articulated,

"Around the lake, we have planted many native tree species, herbs, and all. And we maintained it with our labourers. Till we maintained it was in good shape. When they approached us, rejuvenation was in progress. At that time, we had planted a lot of wetland species, also, even in the floating islands. Once the lake was properly maintained, thousands of people started going around the lake in the morning and evening."¹⁷

This emphasis on 'maintenance' functions as a discursive strategy through which the corporate group legitimised its expanding control over the lake's resources and surrounding areas. The corporation not only provided financial and labour resources but also framed these contributions as crucial for the lake's ongoing viability. This narrative of indispensability is further reinforced by their reaction to the 2020 High Court order that curtailed their involvement,

"I feel we should fight for the rights again because it was corporate money they used to spend with the local help...Because the court order came, all the lakes got handed

¹⁶ Excerpt from the FGD conducted with a group of people from the migrant slum. The interview is translated from their native language to English.

¹⁷ Excerpt from the interview with personnel from the corporate organization.

to the government. Once it shifted to the government, yes in some places they maintained it. I don't want to put it negatively, but in most of the places, they could not."¹⁸

This reaction underscores the organisation's self-perception as a key stakeholder, where their financial investment is viewed as a source of entitlement to continued control over the lake. In doing so, they also established a hegemonic presence that overshadowed the involvement of local neighbourhood associations and civic groups, which had previously played a central role in advocating for the lake's restoration. The corporation's financial power and its proximity to state institutions further enabled this process with the aim of strategic management of the local neighbourhood. A representative from the organisation highlighted their approach to managing local stakeholders,

"It's always you have to handle everything diplomatically; you have to take the neighbours on good terms because they are locals... People started supporting us with our work, and because of that support only we have maintained it quite well. But the water body is not of course in their control anymore."¹⁹

Additionally, the reliance on CSR to fund such projects reveals a broader trend of integrating urban ecological spaces into circuits of capital proliferation. The deliberate transformation of a vital ecological space into commodifiable land illustrates how capital forces encroach upon urban lakes, especially those like Kempambudhi, whose boundaries between land and water remain ambiguously defined, making them vulnerable to exploitation in the face of rapid urbanisation (Coelho, 2020). By aligning CSR with measurable outcomes and corporate self-interest, projects like Kempambudhi Lake extend the nodes for capital circulation.

Role of the Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation

The role of environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) in urban environmental movements over recent decades has been diverse, ranging from radical and anti-establishment approaches to state-enabled, corporate-sponsored organisations. ENGOs often find themselves negotiating a complex terrain between these extremes. In the case of the Kempambudhi Lake Eco-restoration Project, the ENGO that I interviewed largely focused on recreational enhancements and secondary infrastructural work. However, alongside these recreational efforts, the ENGO was also tasked with the responsibility of community mobilisation to support the lake's everyday governance.

As part of this mobilisation, the ENGO formed a local neighbourhood association, predominantly composed of local propertied residents. Notably, the Madiwala community, historically associated with the lake, was excluded from this association. This exclusion was rationalised through the flawed assumption that the Madiwalas no longer depended on the lake. This selective mobilisation not only marginalised the Madiwala community but also exacerbated tensions with the Dalit migrant slum near the lake. The ENGO's approach to the slum was one of vilification, framing the residents as "anti-environmental" and engaged in socially undesirable activities. The construction of a recreational

¹⁸ Excerpt from the interview with personnel from the corporate organisation.

¹⁹ Excerpt from the interview with personnel from the corporate organisation.

infrastructure became a flashpoint, leading to a prolonged confrontation between the ENGO and slum residents, who resisted this intervention on the grounds that it ignored their needs.

Instead of engaging with the needs of marginalised populations, the ENGO intensified their marginalisation by framing them as obstacles to the project's success. The ENGO's exclusionary environmentalism, practiced under the guise of community mobilisation, ultimately reinforced the state's agenda of marginalising these communities in the post-restoration period, and also consolidated state and corporate power over the space, transforming the lake into a capital-intensive urban asset.

The ENGO's selective mobilisation strategy, which favoured local elites, contributed to deepening social divisions within the neighbourhood and narrowed the space for genuine civil society engagement. This fragmentation allowed for the consolidation of a state-market nexus, effectively sidelining any alternative or community-led approaches to lake governance.

Discussions

From our analysis, I have identified two primary factors that have shaped the Kempambudhi Lake eco-restoration project into a socially contested urban space.

Social Fragmentation in Civil Society Engagement – In the pre-restoration phase, civil society actors were instrumental in initiating efforts to save Kempambudhi Lake from pollution and encroachment. However, the nature of civil society engagement was far from inclusive. Rather than fostering a broad-based coalition that embraced all local user groups, these actors adopted a fragmented and exclusionary approach, marginalising key stakeholders in the local neighbourhood who also had historically legitimate claims to the lake.

The fragmentation of civil society in this context was deeply rooted in the caste and other social identities of the actors involved. For instance, Dalit migrant slum residents faced systematic exclusion due to their caste identities, as civil society actors, particularly those affiliated with local temples, failed to recognise them as legitimate stakeholders. Similarly, the Madiwalas, a community of traditional washermen who historically depended on the lake for their livelihoods, were met with scepticism and alienation. Their claims to the lake were often dismissed by civil society actors, who questioned their patterns of usage and traditional ties to the space.

Further compounding these exclusions were narratives around migration and encroachment. The Dalit migrant slum was labelled as the "primary encroachers" of the lake land, reinforcing their marginalisation through discourses of illegitimacy and environmental degradation. These narratives, perpetuated by a section of civil society and supported by media representations, positioned these communities as adversaries of restoration efforts. This framing ignored the lived realities and historical claims of these marginalised groups, reflecting a deliberate process of social exclusion aimed at consolidating elite actors' control over the lake. The restoration project, in effect, produced a social space characterised by unequal power relations, where caste, class, and other identities intersected to deepen exclusions.

The failure to incorporate the N.K. Patil Guidelines (2011), designed to ensure inclusive restoration processes by recognising the needs and claims of local communities, further underscores the exclusionary realities. In the Kempambudhi Lake project, these recommendations were blatantly

disregarded. The dissolution of the Samiti, which had initially led the movement to save the lake, exemplifies how the lack of an inclusive and sustainable organisational framework hindered the potential for cohesive engagement.

As civil society participation diminished, a power vacuum emerged, paving the way for the state and market actors to dominate the restoration process. This transition of power marked a shift in the dynamics of the project, as the absence of inclusive civil society engagement allowed the eco-restoration project to align more closely with elite environmental ideals. The lack of inclusive, vigilant civil society engagement resulted in an eco-restoration project that deprived local communities of their traditional rights over the lake. This dynamic is emblematic of a broader trend in urban environmental governance, where sustainability projects often reinforce existing social hierarchies rather than challenge them.

State-Corporate-NGO Nexus – The transition of power in the Kempambudhi Lake restoration project from a fragmented civil society engagement to the ascendancy of state institutions during the restoration phase marks a critical shift in the dynamics of urban eco-restoration. Through its apparatuses, including local political parties, the state strategically aligned with market forces to reorient the project according to its interests. This alignment, which formed a powerful nexus between the state, corporate, and NGO, not only reshaped the direction of the restoration but also systematically displaced civil society as a legitimate force in the process. By positioning themselves as the central non-state actors in the project, the NGO and corporate group appropriated the roles that civil society actors might have played, assuming control over secondary restoration tasks and, crucially, the everyday maintenance of the lake. This consolidation of power marginalised the potential for meaningful local neighbourhood engagement, rendering grassroots involvement almost obsolete.

The NGO's so-called 'community mobilisation' efforts, conducted in concert with state institutions and corporate actors, further exacerbated social fragmentation within the local community. By reigniting confrontations with the urban poor and marginalised groups living adjacent to the lake, the NGO contributed to the exclusion of these communities, ensuring that the state-corporate-NGO nexus maintains dominance over the eco-restoration process. This widening divide effectively transformed Kempambudhi Lake into a contested urban space, where issues of access and rights to the lake became a battleground between elite environmental ideals and the practices of marginalised communities who had long relied on the lake for their livelihoods.

Conclusion

The discourse of eco-restoration, as it is shaped in the context of Bengaluru, holds significant potential for fostering an inclusive environmental movement, one that could transform lakes into socially and culturally inclusive ecological spaces. This potential is explicitly recognised in the 2011 N.K. Patil Guidelines, which envision the role of lakes as vital communal resources that integrate environmental sustainability with community rights. Importantly, this demonstrates that the discourse of eco-restoration is not inherently bound to a bourgeois vision of environmentalism. On the contrary, it provides the foundation for reimagining urban environments in ways that benefit all segments of society.

However, to prevent eco-restoration from becoming co-opted by the exclusive and elitist logic of capitalist urbanism, robust and inclusive civil society participation is indispensable. Without such engagement, the "geometry of power" that shapes the implementation of eco-restoration on the ground often leads to skewed outcomes, where projects devolve into elite-driven environmental sustainability efforts that marginalise the urban poor. The Kempambudhi Lake restoration project is a case in point: Here, the strong state-market nexus curtailed community rights and cut off access for marginalised populations, illustrating the consequences of insufficient civil society engagement. The exclusion of these communities reveals a fundamental flaw in the process, one that can only be addressed through a fundamentally inclusive civil society presence.

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Image Sources

Figure 1: Map of Bangalore City, prepared by the Survey of India in 1935. Collected from the Mythic Society.

Figure 2: Combined through Google Earth Image and the Open City Map

Figure 3 & 4: Sourced from an ex-activist of the Kempambudhi Kere Ulisi Andolana Samiti

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