

Resilience of Bengaluru's civic activism wins again

BY DIVYA SHEKHAR, ET BUREAU | FEB 23, 2018, 10.08 AM IST

[Post a Comment](#)

An online petition clocking over 61,200 signatures in two days. A digital initiative inspired by the Chipko Movement creating a photo-bank of people hugging trees. A trending social media hashtag called 'MaraKadiBedi' — don't cut trees, in Kannada. A missed call campaign having 40,000 citizens dialling the offices of their elected representatives to register protest. Ten activists, dressed in green, demonstrating outside Vidhana Soudha on the days assembly sat in session.



If it had gone ahead with the amendment, as many as 50 species of trees, most of which are in abundance in Bengaluru, would have been denotified, leaving them vulnerable to the axe.

The resilience of India's startup hub civic activism won yet again. Faced with another steel flyover-like protest when the Assembly polls are just about two months away jolted the [Congress](#) regime. Chief minister [Siddaramaiah](#) obviously did not want another disaster of the type seen in 2013 in [Bengaluru](#) City, when bulk of the seats went to the [BJP](#). The Congress veteran, who is pulling out all stops to redeem the party's image among Bengaluru voters by launching a series of projects in the city, quickly scaled back the amendment his government proposed to the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act (KPTA), 1976.

If it had gone ahead with the amendment, as many as 50 species of trees, most of which are in abundance in Bengaluru, would have been denotified, leaving them vulnerable to the axe.

"Only after tabling the Bill did we realise that people may misuse the amendment and resort to mindless cutting of trees... This would not only cause greater damage to the already worsening environment but also reduce the forest cover of the state. Hence, the government has decided to withdraw the proposed amendments to the Act," Law and Parliamentary Affairs minister TB Jayachandra told the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday.

According to BBMP forest department statistics, 17,764 trees have been cut in the past decade to make way for infrastructure projects like metro, flyovers and road widening. As many as 11,731 trees were cut at the request of the public and local political representatives since they were decayed or unstable. This paints a dismal picture, considering that a 2015 [Indian Institute of Science](#) (IISc) study pointed out that in just four years from 2010, vegetation cover in Bengaluru had reduced by 62%.

Bengaluru might be India's garden city but a compelling sense of environment protection and preservation is missing among policy makers. Trees and natural heritage either get the lowest priority or are completely sidelined. So while the withdrawal of the KPTA amendment proposal announces another victory for the city's strong civic activism spirit, it is also a warning bell that signals the need for a mindset change in governance where trees are the first casualty for any infrastructure project.

IN RMP WE TRUST

"It seems like we are fighting something new every morning," said Tara Krishnaswamy, member, Citizens for Bengaluru (CfB), referring to how citizen activists spent the past many months protesting against one tree-insensitive infrastructure project after another. Right from the steel flyover project and the Old Airport Road signalfree corridor to the Jayamaharal Palace road widening and the KPTA amendment.

"One solution is that the Revised Master Plan (RMP) 2031 should detail certain principles around which Bengaluru should be built."

The first of these golden rules, she explained, is to internalise the notion that a city must be built for its living creatures, including trees, and not for cars, flyovers or skywalks.

"Tree felling can be considered for mass rapid transit like the metro that stands to benefit lakhs of people but all other projects must

have active public consultation,” Krishnaswamy said. “The RMP should also focus on decentralising ward-level committees and corporators. Empower them to solve issues at a local level with greater citizen engagement.”

According to Priya Chetty-Rajagopal, founder, Heritage Beku, it is essential for the government to realise that planning and heritage can go hand-in-hand. “Government has to be on the same side as the people when this is concerned, otherwise citizens will only end up using their intellect to stop unwanted projects instead of concentrating on those that make lives better,” she said, emphasising that until the RMP finds a solution, not a single tree should be endangered.

CASE FOR TOUGH LAW

Appu Rao, deputy conservator of forests, BBMP Forest Cell, said the city corporation is actively developing a model for comprehensive, community-led tree census, something that has been in the making for years now and will also work closely with people to ensure that trees are not unduly cut.

Similarly, Brijesh Kumar Dikshit, additional PCCF, Karnataka Forest Department, said that it is important to widen the consultation net and increase the number of community stakeholders who are part of the planning process. “It would help to codify details about how and where public consultation meetings are held when more than 50 trees have to be cut for an infrastructure project. A broader level of consensus would be good,” he said. “I have also instructed the district-level tree authorities to be more active in conservation, preservation and propagation of trees.”

While Environment Support Group’s Leo Saldanha believed that Bengaluru needs to create a new, stronger tree legislation instead of tinkering with the existing provisions, Harini Nagendra, professor of sustainability at Azim Premji University, said that inter-departmental coordination must be improved. “Infrastructure projects are only planned from an engineering perspective and officials go to the tree officers only for approval. The latter ends up doing it under political pressure. This approach is short-sighted.”