

## The problem

OVER the last two decades, Bangalore (now officially known as Bengaluru) has undergone not only a rapid spatial and demographic expansion but also far-reaching social, economic and environmental changes. From all the talk about Bangalore as the epicentre of India's IT industry with its emergent 'world-class' infrastructure, one could conjure in the mind's eye a digitally enabled city that is hyper efficient, generating high revenues and meeting the needs of the world's most savvy professionals.

In reality, Bangalore's municipal government is bankrupt, the city and its rural periphery are suffering from extreme drought and when it does rain, the city's streets flood (a new phenomenon) – leading many people to question the recent pattern of unbridled urban development and how the city has been planned (or not). Slums continue to expand (but the same cannot be said of the incomes of the poor), unbearable road congestion has produced air pollution almost as bad as Delhi's, and the water and climate crises have been exacerbated by the filling up of lakes for construction and the felling of thousands of trees for road widening projects meant to (irrationally) accommodate the accelerating growth of private vehicles.

Smart? Efficient? Sustainable? Fed up and angry, the public has been speaking out against Bangalore's unbridled development. The latest proposed scheme to ease the city's traffic woes, the infamous steel flyover, was the subject of widespread public protests. It was vilified as an example of crony capitalism and deemed overpriced and of little utility, the project was finally dropped by the Karnataka state government.

In trying to grasp the essence and complexity of the problems facing the city, we find it useful to consider what is *distinctive* about Bangalore's urban transformation, and ask what a focus on India's fastest growing city could contribute to a sharper understanding of the 'great transformation' – and its alternatives – of urban India today. Below is a brief outline for such a possible agenda.

First, much of the urban studies scholarship on India has been driven by work on mega-cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, and to a lesser extent, Chennai and Kolkata. The emphasis on mega-cities inflects the urban turn in Indian scholarship in particular ways – with its focus on slum evictions, migrant lives, the new middle class and changing consumption patterns, new forms of social and judicial activism, pollution and waste, municipal water, and 'world-class' aesthetics. While some of these themes are evident in scholarship on Bangalore, the story of the city's transformation also shares much in common with smaller cities such as Hyderabad and Pune – as an IT hub with an underbelly of land grabbing in the surrounding rural areas, rapid and high-end real estate development, and crippling ecological impacts.

Second, whether analysing the world city, mega-city or IT hub, scholars, policy analysts and activists often compare Indian cities to iconic places such as Singapore, Shanghai or Rio in their attempt to grasp the transnational forces and features that cut across sites. Many strive to understand what makes urban practices both distinctive and interrelated, so as to generate more general insights into what promotes social rights and justice in the city and what does not.

Bangalore may be considered distinctive in at least four domains, all of which call for greater scrutiny:

1. Non-representative administrative bodies and parastatal agencies – e.g., Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board (KIADB), Bangalore International Airport Area Planning Authority (BIAAPA) – have become quite powerful in shaping Bangalore's urban development and governance systems. Their proliferation in Bangalore has provided a model for other cities to follow, but one that is being aggressively challenged for its decisively undemocratic principles and practices.

2. Activism around ecological issues has intensified and expanded to address wide-ranging social issues. State projects to remake the city are regularly halted by middle class constituents protesting the mismanagement of solid waste, rampant tree felling for road widening and other infrastructure projects, and the encroachment and poisoning of lakes. These well publicized street protests and signature campaigns have taken place in parallel with a series of protests by garment workers, street vendors, autorickshaw drivers and waste pickers. For these struggling workers, the issues range from dangerous/unhealthy work conditions, shrinking public space, police harassment, criminalization of their work, and unjust pay and benefit practices.

The former reflects an evolution from a narrow 'bourgeois environmentalism' to a broader intervention seeking a different kind of urban eco-sociality, one that unites their interests with those of the working poor who service the city's needs. The latter type of protest reflects the self-organizing capacity of precarious, non-unionized and contract workers realizing their collective power in numbers and relative influence across the city. Their disruptive protests reveal the worsening nature of their living and working conditions, with rents and prices rapidly rising and the new culture of 'cleansing' and upgrading the city leading to direct harassment of low caste and working class communities. As these two broad constituents begin to converge and overlap in their campaigns, this hybrid culture of activism could represent a model for urban politics different from what is happening in Delhi, Mumbai or Pune.

3. Bangalore's historical concentration of state owned academic and research institutions and manufacturing establishments offers a stark contrast to today's privatized city. The precursor to Bangalore's IT city is the 'public city', one that provided substantial formal employment and subsidized employee-management housing colonies, with English medium schools, transport and public services and goods that were (differentially and hierarchically) available to most of the permanent staff at these facilities. Up to the mid-1980s, the majority of municipal corporators worked at these public institutions, and advocated for a strikingly different government philosophy than today's, when many local representatives are involved directly with the real estate boom. The public city generated a public culture and sensibilities that still linger in

Bangalore, and motivate much of the activism today centred on the shrinking of public spaces, access to public goods and services and opportunities for deliberative democracy.

4. The political economy of land development, reflected in the sheer rate of urban growth and explosion in land values, sets Bangalore apart from most metro cities in India, and from other IT cities such as Hyderabad, Pune and Gurgaon. The real estate boom has been generative of three interlinked and retrograde processes: (a) it is a major obstacle for non-elite rural farmers and producers who are forced to give up their land, and who usually receive insufficient compensation to get back into the land market for farming; (b) it has been highly damaging to rural and urban ecological systems and institutions, replacing watersheds, sacred groves, forests, pastures, ponds and Bangalore's famous interlinked tank or 'lake' system with concrete urban projects, thus undermining the ecological basis of the city – in particular its carrying capacity to sequester and retain water; and (c) it has created a parallel land based economy of extortion and land grabbing that is systematically enriching some bureaucratic and political actors while alienating many non-elite producers and workers from access to land, the commons and their earlier livelihoods.

In January 2014, the mayor declared Bangalore bankrupt and had to use the Town Hall building and many vibrant public markets as collateral to underwrite loans to the BBMP from public banks; furthermore, bank debt was being used (unsustainably) to pay city workers and maintain basic government functions. This is precisely what happened to Spanish cities after the 2008 global financial crisis, which suggests that the volatile financial dimension of this urban logic is not unique to India. Cities that must borrow from banks to pay their workers are not on fiscally sound ground, and invariably have to rule with a different logic. That logic involves searching for 'low value' public space and buildings that can be converted to 'higher value' developments, 'unlocking' the value of land as current international policy prescriptions advise. Indeed, since the national obligation to decentralize governance was paired with the mandate to privatize investments, city governments have increasingly turned to the business of scavenging and recycling public wares and goods. The very attributes that give Bangalore its vitality – open air green spaces; active fruit, vegetable and spice markets; lakes and tanks, parks, gardens and trees; art galleries; and multifunctional roads and footpaths – are being actively transformed into real estate and marketed to the highest bidder.

The dominance and spread of this new urban logic is being critiqued in multiple, creative ways. As artists and artisans point out, this struggle over Bangalore's physical public space has an equally powerful discursive register – the dream of the 'global city' – which they are challenging and striving to replace with alternative imaginings of a more humane and ecologically attuned city that serves the needs of its non-elite majority. Bangalore has recently come alive with expressions of protest that inspire collective action in support of ideas of a livable, just and sustainably linked city and countryside. No longer are street protests merely about the desecration of the city's famous gardens or avenue trees. Today, many people are getting involved in redefining city life as well as democracy: as *demos + kratia*, or rule by the people.

Not yet integrated into this urban discussion, however, are the tens of thousands of farmers whose land, water and livelihoods are being sacrificed in the service of the logic of reckless urbanization. One day in March 2016, hundreds of tractors filled with angry farmers took the city

by surprise, clogging major arteries to demand public support to offset the region's severe drought and the longer-term problem of water shortage. The question of how to stop the encroachment and impoverishment of the countryside is a critical one for any serious deliberation about India's urban future.

This issue on Bangalore's 'Great Transformation' comes out of a workshop by the same name, organized at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore in June 2016. The workshop brought together a diverse set of scholars, activists and artists from a variety of fields and concerns to share their work and thoughts. Almost all the essays in this issue started as workshop presentations, which led to productive discussions and debates about the past, present and future of India's premier 'global city'.<sup>1</sup>

Discussions at the workshop revealed various facets of Bangalore's ongoing transformation, especially the intimate and contradictory relationships between the rural and the urban and the drastic changes taking place in peri-urban spaces where local communities are threatened by direct and indirect dispossession; the regular subversion of planning norms through collusion between politicians, real estate developers and other key actors; the rise and increasing power of new privatized and corporate dominated governance systems; the role of real estate speculation in driving Bangalore's unruly and highly iniquitous urbanization process, which accords little consideration to sustainability or equitable use of public resources such as water; and the demise of the commons which have played a critical role in the sustenance of livelihoods, nature and social justice.

The changing ecology of the city is underpinned by growing spatial, social and economic inequalities, as mobile workers (waste pickers, street vendors, drivers, domestic workers and the like) continue to eke out an existence in the interstices of the globally visible IT economy – for which their labour is central even as they are pushed to its margins. But working class and middle class residents alike have begun to fight back against an urban environment and political system that have gotten out of control, where it is difficult to pin blame on any single agency or class for the increasing cost of living, pollution, or displacement.

These resentments are finding expression in a range of new social movements, activist organizations, residents' welfare associations and artist groups which, while coming from very different ideological and class positions, are converging around a sense of impending disaster. This outpouring of protest and the effervescence of civic and social activism provide some measure of hope to many, that out of Bangalore's urban crisis new modes of democratic development will emerge.

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**Footnote:**

1. The workshop was the final event of a research project carried out by Michael Goldman, Vinay Gidwani and Carol Upadhy, in collaboration with Environment Support Group (ESG), Bangalore, funded by a Global Spotlights grant from the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change (ICGC), University of Minnesota. We are grateful to the funding agency for its support and to all the participants in the workshop and our contributors for their sustained enthusiasm for this project. We thank Rashmi M. for editorial assistance and Kaveri Medappa for copy editing and other support.