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Bangalore Lake story: reflections on the spirit of a place

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This article is based on an ethnographic case study conducted during a small project on the public-private development of lakes in Bangalore. Using conceptualizations of place and implacement as developed by scholars such as Casey and Anderson, this article unpacks the relationship between sociopolitical processes and modification of landscape during the implementation of a public–private partnership lake development project of Hebbal Lake. The disappearance of designated places along the lakeshore that are accessible to different users tends to favor a monoculture of consumer experiences, which can be seen as a hidden form of displacement of other users. I suggest that by physically modifying the “places” on the lakeshore that once supported multiple human-geographical interactions, certain people can experience displacement even if they are allowed to access the lake.

Keywords: place-making; Bangalore; lake conservation; development; displacement

Understanding place, place-making, and lake development

“There was a holy man,1 who used to come here to this place on new moon nights to worship the goddess with rites and chants. This is the tree under which he sat. I would hide and watch.” The respondent, MR, from the village of Hebbal, had reported thus, pointing to an old tree on the eastern banks of the Hebbal Lake, in Bangalore, India during one of our first interviews in the field in 2006. I looked for the tree in 2011, and it had disappeared. The place remained in my head, marked only by a memory and my imagination. A truck was parked on a brown landfill-like area covered with concrete rubble, lake silt, and stone. The tree was gone, leaving me with a sense of loss, and an uncomfortable feeling of being disoriented. The new space had no tree or any space for participating in the ritual on new moon nights. Casey (1993, p. 37) explains that the process of implacement or making a space into a place “acculturates whatever ingredient it borrows from the natural world, whether these are bodies or landscapes or ordinary things.” The human being identifies...

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these places through meanings she or he ascribes to them. When places change, people’s relationship to a space changes and that influences their access to and use of such a space.

I postulate in this essay that any change in these elements will automatically result in a form of “displacement,” where a person can no longer relate to the landscape and is thereby made to feel different. This feeling of displacement can be similar to the experience of leaving behind a place, moving, and then encountering a new place. However, when a familiar landscape changes, as recounted above, one experiences this feeling of displacement even though one’s location has not changed. In developing countries, the term displacement is often used interchangeably with forced migration. It is to denote the shifting and moving of people from their familiar surroundings. I am suggesting here that displacement need not be a direct process of evicting people or moving them out from a place. Instead the process could be indirect, by displacing the familiar and the symbolic features that give meaning and identity to people.

Bangalore or Bengaluru, sometimes called the “Silicon Valley of India,” is a rapidly growing urban center and the capital city of the state of Karnataka in southern India. The image of this city as a place with wide roads, glass-fronted buildings, and huge shopping malls derives in large measure from the vision of urban planners. Also included in this vision is the creation of public recreational spaces such as parks and lakefronts. Across the city, the older landscapes are being changed, and transformed to give Bangalore a “facelift.”

One would not normally associate the word development with a lake. Instead one would talk about “lake management” or “lake conservation.” However, in Bangalore, a parastatal body called the Lake Development Authority (LDA) was set up to manage and conserve the rapidly disappearing water bodies within the city limits. A parastatal body is a government-owned corporation (such as the water supply board or the power distribution board) that can function on behalf of the government for specific purposes. The LDA was created to manage the lakes of Bangalore, and by maintaining them, the LDA gains the capacity to project the city’s image on and through them.

This article draws extensively from a study on the “anthropology of a lake” conducted by the author and two other colleagues from 2006 to 2008 (Baindur et al. 2007). In this essay, I describe our methods of studying the Lake as a place, and then outline a brief history of the Lake. To place the study in context, this is followed by a summary of the various changes that occurred to its management prior to as well as during our study. Conceptual frameworks required to understand the issues around lake development are discussed through a survey of selected literature about place and cultural geography. A discussion of these categories, interspersed with some of our observations from the field, follows next. I use this research as a case study to understand why, even though the lake is a public space, many users of the lake experienced alienation from a familiar place as a result of the lake development process.
Exploring the lake as a place

Studying an urban landscape such as Hebbal Lake presented some unique problems. Interdisciplinary methods of research had to be used. Scholars have pointed out that geographical features, such as a lake in this case, reflect cultural and symbolic values not merely utilitarian values. According to Norberg-Schulz, “the meaning of space depends on the cultural capital of society, as well as on many external conditions ... environmental, economic, politic, religious, which directly or indirectly influence the forms and significance of places and features” (1999, cited in Czepczyński 2008, p. 36). As Tuan (1974) suggests, the lifestyles of people in cities generate spatial patterns that give rise to the architectural forms which again influence the patterning of activities. Theories of how landscapes and buildings act as public symbols are well researched (see for instance, Borer 2006).

The distinction between the functional and the symbolic worth of the various constructed elements around a lake and the conceptualization of its development are discussed and understood from the standpoint of cultural geography rather than from just a socioeconomic perspective or from an urban governance perspective. It was felt the geography of the lake had something unique that was being missed in other perspectives of study. Rigorous yet descriptive categories were used to capture the various aspects of the geography of the lake, its history, the users, as well as the sociopolitical conditions around lake development. One of the fundamental descriptions we wanted to capture in our study was the cultural and social symbols the lake represented for its users. Through a pilot study a list of all possible categories of people who interact with Hebbal Lake was created. The list included direct and indirect users, policy-makers, managers, sponsors, stall owners, tenants, volunteers, contractors, groundskeepers, watchmen, and wildlife experts. Interviews with about 30 users and visitors were conducted at the lake site. To talk to people, we used structured and unstructured interviews, discussions, and mail communications. We attempted to capture the meaning that the particular lake had for these different groups. We let the people construct the narratives around the lake with minimal input or guidance from us. To document the creation and history of the landscape and the different phases of its management, we relied on both oral narratives of the local residents, the officials from the government, and volunteers from a non-governmental organization, the Thoreau Society. For the interviews with the everyday users of the lake, we visited the lake at least six times during different seasons. The open-ended interviews lasted from 10 minutes to an hour and were initiated with an open question about people’s relationship to the lake—who they were and why had they come to the lakeshore. Most of the respondents were at ease talking to us in the local language and we let them tell us their stories of the lake in the way they wanted, asking questions only to clarify. We made sure, through occasional interjections, that the story had a “past, now, in the future” to understand how the various changes were being experienced by
the people. Wherever possible, we cross-checked the facts with other interviewees and historical sources, both primary and secondary. This allowed us to gather multiple narratives and also provided us with insights that would have not been possible without interdisciplinary methods.

Partway through our project, the media drew attention to the attempt of the LDA to “privatize” the public space, and this resulted in a huge outcry that was widely reported in the media (Gandhi and Shivanand 2007). We attempted to interview LDA officials involved in managing the lake project, but because of all the media attention, these officials declined to meet with us. Therefore, we did not have the personal voices of the LDA officials, except through their newspaper interviews. We did, however, use documentation and reports from other researchers and activist groups, as well as copies of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and lake development plans to understand the management policies of LDA and the hotel group (which has leased the lake since 2006 and is discussed further below). The actual physical landscape of the Hebbal Lake was also studied by field visits and regular physical surveys from the accessible vantage points during different times and seasons. We also documented through photographs and videos, some of the tangible landscape changes that were happening along the lakeshore that had an impact on the users of the lake over time. The study gave us a rich description of the social, economic, political, and cultural issues around the Lake Development project. Our field notes were posted on the Sarai-net and a blog as an exercise in creative commons. The research was participatory as well as activist in nature. We recognized that we as researchers were biased against what we perceived as the “privatization” of the Hebbal Lake. Being aware of our bias helped us to be self-reflexive; however, and we did not try and force responses from people who did not support our claims.

**Place, geography, and people**

Places make up the fabric of cultural life, insists Anderson (2010), who adds that we cannot escape places since they are all around us. Both Tuan (1977) and Casey (1993) have worked extensively on the idea of place and the ways in which space and place are related. Descartes, in his work *Meditations on first philosophy*, also refers to the related notion of place. Place, for Descartes (Ariew 2000, p. 258) refers to a body’s size, shape, and position relative to other bodies. Place, therefore, is a relative property. Space, for Tuan (1977, p. 12), is related to the movement of a human body within a dimensional construct. Place is related to space, and these two ideas are interconnected in the experience of human beings. Tuan (1977, p. 17) in his work on space and place explains this connection: “Place is a type of object. Places and objects define space, giving it a geometric personality.”

Casey (2001, p. 683) also makes an argument for distinguishing clearly between the notion of place and space. He defines space as “the volumetric
void in which things (including human beings) are positioned.” Place is distinguished as “the immediate environment of the lived body—an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural” (p. 683). Such a world of places is just not inhabited or occupied but also lived through and experienced. Tuan (1977, p. 6) also explains how space becomes place: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” Place, viewed in this perspective, is just not a container for experiences that are available to our body. In the essay, “The Phenomenon of Place,” Norberg-Schulz (2003, pp. 119–122) writes that our everyday world often consists of such concrete phenomena which are tangible, besides it also includes intangible elements of experience such as the feelings associated with these spaces.

Andrew and Duncan (1989, cited in Anderson 2010, p. 39) describe place as co-constitutive of three parts—location, locale, and sense of place. While location indicates an objective point in space represented by a grid or axis of reference, locale describes the background of the natural, social, and built environment that makes everyday human experiences possible. It is often described as the feel and ethos of a place. The third part of place is the sense of place and it relates to the affective component of human beings and space. Anderson (2010) also suggests that this aspect of place is often marginalized in social sciences as it relates to emotional connections. However, as we found in our study, it is this component that the respondents continuously tried to communicate to us. For the people who visit Lake Hebbal, the tangible elements of the lake are not parts of a sterile physical space. Rather, each of these elements is associated with meanings and emotions that create a sense of place. Understanding sense of place is crucial to understanding place. Anderson (2010) writes:

…sense of place is the key way in which humans, culture, and environment are united together. We can perhaps imagine our own places and the ways in which we might be tied to, or defined to some extent, by our connection with place. … These place attachments, or senses of place, are often individual, but sometimes collective. (p. 39)

Czepczyński (2008, p. 28) also points out that:

Cultural landscape is one of the main representing languages of modern society, which signifies the spiritual dimension of the investors, architects, and users. The context is central to understand the landscape, as it frames and embodies economic, social, and cultural processes.

Designated place-narratives do not exist in the mere imagination of the people but are represented for them in tangible elements of human architecture or artifacts which serve as markers. These markers are objects and in Tuan’s (1977, p. 187) words, “Objects anchor time.” Sometimes these markers are natural parts of the landscape like a tree or a rock, at other times these are
human-made—like a fence or a stone jetty. We found in our interviews that these markers become important for people to understand their place and are conceptualized as designated place. This idea of designated place extends Casey’s notion of place to an indexical and semiotic category. One could also say it is similar in meaning to “trace.” Casey (2001, cited in Anderson 2010) points out that humans are involved in place-making by “leaving a range of traces in different sites;” and these also affect our identity—traces and their meaning come to influence how we feel and respond, as well as how we think about the world and where we belong.” Later in the essay, we shall see how these markers play an important role in people’s feelings of displacement.

Other categories used to study places and particularly natural places are access and rights to access. Schlager and Ostrom (1992) describe different communities of people who have different access rights to resources in terms of ownership, withdrawal rights, and management rights. In the case of Hebbal Lake, our study showed that we could clearly use these categories to understand the different users of the lake, but these categories would not fully capture the various negotiations and practices on the ground that seemed to operate in very ambiguous ways, particularly the role of landscape and geographical features.

D’Souza (2010), who has studied the lakes in Bangalore area, during a public presentation pointed out that a keré (as it is called in Kannada) has a different conceptualization from the concept of a lake. According to him, while a keré includes the bunds, wetlands, and the shores, a lake is much more about the bounded water. D’Souza (2010) suggests that this is a result of the interaction between the traditional water body—kere and the conceptualization of a lake as perceived by urban planners. This provided us with a central question that we hoped to capture in our study—how did people see a kere transform into a lake, and what were its implications?

The Hebbal Lake story

In the many rain-fed areas of the Deccan Plateau in South India, such as Bangalore, tank irrigation has been a common traditional practice. Low-lying areas were made into water holding tanks by constructing retaining walls and sluice gates for irrigating paddy fields (Gurunathan et al. 2007; Figure 1).

Retaining walls were built along the lower slope of the lake to hold catchment water and these embankments were also used as footpaths across the lake. Many of these water bodies, which were originally located beyond the city limits, have naturally formed banks covered with thick vegetation and grasses along the other shores of the lake. Although seasonal variation in water levels was common, these ground-level tanks were one of the key elements in the spatial order of the Bangalore area until the 1800s, being used for multiple purposes like bathing, drinking water, and water for horticulture and agriculture (Srinivas 2004, p. 38).
Hebbal Lake was part of a chain of interconnected water bodies created by a local ruler, Kempe Gowda I to meet the town’s water requirements in the sixteenth century. Its shallow, low-lying area was made into a deeper lake, and the area of this lake in the year 2007 was over 75 hectares, making it one of the larger freshwater water bodies in this region. Hebbal Lake (see Figure 2) is an ecologically rich wetland that lies somewhat on the outskirts of the city, close to the University of Agricultural Sciences. Hebbal Lake, like most lakes, had a system of sluices on the southeastern shore of the lake that were traditionally managed to let water flow onto paddy fields. The whole of the northern bank belongs to the Indian army and is part of a military farm. The western bank is marshy and swampy, but a large number of private lands line the west and southwest boundaries of the lake. It also attracts many migratory waterfowl. Some of the marshes were planted to filter the runoff into the lake, so they are filled with trash and plastic bags. The outer ring road encircles Bangalore on the southern side of the lake. Between the road and the lake is a large area that has a park and the Forest Department nursery. The Thoreau Society, an environmental group from the Residents’ Welfare Association of an affluent neighborhood nearby, created the park for walking and recreation on the southern embankment. This park area also has a boat jetty that was previously used by the Forest Department for renting out pedal boats.

Two distinct religious activities take place around the lake. There is an older shrine to the water goddess of the lake that is the site of an annual procession and worship by the local residents. During the annual festival of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha, large and small clay images are used by people in the city for worship. After the festival is over, the idols are submerged in the lake to symbolize the return of the god to his heavenly abode. Since the clay idols are painted with toxic paint, this also contributed to the lake’s pollution, along with pollution from the city’s run-off.
Figure 2. Outline sketch of Hebbal Lake showing the places mentioned (sketch by the author; not to scale).
In 1998, the State Government, supported by the Indo-Norwegian Environment Programme, launched a project to desilt the lake, which had shrunk to some 55 hectares. This project was successful in reviving the lake ecosystem and the semi-circular silt islands that are visible in the lake today were constructed during this time with trees and vegetation for birds’ nests (refer again to Figure 2).

Before 2002, some lakes in Bangalore were within control of the Irrigation Department, others within parks were managed by the Horticulture Department. Some lakes close to forest areas fell under the jurisdiction of the state Forest Department; urban lakes typically were managed by Bangalore Development Authority, another parastatal body. Other lakes in the rural areas around the city were managed by institutions and communities at the village level. A government initiative to ensure that the lakes that were being managed by different government departments would come under one umbrella for lake management led to the formal creation of the LDA in 2002. During the same year, when a flyover was completed as an overpass, its various road exits completely changed the landscape features of this shore. Despite some efforts to conserve and manage lakes, the status of lakes in Bangalore continued to deteriorate. Some lakes had been drained and in-filled to form residential plots, or they were silted over. Others had stagnant water covered with green algae and weeds. Some reports claim there were 282 lakes in Bangalore Metropolitan area (as of 2002) of which 81 were “alive.”

In 2005, the LDA came up with a grand plan for lake development under which lakes would be leased out to either private contractors for 15 years for a hefty annual fee or to citizen groups (e.g. the Resident Welfare Association, or educational institutions) for five years. The private bidder who signs the MOU agrees to “Develop-Operate-Transfer” (DOT) the lake after using it for 15 years with the payment of an annual fee to LDA. Hebbal Lake was one of the lakes that had been leased to a private company in the hospitality industry, a hotel group under this DOT scheme (Agreement copy, 19 May 2006, D’souza 2006). The agreement of the public–private partnership MOU clearly states that the private company had to “develop” the lake on payment of an annual fee.

From a billboard display outside the lake and statements of the hotel group to the press, it was clear that there were going to be activities around the lake such as a jogging track, entertainment booths and a floating restaurant (Figure 3). It was to be “a recreational venue” (see Gandhi and Shivanand 2007). As the physical boundaries of the city have been expanding and taking Hebbal Lake into its folds, the suburban became the urban; the villages that were Hebbal and Kodegehalli (see Figure 2 for the locations of these areas) became points on the route to the new international airport. This is significant because the lake and the adjoining flyover have become strategically important as entry points to the city. The area opposite the lake has lakefront property coming up adjacent to it, and a huge mall and a hospital are on the opposite banks.
Within a few months of our early field visits, the private company had taken over management of the lake. The first visible sign of this was on the physical features of the lake itself. There were huge pumps that were draining the entire lake. I was traveling on the flyover on the east bank and suddenly noticed that all the water of the lake was gone. There were groups of muddy people wading in slushy pools on the lake bed catching fish with cloth nets and bare hands. We had received no prior notice of this, and we rushed to the site to document what was happening. As I watched the earthmovers on the lake bed, the silt was tossed up creating land where there was none and scoops of land were removed from some old embankments. The lakeshore area was modified and the shape of the lake was being altered. We also noticed the construction of kalyani, a sacred tank, separated from the main water body specifically for immersion of Ganesha idols on the south bank of the lake. Our field observations in the next section discuss some of these changes and capture the relationship of the changing landscape to people’s perceptions of these changes.

**Multiple places, multiple users, multiple managers, one lake**

We discovered through our early interviews that as a space, a lake has multiple functions—it is an artifact of nature; it has aesthetic, visual value in
its very existence; it is a backdrop for recreation; it enables shared experiences for the community; and it provides a stage for economic activity and commercialization. As a commodity, the lake, its water, the water surface, and lake banks are used as resources with different access and ownership rights. Its boundaries overlap public and private property. The physical boundaries of the water are seasonal, and the lake overflows on to shallower surrounding areas (including parts of the road) in the monsoon rains.

In terms of the multiple users, our field studies showed three distinct places in Hebbal Lake with different entry points (refer again to Figure 2). We found that the different users related to the lake through its banks. First, for most people one of the main ways to access the lake was through the park and recreation area, from the adjoining outer ring road. This also is the key area and lakeshore central to all management attempts to modify the lake. This south side is completely fenced over with a gate and a ticketing booth. Second, there is a way to the fishing area along the southeastern embankment with a shrine to a water goddess, and the overflow channel adjoining the east bank, with gaps near the overflow canal which are only partially fenced in. An overflow pond with marshy reeds once existed here and subsequently was filled in with rubble. And third, the inaccessible areas, such as the lakeshores closer to the north and western banks, are not open to public for entry. Finally, we have the islands created by silt and the marshy swamps on the southwest side. One could not simply walk around the lake perimeter in a circle. One had to use different roads, gates, or gaps in the fences to access the different banks (Figure 4). Because the eastern bank had no fence in our earlier visits, we found a number of diverse groups using this part of the shore. There were fishermen, washer-men, weed cutters who used the weeds to feed cattle, cowherds who came to wash cattle, and residents of nearby settlements—Hebbal and Kodigehalli, once villages in the outer area of Bangalore. In terms of the users, where one went on the banks depended on what one wanted to do—buy fish, play or watch the birds, and one would not approach other banks if it were not one’s place to visit. Some visitors went to the east bank only to access the fish shop and get fresh fish. They were unwilling to pay entrance fee money to enter the park on the south bank.

On the park side, our interviewees included groundskeepers, hawkers who sell their goods outside the gate, and casual visitors. The old gate was replaced with an electronic ticket turnstile with a ticketing booth. Entry to the park earlier too had a small fee of 5 rupees per person but we noticed that the price was 25 rupees now. There was a gleaming turnstile (Figure 5). We found some elderly walkers hesitating at bars of the turnstile though they had bought tickets for entry. A guard then let them in through a side gate meant for transport of gardening equipment. In our later visits we found that the turnstiles had become nonfunctional and everyone was using the side gate.

What we noticed was that these casual visitors were users of the lake but they had no connectedness to it beyond a sense of aesthetic or entertainment value. Two young men taking a break from a desk job in the afternoon were
Figure 4. Gaps for ticketless access to the lake shore, August–September 2008. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5. Electronic turnstile gates and the side gate at Hebbal Lake, park entrance, July 2008. Photograph by the author.
happy to hear that there was to be a floating restaurant on the lake. Park
visitors, however, were rare during the day and most of them came to spend
evenings and weekends by the lakeside on the south bank. We found guards
with whistles who were patrolling the park pathways making sure that
ticketless people do not enter the park. An elderly guard we interviewed was
also indignant about young dating couples displaying affection in public parks
and kept diving into the pathways and alcoves to keep vigil on the visitors.

It was not only the access rights to spaces that determined where the
fishermen and the washer-men worked, but there was a temporal division of
the spaces on certain banks. The grass/weed-cutters for instance, came only
during the early morning. They entered the lake banks from the same side as
the fisherman or cattle owners, but cut their cattle-feeding weeds on the more
inaccessible banks adjoining the military farm by making their way across the
shallow waters of the lake. The cattle herders arrived during the day to wash
their cattle in the lake and some of the washermen arrived just before noon,
while others came early in the morning when the skies were clear. The fish
stall was doing brisk business by mid-morning and many more customers
came to buy fish at the stall in the late evening after office hours. The north
embankment, within military farmland was completely off limits for everyone
with military guards posted at the entrance of the farm. Though the east bank
has access to the lake through a slope close to the overflow canal, the
washerman we met was not washing clothes in the lake waters. Instead, he
had stationed himself near a pipeline that had sprung a leak, perhaps a valve
that was attached to the main water supply to the city. The fishermen’s huts
and washing area was close by and we asked him if they shared the water spot
near the pipe. The washerman said, “This is my sthana [designated place] that
is theirs. These rocks, they are good for drying clothes and it is clean, that’s
why I come here,” he added, pointing to the rocky north banks of the military
farm, “not for the water. The lake water is dirty and will stain our clients’
clothes. They (while pointing to the fishermen’s huts on the eastern bank,
some distance away) wash their clothes in the lake” (Figure 6).

The local cattle herders kept away from the fishermen’s huts on the eastern
bank though they used the same space. “They are not from here; they are from
a different state.” This was what a cowherd told us as he herded his buffaloes
into the shallow overflow canal for washing them. “They dirty the banks with
their torn plastic nets.”

We were under the impression that the fishermen were some trespassers
who had no access rights. One of our early morning visits to the fishing area
helped us understand the fishing scenario at Hebbal Lake. The fishers were
from Kuppam, a small town in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh in
South India. They also spoke the local language, though it is not their mother
tongue. They had no idea about the lake’s history or the surrounding area. One
of the fishermen told us about the places where fish were to be found and how
they used coracles to fish rather than motor boats. He also told us the names
of all the fish in the lake. On questioning him more about his work, we
realized that these men were hired laborers, working for a contractor who had a valid fishing license from the government Horticulture Department. Fish hatchlings were introduced into the lake by this department before the season and after they were fully grown, they were to be harvested by contractors who sold the fish to local markets.

The contractor businessman, who also had fishing rights in some other lakes had built a small concrete room for some of his fishermen labor, and sometimes during peak season for fishing there were more temporary huts for the extra hired help to stay. He also ran the small fish stall on the eastern bank. The contractor was unsure about the fate of his annual contract under new management of the private hotel group. Before construction of the flyover and the ring road, there was a local resident of Kodegehalli Village on the northwestern side who had fishing rights. All we could gather from our respondents was that he used to employ a guard with a shotgun to run around and chase away anyone else who tried to fish. We also were told by a visitor to the park that there were two fish sellers’ stalls on the southern bank until the ring road and the flyover were constructed. These large roads made it impossible for vehicles to halt, so people no longer stopped to buy fish in the intersection.

As our interviews make clear, access to shared places is socially determined by hierarchies of caste, economic status, power, and other forms of social stratification. People and places are linked by a sense of
appropriateness that seems to segregate the users into different social groups. Everyone knew his or her place on the lake banks (Figure 7). Every respondent we interviewed was pointing to places that had markers — a stone, a tree, a path, or a structure as they told us their story of the lake. Even in the lake, on the surface of water, fishermen pointed to the view of the other bank or the island. “We take the boat till we are in line with the rocks. No further. That’s deep and that’s where the fish are.”

As more soil work on the lakeshore proceeded, the transformation in the shape of the lake was dramatic. Natural slopes, banks, and other features began to change rather dramatically. “The lake is being molded in the shape of an amoeba,” was the comment of one of my coresearchers. We could see a walkway (or a jogging path) that was to encircle the lake, and flat, leveled land that was to be the precursor to an extension of garden cum entertainment area, such as food stalls and other pay-to-enjoy forms of “having fun.” The familiar pathways and nodes were being displaced and transformed through dumping, deepening and landscaping. The old tree mentioned at the start of this article was replaced with topiary. Compare the before and after photos in Figures 8, 9, and 10.

On the same day, when we visited the park area, we saw two young men fishing with lines near the boat jetty. Some pedal boats were lying disused and water weeds surrounded the jetty. One young man was flinging a plastic twine into the water and pulling out small wriggling fish and dropping them in to a bright orange plastic pot of water. Very politely we asked him what he was doing. He told us that he was fishing and added that he did not sell the fish.
Figure 8. Partially fenced area along the lake shore (view from the flyover), July 2008. Photograph by the author.

Figure 9. Silt being dumped to create a shore area (view from inside the lake shore), late August 2008. Photograph by the author.
He was a resident of Bhoopasandra, an area that would have been on the southern bank of the lake but has been since separated by the ring road. We were curious about the fish and again asked him if perhaps he actually ate them or sold them? He replied that he gave them to the watchman in return for a favor because he was allowed to do “time pass” fishing. He did not have to buy tickets. Was he a version of the local angler? We were surprised. We peered into the fish pot and found small aquarium-size fishes wriggling, probably the hatchlings introduced into the lake. He was not aware that there were other fishermen who worked at the lake. This indicated that the users of the lake, such as this casual visitor seemed to be unaware of the people who used the resources of the lake directly.

Many visitors to the lake complained there was not enough to do and that the boating had closed down. Others were apprehensive about the increase in the entrance fees after the hotel group took charge. “I have five people in my family, how can I afford to come here on every weekend if the fee is rupees 25 [about half a dollar] per head?” asked a regular visitor to the park. “There are so few places for my children to play freely and I enjoyed bringing them here. Now it will be harder,” he added.

Even when the LDA was in charge of the lake, the fishing rights were invested with the Horticulture Department of the government. The Forest
Department, which had a nursery on the south bank, was planting trees on the lakeshore and took care of the birdlife around the lake. The villagers still had the right to use the lake for religious purposes and worship, and the military-owned farm continued to control the north bank. Respondents whom we interviewed were all from different backgrounds and their purposes were different, but they were bound together by their relationship to the actual lake through these “traces” created through their use of the landscape. The residents of the settlements near the lake who worshipped the shrine on the banks, came there to celebrate the annual festival of the water goddess, had very little interaction with the group who came to immerse their idols. Every person’s sense of place was different, yet linked to the same location, the lake. However with the new plans of the hotel group uncertainty had set in for all these happenings (Figure 11).

Reordering the place: displacement

Places anchor the human experience and the process of implacement binds happenings and events into unique co-locations of spatiotemporal memories (Casey 1993, pp. 23–24). They are public in the shared meanings and communicated oral histories. The public quality of the lake extends beyond the physical space into these notions of shared memory. A deeper

Figure 11. The shrine to the water goddess, Gangavva, on the east embankment. Photograph by the author.
understanding of a public space such as Hebbal Lake would question the schemata of places in a lake—a place to use water, place to watch wilderness and nesting water birds, a backdrop for fun, or a place for gathering of fish and cutting cattle feed. The traditional idea of qualified place is culturally and functionally determined and implemented by traditional systems of lake management.7

Yet even with the lake being enclosed in an urban area, until the takeover by the private company, other community negotiations and “adjustments” created a fluid, if not perfect system of designated places that minimized conflicts and served multiple publics. The washermen’s drying clothes may not be a good background for fun and recreation but as long as the visitors could not see the clothes, no one stopped his activities. I suggest that one form of access and rights did not replace the other types of interactions overnight. As long as the government departments were in charge, both realities of traditional uses and urban recreational utilizations coexisted in the same spaces. We could say that the kere and the lake coexisted in the same space.

The types of value one gives to an open space can be categorized on the basis of its utility, and whether it has functional, contemplative, aesthetic, recreational, and ecological value (Berry 1976). Though ultimately planners tend to look at trade-offs between these various values, it has become clearer that functional values of lakes which involve direct usage of a resource such as water or fish are of lesser importance than the lake serving as a visual and aesthetic backdrop for recreation. We cannot model a lake and call it an “ecosystem” or an “economic resource” or a “social construction.” It is a lived space, a lifeworld that is dynamic and changing in more than one way. The ambiguous nature of a lake in an urban area, its shores and embankments, and entry points all influence human interactions with it and, in turn human beings impact the lake by their activity. A certain kind of model informs the development of this lake, that of an imagination that favors the visible and intangible economic consumption of the lake rather than direct uses of a water body. The display thus takes on primary value under which everything—the health of the plants, the shape, size, and the functionality of the embankments all are subsumed. The shrubs were replanted to create newer paths for walking and jogging. The paths were narrower allowing only three people to walk together. The retaining walls were rebuilt with steeper sides with granite rocks. Under the new management plans of the private group, depicted on the map board outside the entrance, lake development prioritizes aesthetic values above the other utilitarian values. This aesthetic value then becomes an amenity to market real estate. Thus, land, air, water, and living forms are marketed. Within such a framework, sense of the place is primarily linked to consumption and entertainment under the guise of lake conservation.

The location and locale become predominant over the sense of place as people are, in effect, forced to choose specific and limited types of experiences on certain areas on the banks. The message conveyed by the
whole experience of such a place clearly says, “See, enjoy, consume. Walk in designated paths, see what we can show you, and keep in sight.”

This transformation is possible when the place of other users is displaced. The diversity of places around the lake is lost. What I am arguing here is that current planning is displacing “place” and this in turn contributes to the displacement people. The sense of place and locale of the lake are made uniform. Control over the water, the banks and the view is gained through transformation of the actual physical environment of the lakeshore. Thus, the presence or absence of places limits or permits access to different parts of the lake. Transforming this feature in turn is instrumental in influencing which “public” can use the lake. According to Czepczyński (2008), people understand landscape through memory that is both cultural and historical. What happens to these memories when landscapes change is that the memory and landscape do not collude, thus leaving the experience of a person with a sense of “displacement.”

I posit here that the LDA planners used changes to the landscape to dominate and exclude some of the users of the lake. Within the ideology of landscape, there is intent of creating unity for the beholder, a sense of uniformity for the eye, again drawing from the imagined order in a place. The multiple users of the resources of the lake become “out of place” in the otherwise uniform landscape of the lake as well as of the city. The urban poor are considered to be dangerous and uncouth, so they can be kept out by introducing an entrance fee. A remark by the CEO of LDA in a newspaper article about Hebbal Lake indicates this idea very clearly (Gandhi and Shivanand 2007). “This project,” Dr. Munireddy says, “will at least provide urbanites an avenue for recreation, and keep the place clear of slums.” He was referring to the huts of the contract fishermen and had no idea that they were contracted fishermen permitted to fish in the lake.

Public access is spatiotemporal not just spatial for human beings. This is because where one can access the lake, when can one access the lake and for how long are definitely important for the public. The weed cutters need to cut cattle feed early morning on the northern banks even before the morning walkers arrive in the southern park area. The fishermen need access throughout the day during some seasons. Visitors are denied access during night hours and may have to pay extra entrance fees for weekends. Within the current paradigm of lake development, it is contended that displacement is almost subversive, limiting access to the lake spatially through landscape redesign, and temporally through designating particular access hours.

I argue that displacing place and the resulting exclusion of people does not include direct action (that would seem to be a form of forced eviction/migration) on the people. No one banned entry to the fishermen, but the construction of the fence on the eastern bank excluded visitors who wanted to come to the shrine or those who wanted to cut cattle feed; no gate was included in the design. Not opening the main gate at dawn displaces birdwatchers as does replacing the muddy slopes or rubble masonry of the
lakesides with concrete walls that are unsuitable bird nesting sites. The physical objects that gave a sense of the familiar to people were changed. Tuan points out the importance of objects in relation to our sense of place. He explains:

Permanence is an important element in the idea of place. Things and objects endure and are dependable in ways that human beings, with their biological weaknesses and shifting moods, do not endure and are not dependable. (1977, p. 140)

The point is that these multiple users of the lake were not considered by the planning authorities who saw the lake as spaces for amusement and recreation. Objects and places were constructed and reformed to fulfill particular kinds of commercial needs.

What was proposed at Hebbal Lake was a form of intentional cultural control over a public space. While negotiations were possible with government-controlled bodies, the presence of private management was felt to be a case of privatization of a public space. One may argue that resources were consumed by human beings both before and after the lake development initiatives. Before the lake development schemes, consumption involved the lake’s resources itself—water, weeds, or fish, whereas within the development schemes planned, consumption was to be materially different with the lake itself forming an intangible aesthetic background for consumption of urban resources—espresso coffee and fast food. The plan for well laid out paths which will be paved like a promenade, will ensure that the paying visitor gets all points of view of the lake that are worth seeing from the shore and be led through the different experiences that have been laid out for her.

The development of a lake also involves a transformation of the perimeter, making the banks uniform and then breaking up the uniformity by views and consumption areas—the eat area, the walk area, the play area, the nature area, and so on. These new sites for the lake “visitor” are for eating fast-food and enjoying the lake, but not for the wide range of different lake users in the past. This is why boating, food courts, and amusement will have a legitimate place on the lake shore and the fishermen’s huts will not. These conceptualizations shape both the physical architecture of the lake and the policies for users and managers involved in the business of lake development. Perhaps when there is future water shortage, the lake may again be seen as a source of impounded water for the use of the city.

The features of the lake that indicate its health or integrity have also changed. When it was being used as a drinking water reservoir, potable water quality parameters were its markers for our respondents. For the newer casual visitor the vastness and blueness of water imply the quality visually rather than through its chemical purity. Natural silt and muddy water are regarded as intruders on what is otherwise a breathtaking view of a blue lake surface. The idea of a lake drying up as a part of its natural seasonal cycle does not fit this
new portfolio, so there are continuous efforts to deepen the lake bed to hold more water.

The concepts of enclosures and boundaries are also different for the developed lake. The boundary markers that usually designate private property are now placed around public properties such as lakes. The whole idea of enclosing the space of a lake with a fence also is based on the notion of privatized space and not public space. The lake managers insist that fencing is for keeping out encroachments on the lake banks or preventing the dumping of garbage and construction rubble. On the other hand, a covert purpose also is fulfilled by the very architecture of the fence. That is, that the visual vista of the lake is cut off from public view. While topiary boundaries clearly distinguish “in and out,” in Hebbal Lake for instance they also serve to keep the view in. The non-paying public cannot enjoy the view which is sold at a premium in the higher floors of an adjacent lake-view apartment. There are “places created-to-view-the lake.” The phenomenon of public space now is only about the paying public, and the non-paying public cannot have these experiences just because they do not pay. The displacing of place also occurs when public choices are replaced by intentions of manager–stakeholders. While the original purpose of lake development was one of conservation and lake preservation, the newer intentions of “lake development” imply that the lake has to look developed. In the words of Czepczyński (2008, p. 129), such transitions occur through symbols or representations:

The old landscape is being re-interpreted and de-contextualized, while the newly constructed scenery answers new intentions and is continuously being constructed, both physically and mentally. The intentional approach of representation is based on belief, that signs and symbols mean what the instigator intends they should mean. The intentions of the investor, designer or decision-maker can sometimes be clearly read in urban text, but sometimes the initial purpose is forgotten or replaced by decisions of the new “intentioners.”

Planners of lake development in this case did not take into account the idea of multiple places with respect to cultural values when planning. When one calls a lake a public space and prioritizes some stakeholders rather than others, the way the lake is perceived is actually “private” or at the most, “elite public.” When a group of users are moved away into a different space all together, it can be called dislocation. Dislocation creates refugees with no place to stay, migration, and its own sociocultural and economic problems. Displacement, however, as described in the sections above, occurs when the relationship between people and their landscapes are disturbed. Displacement cuts across sociocultural backgrounds as it impacts almost all people who have connections to a place. Absences, transformations, and modified landscapes destroy a sense of place for a person that is often dismissed as nostalgia. To understand the concept of a lake in an urban space is to perceive it as a place in the city and develop a systematic analysis of the relationship between
people and places and what the lake presences is as a place for a diverse group of users.\(^8\)

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**Notes**

1. The respondent used the term *Sadhu Tantrik* to refer to a holy man following certain forms of meditation. From his manner of speaking he wanted to express a sense of magic, mystery, fear and respect for the person who came on new moon nights. Unless otherwise mentioned, all non-English terms are in Kannada, the local language. *Tantra* (Sanskrit), however, is a system of Indian philosophy that has a rich tradition of praxis. For an introduction to the philosophy and practices of *Tantra*, see Feuerstein (1998).

2. I am aware that this term could have a positive connotation but in contemporary times a displacement of people is often forced migration.

3. See, for instance, one of the articles in the weekly magazine, *Outlook* (Srinivasaraju 2005).

4. Sarai is a program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), one of India’s leading research institutes which focuses on critical thought around development issues. Sarai renders its research and creative work into the “public domain” and as participants in this project we chose to make our fieldwork observations available through a blog.

5. The exact word which the respondents used was *sthana*, which I have translated as “designated place.”

6. Figures are from the website of the LDA. The count varies in different sources and reports not because of the confusion in the number of lakes, but due to the differing extent of the administrative area classified as “Bangalore urban” during different periods of urban expansion. See Rau (1986) for a report on status of lakes in Bangalore. Also see Mohan (2004) for an interview with Rau.

7. For a study that deals with transformation of another lake in Bangalore from a different perspective, see Sunderesan (2011).

9. A number of news articles, protest meetings, and study reports on this issue have had an impact after the completion of our project. The private company withdrew its plan for the floating restaurant after the objections raised by bird watchers and environmentalists. Due to the widespread publicity received in these campaigns, Hebbal continues to be accessible to multiple users. A non-governmental activist organization Environment Support Group filed a public interest litigation suit against what was perceived as lake privatization. Other lakes that were to be leased out on the DOT scheme were granted a reprieve by the court. However, since the MOU was already in place with the hotel group in charge of Hebbal, there was no rollback. The MOU is legally valid for another 10 more years, till May 2021.

References


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