

Urban Lakes as Contested Social Spaces: Colonial Legacies, Contemporary Urbanization, and Social Contestations in Bengaluru Lakes

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The RCC Landhaus Fellowship offers a unique opportunity to advance my doctoral research at the post-fieldwork stage, allowing me to write a significant portion of my thesis. My project will examine the transformation of the waterbodies in Bengaluru, one of India's fastest-growing cities, from community-managed tanks to urban lakes, shaped by colonial governance and contemporary urbanization. By integrating archival research and urban ethnography, the study will investigate how these waterbodies—historically integral to local ecologies and livelihoods—have been reconstituted into sites of exclusion, privatization, and sociopolitical contestation.

Focusing on two pivotal historical periods of urban development in Bengaluru—the late colonial era (1870s–1920s) and the post-economic liberalization period (1990s–present)—the research project will unpack the socioecological and governance transformations of these lakes. During the colonial period, the British administration redefined Bengaluru's precolonial tanks, reshaping their governance structures under the guise of public health improvements and urban planning. During my eight months of archival research in the Karnataka State Archives Department and the Mythic Society, a public library in Bengaluru, I have examined colonial administrative records such as municipal documents, and reports from public works departments to trace how tanks were socially and spatially reimagined to align with colonial urban planning and functional needs, ultimately symbolizing a potential shift from 'village tanks' to 'urban lakes.'

In the post-independence period, rapid urbanization and neoliberal governance have reframed these lakes as real estate assets, fuelling privatization and commercial development. My research will interrogate how these processes of privatization and capital investment have transformed the lakes into contested urban spaces where various actors—including state agencies, private developers, environmental groups, and local communities—vie for control. Through ethnographic fieldwork at four lakes in Bengaluru, I will examine the lived experiences of local communities, uncovering how contemporary governance models perpetuate the marginalization of historically dependent groups—including the urban poor—while privileging elite recreational and aesthetic interests.

The research project, thus, aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how urban environmental governance in the Global South is entangled with histories of colonialism, the politics of exclusion, and the challenges of ensuring equitable access to urban environmental space and resources.