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How India's Urban Lake Policies Are Getting It Wrong

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Hyderabad's lakes are being reduced to wastelands awaiting real estate conversion. Fences, and cosmetic dredging cannot reverse this. A democratic, community-oriented approach is needed to reimagine lakes where cultural memory, ecological repair, and civic participation reinforce one another.

Across Indian cities, water is becoming an alarming concern. Cities are facing dire and allegedly irreversible water scarcity on the one hand, and unprecedented rates of flooding on the other. Both stem from the same source: rapid urban growth that has flattened landscapes and disrupted watersheds while enriching a small class of developers and land speculators. In tepid response, lake and river "revival" projects costing crores per water body have become commonplace.

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They all follow a standard formula of fences, paved walkways, and chemical sprays. This only occasionally turns degraded water bodies into passable urban parks, while leaving most vulnerable to further degradation and even disappearance. Ultimately, these projects do little to mitigate growing concerns about urban water insecurity and increasing flood risk.

The problem is not simply poor implementation, but a deeper failure of imagination. Urban lake policies remain fixated on restoring a lost past or managing present pollution, with little vision for what a sustainable urban lake should become.

This pattern is visible nationwide, and is now taking a new institutional form in Hyderabad, where lake management is being undertaken by the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRAA). Although presented as a step towards more effective governance, we argue that this shift risks further entrenching a model that treats lakes as problems to be contained and only values them as property assets.

Unless we move beyond lake beautification and preservation towards a future-oriented approach, urban lake revival will continue to reproduce failure and accelerate the degradation of urban water systems. Here we build on collaborative field research to reframe lakes as living urban systems shaped by ecology, infrastructure, and social life. They are environments that can flourish and they offer diverse pathways for sustainable development, but the prevalent lake revival formula is not one of them.

New Hyderabad Experiment: A Lake Police

Owing to its arid geography, Hyderabad's evolution as a metropolis has relied on a vast hydraulic infrastructure of tanks and canals over many centuries. Some of these tanks, now ubiquitously called lakes, are iconic landmarks: Hussain Sagar at the city's heart, Mir Alam Tank near the zoo, Durgam Cheruvu framed by its suspension bridge and gleaming high-rises, and Ameenpur Lake, which has been recognised as a "biodiversity heritage site" (National Biodiversity Authority, n.d.). Yet, across these very different sites, a persistent pattern emerges: the lakes are either being killed slowly or being maintained on heavy life-support.

> But the biggest problem is that there is little sustained imagination of what a healthy, sustainable future for an urban lake might look like.

The latest initiative by the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency promises to restore the city's lakes (. It distinguishes itself from previous efforts in terms of governance. While lake management was earlier handled by the democratically accountable Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC), it has now fallen under the purview of the technocratic agency, whose broader charge of disaster management and asset protection ostensibly comes with stronger executive powers.

From the outset, however, its execution of lake and river protection in Hyderabad-through demolitions, strong directives, and the propagation of fear-has been divisive. Some argue it lacks statutory authority, yet it has operated with impunity in carrying out

demolitions. Others see it as the kind of strong executive force, a Singham-like strongman figure (headed, incidentally, by an Indian Police Service officer), that was needed to deal with the menace of "encroachment" and the growing crisis of pollution.

This shift away from local government towards police powers for lake management strongly suggests that the vision of what lakes can be is only narrowing further. And the actual approach to urban lake restoration differs little from what has gone before.

Is treating lakes as pollution crises and property conflicts and as a policing problem going to make persistently inadequate approaches work better? We think it is unlikely. Unless we rethink what "restoration" actually means, as the commissioner of the agency himself insisted, we risk repeating the same cycle of beautification, socio-political tensions, eventual neglect, and decline that has defined earlier efforts.

Across all existing approaches to lake management, there is a striking absence of a future vision. Lakes are valued only for their past, whether as heritage water bodies or historical commons, and are heavily engineered in the present to manage toxicity just enough to be tolerable. But the biggest problem is that there is little sustained imagination of what a healthy, sustainable future for an urban lake might look like. This future-blindness is the real problem.

Prevailing Imaginations of Lake Policy

Policy and public responses to lake degradation tend to fall into three familiar patterns bogged by present concerns and stuck in a backward-looking mode of preservation.

First, there is the standardised model of beautification, repeated ad nauseam by every government in turn. Lakes are fenced, ringed with paved walking tracks, and cleaned through technological interventions and a large labour force drawn from low-income communities. The goal is to transform them into sanitised neighbourhood parks that are ornamental, odour-free, and visually pleasing. In Hyderabad, this idea has guided many lake restoration projects, including the much-touted success of restoring Malkam Cheruvu) in a bustling information technology corridor. Yet even this success story has been soured by recent flooding events.

Second, there is an activist model of preservation. Here, the focus is on restoring lakes to their officially demarcated historical boundaries and policing encroachments, whether by the poor or the powerful. The aspiration is to restore the hydro-ecology by rolling back construction and enforcing legal limits. This approach can sometimes take the form of an elitist environmentalism focused on aesthetics and idealised views of nature, which adversely affects marginalised communities.

> They become toxic ponds bloated with sewage and garbage, or dry out and are gradually captured by real estate speculation.

But it can also be guided by well-informed and thoughtful environmental advocates. In Hyderabad, the collective called Save Our Urban Lakes is guided by a rich understanding of both history and hydro-ecology. However, faced with the vested political and economic interests in urban real estate, their judicial and media strategies tend to narrowly focus on preventing encroachments and preserving lakes as heritage by re-enforcing past boundaries.

Third, when neither beautifiers nor activists prevail, lakes simply languish. They become toxic ponds bloated with sewage and garbage, or dry out and are gradually captured by real estate speculation. Hundreds of less visible lakes across the city face this slow erasure. In Hyderabad, lesser known lakes like Shaikpet Kotha Cheruvu and Ramanthapur Chinna Cheruvu, and dozens of others dot the landscape as little more than cesspools ringed by unfinished walkways, broken fences, and disproportionately affected low-to-middle income residents (see Vidyapogu and Jonnalagadda 2023, 2025).

Challenge of Lakes

India's urban lakes are facing immense physical challenges. Across Hyderabad's neighbourhoods, unprecedented flooding, uncontrollable mosquito swarms, and the stench of stagnant water bodies greatly disrupt elite lifestyles and, more concerningly, gravely affect the health and well-being of non-elite residents living even closer to these water bodies.

In a burgeoning city with limited options for waste management, lakes formally receive treated sewage from an overstretched sanitation system, and informally receive untreated waste from neighbourhoods that lack adequate infrastructure. Garbage and construction debris often find their way into water bodies that remain among the few open public lands in an increasingly built-up city.

The situation is further aggravated by many lakes being effectively killed through the cutting off of inlets and outlets, and the flattening of watershed topography by prolific and reckless construction. Much of this construction has taken place on land that was once part of lakes. Although concrete and cement have erased every trace of many lakes and their surroundings, even moderately heavy rainfall causes floodwaters to inundate neighbourhoods-grim reminders of the lakes that once existed there.

> But where lakes are merely treated as problems of pollution and asset protection, these communities come to be seen as identitarian blocs with competing interests.

Floods are not the only reminders of lake histories. These wetscapes have long been socially complex. For decades in the modern city, lakeshores were marshy, flood-prone, and mosquito-infested-marginal spaces where poorer residents could find room to build shelter when other options were unavailable.

There is also a deeper social history. Many lakes predate the modern city and functioned as village commons shared by heterogeneous communities across caste and religious lines. Different occupational groups, such as fishers, washer communities, cattle-herders, potters, and peasants, held customary rights to fish, draw water, graze animals, gather clay, cultivate crops, and perform rituals. These histories are not dead. And as we have shown in our research on the cultural value of lakes for lower caste communities in Hyderabad, they continue to animate cultural and political claims to lakes today (Vidyapogu and Jonnalagadda 2023).

In a more recent publication, we focused on how real estate pressures on lakes affect these caste communities (Vidyapogu and Jonnalagadda 2025). We found that these communities are demanding to be recognised as stewards of urban environmental resources. But where lakes are merely treated as problems of pollution and asset protection, these communities come to be seen as identitarian blocs with competing interests. Rather than serving as a social resource for lake management, they end up derailing lake revival efforts through social conflict.

Lakes as Living Urban Systems

India's urban lakes are stuck in a limbo where they are either defined by pollution, or understood as ruination. And they only gain value when they conform to the aesthetic preferences of elite residents. Is there a way out?

We believe that there is. Lakes must be managed simultaneously as emergent ecosystems, cultural resources, architectural heritage, and municipal infrastructure. Treating them as bland parks flattens this complexity. Treating them only as ecological and historical relics to be restored erases the dense urban lives that now surround them. Treating them as disposable land banks undermines both environmental sustainability and democratic access to urban space.

What would it mean instead to imagine lakes as democratic environmental spaces? Sites where ecology, culture, history, and infrastructure are visible and engaged rather than hidden or erased. This requires a strong challenge to valuing urban space primarily as

real estate. But with greater social consciousness of the dire circumstances of water security, and a consequent political will for sustainable urban growth, such a challenge will have to come about.

Consider a future scenario. A neighbourhood lake could still provide space for leisure and exercise. But it could also become a place where children learn not only to play, but to understand the water systems that sustain their city. Programmes led by local community members could introduce visitors to birdlife, horticulture, and water-quality testing. Interpretation centres could trace the arc from medieval tank-building or the natural history of the region to contemporary urbanisation, helping residents see themselves as participants in a long environmental history rather than as passive consumers of green space.

Infrastructure, too, could be made visible rather than concealed. Instead of hiding sewage treatment mechanisms behind walls, why not treat them as educational tools? If residents can see and even volunteer in aspects of maintenance, they may better understand the environmental costs of their own urban lives. Cultural practices around water, often separated (or dismissed) as religiosity, could be reanimated as affirmations of water's life-giving properties, fostering dialogue rather than conflict across communities.

> Sadly, none of those promises or plans were realised. The designs were too community-focused and their value for the economic and real estate growth of the city was unclear.

Such a vision does not promise a pristine lake in the near future. Given the scale of pollution and urban growth, "cleanliness" will remain an aspiration, but the goal would shift. Instead of managing toxicity just enough to create a jogging track, the aim would be to cultivate environmental literacy, shared stewardship, and long-term ecological recovery. Although the present condition of urban environments makes this vision seem utopian, these are small but concrete shifts in policy imagination that will have cumulative effects.

Indeed, such shifts in imagination are already taking root across Indian cities, as beautifully chronicled in Shades of Blue: Connecting the Drops in India's Cities, by Harini Nagendra and Seema Mundoli (2023). But these grassroots changes face structural challenges.

In June 2023, we witnessed this first hand at Mir Alam Park in Hyderabad. The occasion was full of promise, a brilliant team of student architects from Aurora's Design Institute, researchers from Hyderabad Urban Lab, and a community-based organisation from the nearby low-income neighbourhood of Kishan Bagh had put together a range of design proposals to effect a social and environmental transformation of the iconic Mir Alam Tank.

The event was attended by architects from the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority and officers from the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation. There were also the Chief Secretary of the Municipal Administration and Urban Development, Arvind Kumar, and the local Member of Parliament (MP) Asaduddin Owaisi. The presentation was met with enthusiasm, and the MP even said that this was exactly what was needed. Promises were made to implement the designs, and plans began for a grand inauguration just a year away.

Sadly, none of those promises or plans were realised. The designs were too community-focused and their value for the economic and real estate growth of the city was unclear. They advocated for the interests of low-income communities, drew on plans proposed by schoolgirls from Kishan Bagh, and took no account of the Hyderabadis with purchasing power in their cars. Today, those designs are gathering dust on office shelves.

Instead, new plans are afoot for Mir Alam Tank. The city is wagering that the neglected lake can gain value if the city's elite population can whizz past it on a suspension bridge, like at Durgam Cheruvu. What this bridge will mean for the ordinary communities, for the ecosystems, and for the hydrology of the area are not core concerns in our existing imaginations of lake policy. Expanding our imaginations of lakes and their futures is an urgently needed shift.

Reimagining Lake Policy

For a city where water scarcity and flooding coexist, and where natural spaces are shrinking or kept on life support, this shift is not cosmetic-it is essential. Prevailing patterns of lake management are relegating lakes to one of two tragic fates: becoming sanitised gutters in the scenery of evening walks, or becoming contested wastelands awaiting real estate conversion. Managing lakes under the aegis of disaster response or asset protection places further limitations on policy imagination.

> Without that imagination, restoration will remain a cycle of short-term fixes. With some imagination, urban lakes could become laboratories of democratic environmental life.

Instead, lakes can become places where urban residents collectively confront and shape the environmental consequences of rapid growth. Hyderabad is at risk of setting a dangerous precedent. Restoration need not mean another fence, another walkway, another round of cosmetic dredging. And restoration should certainly not become a police action.

The Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency might be a useful instrument of governance towards protecting vulnerable lakes in some circumstances, but a more democratic and community-oriented approach is needed to reimagine lakes as spaces where cultural memory, ecological repair, and civic participation re-enforce one another.

If Hyderabad is to avoid repeating past mistakes as urbanisation expands farther into its frontiers, it must invest not only in cleaning its lakes, but also in imagining their future. Without that imagination, restoration will remain a cycle of short-term fixes. With some imagination, urban lakes could become laboratories of democratic environmental life. Messy and imperfect, but oriented towards something more than nostalgia or damage control.

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