



Nandi Hills

Nandi Hills, Bangalore's most famous historical spot was known as Ananda Giri meaning Hill of Happiness during the Chola period, and not without reason, judging by its popularity today. Geologically too, it is a rare area, for it is seldom that you see a rock face of over a 1000 meters encircling three sides of a mountain 4851 feet (1478 meters) high, and topped by an evergreen forest. The variety of its ecological niches, from evergreen to deciduous to dry makes it of special interest to naturalists of all hues. The fortress built on the summit of a rock was "traditionally held impregnable until stormed by the army of Cornwallis on 19th October 1791." Later it became a retreat for British Raj officials, and then the residence of Sir Mark Cubbon, the Resident, whose name is a household word in Bangalore. Before the British victory Nandi Hills was the summer capital of Tippu Sultan and Haider Ali, the rulers of Mysore who had an exceptionally discriminating eye for natural beauty. Lalbagh, Seringapatnam, the Kunigal Stud Farm are examples of their creations which indicate their aesthetic sense and interest in detail. Birds are reputedly excellent indicators of the biodiversity of an environment and in Nandi, amongst its numerous avians, there are two species which are of special interest to ornithologists: the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon (*Columba elphinstonii*) and the Yellow throated Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*). The Pigeon is an endemic of the Western Ghats, located 500 kilometers away from Nandi, with no evidence of the presence of this bird in the intervening area. This naturally reflects on the similarity in the condition obtaining in the evergreen patch in Nandi Hills with those of the Western Ghats.

This fact alone invests Nandi with an ecological status of great importance. The Bulbul is patchily distributed in several stony hilltops with the trees and ground cover favoured by this bird. Its sighting is always exciting for birders. According to Subramanya "Some of the unforgettable birds that can be seen at Nandi Hills include, Blue-headed Rock Thrush (*Monticola cinclorhynchus*), White-throated Ground-thrush (*Zoothera citrina*), Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Pied Thrush (*Zoothera wardii*), Indian Blue Robin (*Luscinia brunnea*), Olive-backed (Tree) Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*), Ultramarine Flycatcher (*Ficedula superciliaris*), Verditor Flycatcher (*Eumyias thalassinus*), Spotted Babbler (*Pellorneum ruficeps*), and the Indian Scimitar Babbler (*Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*)..... Nandi Hills never ceases to spring surprises on a visiting birdwatcher ...For a willing birdwatcher there is never a dull moment on top of the hills. The ideal trip ..would include a full morning at the top followed by a walk along the fortifications to look out for birds of prey and later, trek down the old Palegar (the chieftain) trail along the hill slopes..." One would have thought that because of its rare historical background and unique geological features the authorities would take special care to protect its identity and prevent any untoward development from invading the area. But the breakneck pace of development in Northern Bangalore is a cause for concern, and Rustam Vania (of Gobar Gas fame) sent an alarm signal on the internet suggesting that it was important to find out what the plans of the Horticultural Department (the nodal agency) were about Nandi Hills. The Bangalore

Environment Trust requested Dr S Subramanya, a leading birder and entomologist to have a look at the DPR (detailed project report) and find out if the plans had taken cognizance of the sensitiveness and fragility of the area. Subramanya took an enormous amount of trouble, visiting the area many times for a discussion with the Project Officer, and also making a presentation before Mr S.K. Hegde the Secretary of Horticulture Department, Govt of Karnataka. As we had suspected from the past actions of the authorities, they have given precedence to "janta" tastes instead of planning for the enjoyment of the discriminating visitor. The DPR includes a Food Court which according to Subramanya is planned to be located in an area which will harm the habitat of the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon as well as of several other resident and migratory birds. Thanks to Subramanya's

intervention, it appears that the location of the Food Court may be changed. The plan to create artificial waterfalls is just absurd, in an area where natural waterfalls already exist. And why have a Bonsai Garden in a place where it will look outlandish against the grandeur of the natural scene? And to think of a Fountain in our water starved city is a mockery of sensible planning. Dr Subramanya has suggested alternative sites for some other facilities, such as the Parking area. The Chairman of BET Capt S Prabhala has had some discussions with the Secretary, Horticulture and it was agreed that an Advisory Committee would be established to decide on the final plan. We hope this Committee will be established soon. Nandi Hills is too precious a place to be left to the whims of one Department of Government Zafar Futehally.

Road Widening – Need for a Relook

Introduction

There is wide spread concern among NGOs, citizens and environmentalists about the programme of widening of 91 roads taken up by BBMP. Loss of many grand old trees and resulting impact on environment, displacement of shops effecting livelihood, loss of property etc are the worries. They question the wisdom of road widening based on studies carried out in 2004/05 and approved by the Government in 2007 without taking into consideration subsequent developments viz, vast improvement in bus service, impending start of the Metro, etc.

In Plan Bengaluru 2020 brought by ABIDE, one of the major recommendations is that road widening plans should be subject to review / modifications through a consultative process, once every five years or so. The time is therefore ripe for such a review.

Review – Aspects to be considered

Apart from improved bus service and Metro (a study by Central Road Research Institute showed that 60,000 cars went off the road due to Delhi Metro) the following aspects need to be taken into consideration during the review :

- what has been the effect of roads already widened such as Race Course Road, Palace Road, Seshadri Road, etc?

- are the assumptions made in 2005 about traffic growth on the 91 roads valid?
- is parking of vehicles the problem? ABIDE has quoted a figure of 27% road space in Bangalore being occupied by parked vehicles as compared with 17% for Delhi and 14% for Hyderabad.
- will not 'pay and park' and multi-storeyed car parks (ABIDE's suggestion) relieve pressure on the roads?
- is extension of computerized coordinated signalling introduced in some segments not an adequate solution?
- are there no other solutions to traffic congestion? Can we not tap the knowledge of local residents to find innovative solutions?
- where inescapable, to save trees, can the widened road retain the tree line as the median as done in Jayamahar Road and Sarjapur Road?
- should we not identify a few of the 91 roads containing many magnificent trees as 'heritage' roads and exempt them from road widening? Alternatives to five such roads are given below purely as an example.
- many buildings do not comply with provision for parking of vehicles as per building bylaws. Shouldn't they be made to comply?
- violation of zoning regulations has resulted in commercial operations on unsuitable roads.

Should we not at least from now on enforce proper observance?

Such a review, hopefully, will **minimize** the need for road widening so that the tree wealth for which our city is famous can be preserved for future generations. The large trees on our avenues are responsible for controlling the temperatures on the roads and capturing dust and pollution from vehicles. Removing them will result in adverse changes to climate in Bangalore. These trees, once removed, cannot be replaced since many newly widened roads do not have enough space for planting of large avenue trees.

Alternate approaches – 5 Roads

As an illustration of what alternate solutions can be thought of to avoid the damage to tree wealth, five roads have been studied and the suggestions are as follows :

1 Queens Road : This road is already 4 lanes one way and leads from Cant Station to Balekundri Circle (Indian Express). This road is congested during peak hours only because the Indian Express Circle has 5 busy roads meeting at one point. Widening this road will not reduce the delay at this point. Suggest that this junction must first be improved suitably making it signal free in some directions at least. This will avoid felling of 25-30 large and old avenue trees.

2 Cantonment Station Road : This road can be widened only by acquiring the Railway land to the North. If sufficient land is acquired, two lanes could be built on it and the 25 large Rain Trees on this road can be retained as the median. (BBMP has already done this in Jayamahar Road and Sarajapur Road)

3 Sankey Road : This road has many beautiful trees all along the 3 km length upto Yeshwanthpur Circle, including IISc, Forest Dept, Wood Research Institute, Maramma Circle etc. BBMP is already building an underpass at CNR Rao Circle, and flyover at Yeshwanthpur is ready. This will leave only one signalled junction, namely Bhashyam Circle. This area is also only congested during peak hours. Instead of widening this road to 6 lanes with loss of hundreds of trees, suggest that an underpass at Bhashyam Circle can be built so that vehicles can have signal free movement here also, with some control to help pedestrians cross over. This method will also retain the existing broad pavements, for the use of school children and others. (Poorna Pragnya, Stella Maris,

Malleswaram Govt School, Kendriya Vidyalaya are some of the famous old schools here.

4 JP Nagar ORR (15th Cross) : This is one of the best planned avenues in Bangalore with about 250 large avenue trees over 2.5 kms stretch. The road is also broad with 4 lanes and the trees are planted at least 8 feet away from the road. One underpass at 24th Main is getting ready and another is planned at Kanakapura Rd Jn. Moreover all lorry traffic on ORR will move to PRR in 3-4 years time. Hence this road need not be made 6 lane with loss of walking space for residents and loss of their property. Instead the road can be widened by 6-8 feet upto the tree line to provide more space for traffic.

5 Hosur Road (NIMHANS) : This road leads from Lalbagh North gate to Dairy Circle and has NIMHANS campus on both sides and some private buildings also. It is a heavily used road by buses and the four lanes are not very broad. The main problem in this road are the two bus stops at Lakka Sandra and NIMHANS. All traffic is held up when the buses stop here since the bus stops are not set back. Construction of two large bus bays with adequate set back may avoid the need for widening of the road.

Tagore Circle – A Case Study

The Tagore Circle underpass is a classic case of the danger of entrusting traffic studies to interested parties. The underpass was decided upon based on the traffic density figures provided by a consultant to the project. Studies carried out by reputed advisors to the Govt of Karnataka showed clearly that the traffic density was only about 4000 PCU per hour. This can easily be handled by a well-designed traffic signal.

Unfortunately the figures given by the Govt's own traffic advisor were ignored and the BBMP commenced the project. This project has resulted in about 75 trees being felled in a very beautiful old area of the city adjoining the famous M N Krishna Rao Park and in complete disregard of the local citizens' protests.

Recommendation

For reasons given above, it is desirable to take a **pause** of say 6 months and carry out a thorough review of the road widening programme. Councillors, in whose jurisdiction the 91 roads lie, should interact with the residents and other stake holders who have the ground knowledge and therefore can offer pragmatic and lowest-damage solutions.



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