WestminsterResearch

http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch

Because the lake burns

Bhat, H.

A paper presented at the Monsoon [+ other] Airs Symposium convened by Monsoon Assemblages at the University of Westminster, 20-21 April 2017. Book version of this piece titled Because the lake burns can be accessed in Monsoon [+other] Airs (2017) edited by Lindsay Bremner and Georgia Trower :

http://monass.org/monsoon-other-airs-proceedings-published/

Because the lake burns into the air

Harshavardhan Bhat

This essay is a brief observation on the complexities of an air sensed through a particular history and cultural/linguistic lens. It's a personal entry too because, the linguistic references used in the essay are from the south Indian Dravidian language of Kannada, predominantly spoken by people who live in the Indian state of Karnataka. In citing key moments that encompass the private, the political and the spatial, I try to think with the vocabulary and discourse of the anthropocene to extend the thesis of the anthropocene into a wider range of imaginations. The argument I make is that a theory of air in the anthropocene inhabits many different human possibilities, when viewed from separate independent cultural viewpoints. Some sensibilities are blended into formats of the divine and of surrender; some sensibilities are entangled with the overwhelming desire for capital and development; and some sensibilities while meshed in a deep history of ideas with certain concepts of nature, yet remain disconnected from reality where the air is somehow forgotten. So how in this time or *kala,* which translates to the word 'time','age' or 'phase' in English, are we to think of the anthropocene? What is it that a theory of *kala* might show about the anthropocene that would be different from the English notion of time or '..cene' in the anthropocene? I do not offer an answer but I attempt to open up a conversation, to provoke the possibility of a plurality of times cohabiting the airs of the anthropocene.

One

On the evening of 16th February 2017, Bellandur Lake, Bangalore's largest water body caught fire. Sewage and industrial scale dumping of waste into the lake had transformed the water body to a pool of toxic fluids, strangely vegetal and frothy like foamy soap bubbles, that took to the air. On that particular day, the lake caught fire. From its life as a living lake to a condition in which it was terrified and searching for breath - it's self-immolating act was its last call for help, before a certain death. The lake was screaming at the human consensus through the air. Just as the media reported the incident as a problem that troubled motorists and local residents, democracy had shrunk to the citizenship offered by real estate and motorized development. The idea of development had consumed nature as an object, within humanly perceptible scales. The lake could not survive this onslought. The burning lake was both a constant metaphor for the grave precariousness of the anthropocene and the translation of material into the air through particulates and fire.

Bangalore, also known as Bengaluru used to be known as city of lakes and is even today conveniently advertised as a garden city, in memory for what once was. Bangalore's temperate climate and strategic position next to Mysore and other cities in Karnataka and the south, made it particularly attractive for empires, including the British at one point who set up a presence in this location. When Kempe Gowda 1, ruler of the *Vijaynagara* kingdom in the 1530's set out to make Bengaluru his capital, his mother is said to have advised him of two principles ; '*Keregalam kattu, marangalam nedu,*' which directly translates 'to build lakes and plant trees' (George, 2016). The notion of *prakriti*, which conceptually roughly translates to 'nature' is assumed as a foundational concept in this process of city making.

Not a long time ago, a younger version of me used to visit Bangalore during school holidays. The air was not something I distinctly thought of at the time. The air was just the air. But, in my memory, Bangalore's air was distinct. It used to get really cold in the evenings. I remember how I used to argue with my cousins about switching the fan off at night. I also remember the mist that carried the morning chill. Bangalore conjured the idea of *challi* and *sīta,* the former translating as 'chilly' and the latter translating as 'cold'. "It's easy to catch a cold, if you go out in the morning without your head covered," my mother would say. Bangalore's air was a space where the morning dew would perform as a mist, playing with the trees and the moving mobilities of the street. The morning mist does not exist anymore. My intent here is not to express a moment of nostalgia but to express that the air has changed. Urbanization transforms the air and dust has replaced dew. The very nature of climate is transformed in the process. From a notion where *prakriti* served infrastructure, to a Bangalore today, in line with India's neoliberal growth story is attuned to a very different desire and imagination of infrastructure. This breaking out from one view of the world, to another is a noisy one. Naresh Narasimhan (2014) calls it urban amnesia, where a society forgets what a city looked like.

From over 400 lakes at one time, to 280 lakes through the 1960's, eighty by 1993, today the city is left with only seventeen healthy lakes (Murali, 2016). Bangalore has in-fact expanded over ten fold in the past few decades (Nagendra, Unnikrishnan, and Sen, 2013) and has lost a significant percentage of its tree cover (Nagendra and Gopal, 2010). For the city, the air and water in this mode of growth are framed within a project of othering, where the elements constitute a form of disposability. Almost all of Bangalore's lakes were human-made, in history, through processes of some kind of planning. The resulting ecosystems were important both to human and non-human life (Ramachandra, Ahalya and Payne, 2003). Mathur and Da Cunha (2006, p.215)

write that "The uncertainty and blurring injected by today's open economy merely underscores the point that Bangalore is not necessarily a demarcated entity to begin with." Furthering that spirit of blurring, it can be argued that the economic growth the information technology sector has provided has out-scaled the ability for plans and the desire to control politically any limit to the profit space and capital can offer. Bangalore being the nation's central IT hub is a major contributor to India's information technology sector which contributes to as much as 18 percent of India's GDP (Times of India, 2016). The workings of ecology and the workings of capitalism juxtaposed on this terrain operationalise very different logics of time and speed. This suggests a certain kind of complicity in the making. The infrastructure of lakes and trees in a certain regime of thought competes with the infrastructure of neoliberal capitalism and development. This mode of advanced capitalism conditions the city, the earth and life (Braidotti, 2013).

Bangalore's *kala* (translating roughly to 'time/age') today is a present with an uncertain future. T. Ramachandran of the Indian Institute of Science argues that its ecological crisis will make the city unlivable by 2020 (Bhashti, 2017). Bellandur Lake's toxicity translating to an aerial mode is a perfect example of its contemporary condition. It's a moment that connects visibly, the earth, water and air in entangled precarity. It is caught up in a deep complicity where the actors of toxic supply are aware of the consequences of encroachment and waste disposal. However, it is convenient and profitable to do so and in time informal-formal systems allow for domestic real estate to consume the life of the lake by covering it with material. While the National Green Tribunal this August lashed out at the responsible agencies, asking "why they should not be prosecuted for negligence" (Press Trust of India, 2017), the lake still burns, because the only way it has is to burn. Mark Wigley and Breatrix Colomina (2016, p.25) argue that "if the human is a designing animal and the earth is its design studio, this animal is not unique and distinct creature moving and thinking within that vast studio. The figure of the human is not sharply defined. It is part of the living earth that it designs just as the living earth is part of it." What imaginations therefore I wonder will a political project have to procure in time and *kala* to serve living? I.e. is there a way for *kala* to exist as a concept of time where a particular notion of agency can be enabled?

Two

A little over three hundred kilometers west of Bangalore, after the descent from the ghats, in a village, my grandmother used to sit out in an open porch overlooking her lands. On a seemingly random evening, at the dawn of the monsoons, she'd say that the rains would arrive. Her nose was one with the monsoonal winds. It was like the air spoke to her; she was never wrong.

Perhaps, partially because the monsoons attended a certain regularity with her senses, even on those odd years, when the clouds were not kind, there was a sensibility to its very non-occurrence. She was a human of the agricultural hill and forest, in tune with a smell of plants, soil, listening to birds, insects, cows and the general fluctuations in life that enabled her to read her relatively small world with comfortable accuracy. For her, the monsoons seemed to be communicated through the air. The air informed her that they were coming. Every facet of rain and storm did things to the ecology of the landscape she was part of. "Did you know that thunder and lightning informed the growth of particular mushrooms?" "Oh look at the flowers that bloomed because of the rain last week," she said. Beneath the agricultural knowledge system that informed crop and harvest, there seemed to be an underlying relationality to life in general. The monsoons informed that relationality. She seemed aware that these winds came from other places. Yet, her location on the land as her constant sensing agent, anchored these winds perceptually.

The concept of the anthropocene for her rested in something she called *Kali Yuga,* the 'age of the demon.' According to Sanskrit scriptures, this is the last in a series of four cycles the world goes through. *Kali Yuga* is a time of great quarrels and a certain tyranny. For *Honnamma,* my grandmother, *Kali Yuga* indicated unpredictability. Her world was challenged in time. "Nothing can be said these days," she used to say. The knowledges and practices that enabled her sensibilities of prediction seemed to dim. The ecosystem had changed and so had she. The very nature of the wind had changed, she said. In a moment of angst, she sometimes remarked that this was a spoilt air. The use of *Kali Yuga* in her vocabulary merged with *igana kala (*translating roughly to 'nowadays' or 'these days'). She started saying "These days you never know what's going to happen." In the formation of *igana kala* as a concept, *Kali Yuga* is only a backdrop. The former evolved because of the latter. *Igana kala,* of course also comprised of *Male kala* i.e. the season of the rain. There was a design to this time, a design that she recognized but did not completely understand, and it was clearly not of her doing. This was not happening to her as a person, but was a change in the nature of the wind and the air. In humility to time and the making of time, all she could do was to surrender. Her political encounter with the air was one of acceptance and surrender. What could one do but breathe the air and drink the water?

My grandmother's was a complex integration of the air. It was not an air that cared about politics or democracy. The air of *igana kala* gathered the object sensibilities of the many, concerning things, people, thoughts, gods, stories, cars, devices, family, jobs, nature, circumstance, fertilizer, newspapers, care, fruit, fire - in an ever growing list of possibilities. In time, rain became fickle. The wells were shallow. Fungi invaded the arecanut trees and peculiar little

dot-like sticky insects buzzed around the bulb outside the door. A simultaneous invasion on the senses from all sides, of all forms, convened. *Igana kala* described the air, but it also described everything else, just like the air. In her description of this *gaali* (wind), air is both a carrier and a state of life. The wind as a force of the air, mixes worlds and makes new worlds. As a concept, it was the Anthropocene already. As Haraway (2016, p.35) writes "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories ".

In this knowledge system of entanglement, it was possible to understand the air in its complicity with other forces. Yet, conceptually a surrender because of an overwhelming *kala yuga* would only indicate a redirection of agency. However, the burning lake only shows us that if we treat air with linearity and void, it gives back a similar treatment, just like Gaia's revenge (Stengers, 2015). For the lake, water made worlds with air just as air made worlds with fire. If one thought that the harvests of the ground had no connection with the harvests of the air, these were times to deeply reconsider such positions. For the actors of the Bangalore condition, the question is not just of complicity but why a certain toxic version of the future must reign? For *Honnamma,* the question was how can complicity be invented when the automatic response is to surrender? In *Honnamma*'s view of the air and life, entanglements don't go unnoticed. They're embraced. In Bangalore's new emerging developmentalist modernity, the environment is an externality, just as real estate colonises environment as a commodity. None of these are ideal views but what if there could be a world that embraced entanglements at scale?, that is to say that the lake was not alone but in community with life (Morton, 2017), and that a very particular kind of complicity needed reinvention, where life is let to prosper.

In urgency. The lake had to burn to be seen and because people and other life were in the air's world, breathed.

References

(2016). 'Karnataka Contribution to India's GDP Has Increased." *Times of India.* http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/Karnataka-contribution-to-Indias-GDP-has-increased/articleshow/51466196.cms
Bhasthi, D. (2017). 'City of Burning Lakes: Experts Fear Bangalore Will Be Uninhabitable by 2025'. *The Guardian*, 1 March http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/mar/01/burning-lakes-experts-fear-bangalore-uninhabitable-2025
Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK : Polity Press.

Colomina, B., and Wigley, W. (2016). *Are We Human?: The Archeology of Design*. Zürich: Lars Muller.

George, T. J. S. (2016). *Askew: A Short Biography of Bangalore*. New Delhi: Aleph.

Haraway, Donna. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chtulucene.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Mathur, A. and da Cunha, D. (2006). *Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore's Terrain*. New Delhi: Rupa.

Morton, T. (2017). *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. Brooklyn: Verso.

Murali, J. (2016). 'Cauvery Issue: The Shocking Story of Bengaluru's Dried up "1,000 Lakes"'. *Firstpost*, 19 September. http://www.firstpost.com/india/how-city-of-1000-lakes-dried-up-the-shocking-story-of-bengalurus-ailing-water-bodies-2671706.html

Nagendra, H. and Gopal, D. (2010) 'Street Trees in Bangalore: Density, Diversity, Composition and Distribution.' *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 9(2):129–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2009.12.005

Nagendra, H., Unnikrishnan, H. and Sen, S. (2013). 'Villages in the City: Spatial and Temporal Heterogeneity in Rurality and Urbanity in Bangalore, India.' *Land* 3: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/land3010001

Narasimhan, N. (2014). 'We Are All Suffering from Urban Amnesia.' *TEDxBangalore - YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFqyW44yX9U

Press Trust of India. (2017). "Green Court Summons Top Karnataka Officials Over Bellandur Lake Frothing". NDTV.Com, 20 August 2017. http://www.ndtv.com/bangalore-news/green-court-summons-top-karnataka-officials-over-bellandur-lake-frothing-1739609.

Ramachandra, T. V., Ahalya N, and Payne, M. (2003). 'Status of Varthur Lake: Opportunities for restoration and sustainable management.' *Technical Report 102*, 1 January.

Stengers, I. (2015). *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Open Humanites Press. http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/in-catastrophic-times/