

THE GARDEN OF COMMONS

Ashwath katte, Bengaluru

Smruti Balvalli

As a new girl in the Garden City, my encounter with *ashwath kattes* started almost a decade ago. Standing magnificent and bare, marking their own territory on busy sidewalks or in quiet temple compounds, *ashwath kattes* are modest, raised

plinths on which the native *peepul* (*Ficus religiosa*) and *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) trees grow robustly. At the sight of an *ashwath katte*, one cannot help but agree with the words of Saurapala, the author of the ancient Sanskrit text '*Vrukshayurveda*' (the science of plant life) that, 'it is better to plant a single tree by the roadside under which people can rest, rather than several trees in a forest.' Creating pauses and marking nodes, these *kattes* are immersed

in local folklore and guarded by myths, almost as if time around its immediate precinct has slowed down.

Forming informal spaces of communal associations and activity, the *kattes* are spread across Bengaluru and strongly resonate with the universal idea of the 'commons', which represent shared resources and social practices maintained equitably by communities (Ostrom in Čukić et al, 2020).

'To speak of the commons as if it were (only) a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst - the commons is an activity and if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relationships to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity (or process), rather than as a noun, a substantive' (Linebaugh 2008:279). Hence, the



Figure 1. Product and Producer



Figure 3. Ecosystem

commons are not only the product of the city but also a producer of urban space, stitching the city fabric with invisible threads (Čukić et al, 2020).

Co-creation. Who creates the *katte*? What are its extents? The magnificent



sacred trees of *peepul* and *neem* mark this space. The common man shapes this space through part instinct and part will, through shared cultural beliefs, myths and actions of rest, refuge and storytelling. Local communities create their own communing space with exchanges, interactions and interdependencies spread over space and time. The space is co-created at the intersection of nature and culture (Keswani, 2019). This makes the reading of the space cohesive, giving it identity and a sense of belonging. The sacred trees are also keystone species and critical in maintaining the diversity of their ecological communities. As

178
179

a canvas for exchange between the larger ecosystem - the human and non-human world - the *katte* creates a strong socio-cultural and ecological connect between nature, humans and future generations to build a humane and ecologically-sensitive social order (Patterns of Commoning).

The *ashwath katte* at Baiyanpalya sits in a quiet alley parallel to the city's busy Kanakapura highway. The *katte*'s co-creators are many - the women visiting for a daily ritual that gets extended by small chats, autorickshaw drivers sitting alongside, passersby from the adjacent Water ATM, and flower and fruit vendors.

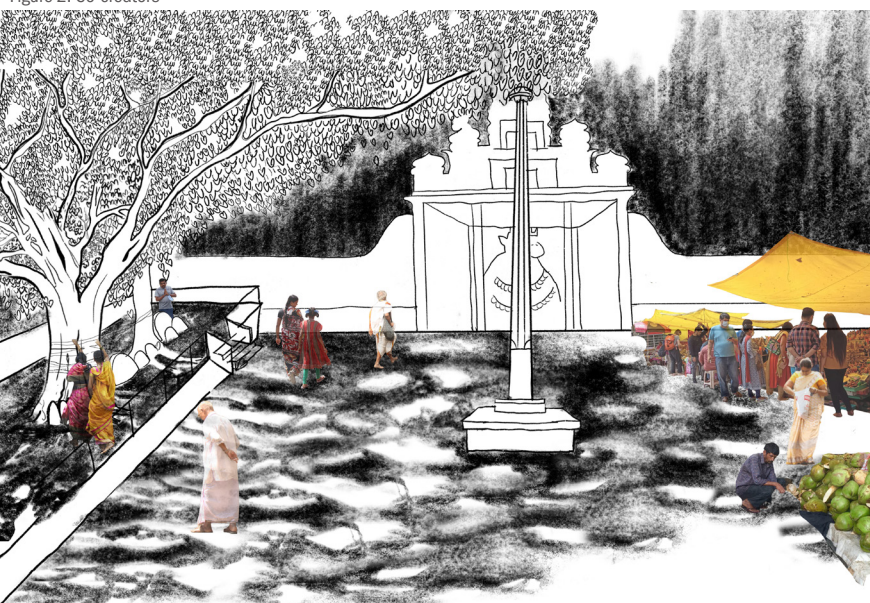


Figure 4. Shared management

Figure 2. Co-creators

Shared management. How is the space managed? What do they do? Adorned with *kumkum* (vermilion), *haldi* (turmeric), sacred threads and cloth-strips around their trunks, and idols of serpent gods at their roots, the trees stand tall marking a notional domain that celebrates transient exchange between the community and the commons.

The 'verbs' in these commons are a series of tangibles and intangibles - actions, transactions, conversations, and layers of barriers and buffers co-created by varied users. How the community constitutes itself is manifested in the social practices for managing the resources and associated values, rituals, customs, myths and self-determined rules to develop this malleable system, rather than dependency on the market or government (Bollier, 2013).

The other silent guardians of the *katte* are neighbourhood local senior citizens who pause there for their daily conversations with friends, wayfarers for short afternoon naps or street vendors who create a dynamic threshold between the sacred space and its outer world. The *katte* is a

non-hierarchical and flexible space, replete with varied interconnections and interactions of users and activities. Therefore, what 'makes' these urban commons is actually a 'process of space creation' that unfolds through 'practices of commoning' (Woerden, 2021).

At the Bull Temple in Basavanagudi, the primary users are temple devotees, women who continue longstanding living traditions with their rituals related to the marriage of neem and peepal and fertility, and vendors who create this notional dynamic threshold under the shade of large canopy.

Generative Space. Space, as a resource, within the urban commons discourse is both a social product and a prerequisite for social interaction. While rapid urbanisation, construction of more roads and flyovers for motorised traffic, and built spaces continue to take precedence, 'commoning' represents a profound challenge to the current overwhelming pageant of capitalism. It is based on a very different ontology where values and practices enable communities to be generative instead of extractive (Woerden, 2021).

Bengaluru's *ashwath kattes* exist as multiple generous and undisturbed inner worlds of giving within the bustle and chaos of an outer world. They may seem a part of the everyday - small and speckled but with a deeper understanding of the city. One cannot disagree that the *kattes* are and will always be significant contributors to the identity and belonging of the bustling city.





Figures 5 & 6. Giving rather than extracting



Figure 7. Marriage of neem and peepal

Note: All illustrations are made by the author.

Smruti is a practising landscape architect, visiting faculty and self-taught illustrator. She attempts to read and shape environments that are socio-culturally diverse and hold narratives of nature in all its complex and rich forms.

Email: smrutibalvalli@gmail.com

References

- Bollier, David. (2013). 'What is commoning?' iRights.info, April 2013, David Bollier: What Is The Commons? (Youtube - Long Version)
- Čukić, Iva, Jovana Timotijević, Božena Stojić, Njomza Dragusha, Orbis Rexha, Sonja Dragović, Tatjana Rajić. (2020). 'SPACES OF COMMONING: URBAN COMMONS IN THE EX-YU REGION', Ministry of Space / Institute for Urban Politics, Belgrade, Serbia, Belgrade, pp. 9-10.
- De Angelis, M (2014). 'The commons: a brief life journey', Community Development Journal 49 (1), pp 168-180.
- Keswani Kiran (2019), 'The Sacred and the Public', Everyday City Lab and Azim Premji University.
- Linebaugh, P. (2008) The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Patterns of Commoning | The Commons Strategies Group, www.patternsofcommoning.org
- Nagendra Harini & Seema Mundoli. (2019). 'Cities and Canopies-Trees in Indian Cities,' Penguin Viking India.
- Venugopal, Vineetha. (2020) 'Commoning Practices -Towards becoming in common', Dakshin Foundation and Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Trust, Learning Module | 2020,1-2, www.dakshin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Commoning-Practices-Towards-becoming-'in-common'-pdf
- Woerden, Winne van. (2021). 'Why is commoning so important?' Commons Network, April 05, 2021.

Related references

- Everyday City Lab (2021). Ashwath Katte Project. <https://www.everydaycitylab.com/ashwath-katte-project>
- Fowler-Smith, L. (2018). Adorning and Adoring: The Sacred Trees of India. Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture, 12(3).