



MEDIA NARRATIVES ON URBAN WATER BODIES: ANALYSING THE COVERAGE OF LAKE DEGRADATION AND REVIVAL IN BENGALURU

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ABSTRACT

The degradation and revival of lakes in Bengaluru represent a crucial environmental issue with significant social, economic, and ecological implications. Despite ongoing efforts to restore these vital water bodies, there is a noticeable disparity in the attention given to this issue by the news and digital media. This paper aims to investigate the extent and nature of media coverage regarding Bengaluru's lakes, examining both the decline of these ecosystems and the revival initiatives. By analysing the role of the media, this research seeks to understand how effectively these narratives are communicated to the public and stakeholders, and how media attention influences public awareness and policy-making. This study will employ quantitative content analysis by involving a comprehensive content analysis of articles and news segments. This will help quantify the frequency, tone, and themes of lake-related stories in prominent media outlets. The research will draw from multiple data sources, including newspaper archives, online news platforms, government, and NGO reports on lake conservation. Through this comprehensive approach, the study seeks to identify patterns and gaps in media coverage, highlighting the gaps in current reporting practices.

KEYWORDS : public awareness, policy-making, news coverage, environmental significance, lakes of Bengaluru

INTRODUCTION

Bengaluru, once known as Bangalore, sits gracefully at an elevation of about 3,000 feet above sea level. Without the benefit of a perennial river, the city has historically depended on its lakes for water and sustenance. The early city planners, Kempe Gowda and General Heiram Sankey (whose name graces the Sankey Tank), were instrumental in creating an intricate network of cascading lakes.

Bengaluru typically receives around 800 to 900 mm of rainfall each year. To make the most of this precious resource, a clever system was developed: rainwater runoff (about 20% of the total rainfall, with the rest lost to evaporation or seeping into the ground) was first collected in lakes situated at higher elevations. This excess water then flowed through wide channels called Rajakalwes, about thirty feet wide, down to the next set of lakes. This cascading system continued until the surplus water reached the four main natural drainage valleys: Challaghatta, Koramangala, Hebbal, and Vrishabhavati.

In the late 18th century, a British East India Company captain, on a mission to find an alternate route to Seringapatam, was struck by Bengaluru's lakes and its pleasant climate. He famously dubbed it the "Land of a Thousand Lakes." Today, Bengaluru's Revenue Survey maps still list 937 lakes scattered across its five taluks.

However, the city's rapid urban development, particularly since the IT boom of the 1980s, has drastically changed the landscape. Skyrocketing land values have led to extensive land grabbing by a range of stakeholders, from criminals to politicians and bureaucrats. As a result, only 189 of the original lakes remain functional, according to the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). Sadly, many of these surviving lakes have become repositories for sewage and wastewater, further contaminating groundwater and diminishing their once-crucial role in the city's ecosystem.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN LAKE/ ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES COVERAGE

The media plays a critical role in highlighting the state of lakes, advocating for their preservation, and mobilizing community and governmental action. The media can contribute in many ways, and they are:

1. Raising awareness

- **Highlighting issues:** Media coverage can bring attention

to the various issues facing lakes, such as pollution, encroachment, and mismanagement. By reporting on these problems, newspapers and media channels inform the public about the environmental and health impacts of deteriorating lake conditions.

- **Educating the public:** Through news articles, features, and documentaries, media outlets can educate the public about the importance of lakes for ecological balance, water resources, and local climates.

2. Facilitating public engagement

- **Encouraging community involvement:** Media coverage can inspire community action and advocacy by showcasing local efforts to restore and protect lakes. Public interest stories can galvanize citizens to participate in lake conservation activities.
- **Providing a platform for dialogue:** Media serves as a platform for discussions between stakeholders, including environmentalists, government officials, and the public, helping to facilitate dialogue on lake management and conservation.

3. Holding authorities accountable

- **Investigative reporting:** Journalists can investigate and expose issues related to lake management, such as illegal encroachments or failures in policy enforcement. This kind of reporting can pressure authorities to address these issues and implement corrective measures.
- **Monitoring progress:** Media can track and report on the progress of lake conservation projects and policies, highlighting successes and ongoing challenges to ensure that commitments are met.

4. Advocating for policy change

- **Influencing policy:** By documenting and publicizing the impact of lake-related issues the media can influence policymakers and drive legislative and regulatory changes aimed at protecting and restoring lakes.
- **Promoting solutions:** Media coverage can spotlight successful lake restoration projects and innovative solutions, encouraging adoption of similar measures in other regions.

5. Documenting and preserving history

- **Recording changes:** Media archives can document the historical and ongoing changes in lake conditions, providing valuable data for researchers and policymakers.

- **Preserving cultural heritage:** Coverage can also reflect the cultural and historical significance of lakes to local communities, preserving their stories and importance for future generations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Media's role in raising awareness

The role of media in raising public awareness about environmental issues, such as lake pollution and conservation, is well-documented. Boykoff and Boykoff (2007) argue that media coverage significantly impacts public perception by highlighting environmental problems and their implications. Their review emphasizes that media can either amplify or diminish the urgency of these issues, a critical factor in prompting action on lake conservation. Nisbet (2009) further elaborates on the media's role through framing and agenda-setting, noting that media can guide public attention and shape perceptions of lake-related problems. By focusing on aspects like pollution or conservation successes, media coverage can mobilize community support and influence public discourse.

2. Media's impact on policy and decision-making

The influence of the media extends into policy and decision-making, affecting how environmental issues are addressed. Cohen (2010) explores the relationship between media coverage and environmental policy, illustrating how public pressure, driven by media exposure of issues such as water quality and illegal encroachments, can lead to stricter regulations and conservation measures. Smith (2015) adds that media scrutiny, particularly through investigative journalism, can result in significant policy changes. This type of media influence is vital for ensuring that lake management policies are effective and responsive to public concerns.

3. Investigative journalism and accountability

Investigative journalism is instrumental in uncovering and addressing issues related to lakes, such as pollution and mismanagement. Glasser and Ettema (2012) highlight how investigative reporting exposes hidden environmental issues and contributes to advocacy efforts. Downing (2008) supports this by emphasizing the role of media as a watchdog, ensuring that environmental policies and practices are implemented correctly. Investigative journalism not only brings issues to light but also pressures stakeholders to address them, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability in lake management.

4. Media and community engagement

Media coverage significantly enhances community engagement and advocacy for lake conservation. Smith (2015) examines how media mobilizes community action by showcasing local conservation efforts and the benefits of community involvement. McCombs (2013) further discusses how media influence extends to community action by disseminating information about successful conservation projects and local initiatives. Media coverage that highlights community successes can inspire other communities to engage in similar actions, amplifying the impact on lake management.

5. Criticisms and challenges

Despite its critical role, media coverage of environmental issues, including lake management, faces several limitations. Thompson (2018) discusses how media biases and selective reporting can skew public perception and undermine environmental advocacy. Biases in media coverage can lead to an incomplete or distorted portrayal of lake issues, affecting public understanding and policy responses. McCombs (2013) also addresses the limitations of media, noting that sensationalized or superficial reporting can detract from the complexity of lake management issues.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the extent, nature, frequency, scope and depth of

media coverage on lake degradation in Bengaluru. This assessment aims to reveal how often and in what detail lake degradation issues are covered, providing insights into the level of attention these problems receive and identifying the predominant themes in the discourse.

2. To analyze media framing, narrative techniques, portray lake degradation and revival. This analysis will shed light on how lakes are represented in the media—whether as environmental crises, success stories, or neglected issues.

3. Evaluate the impact of media coverage on public awareness, policy responses, community engagement in Bengaluru. Evaluating this impact helps determine the role of media in shaping environmental outcomes and advocacy efforts.

4. Identify gaps and opportunities for improved media coverage on lake degradation and revival. Recognizing these gaps will allow for improved reporting practices and contribute to better-informed public and policymakers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a content analysis methodology is employed to examine media narratives related to lake degradation and revival in Bengaluru. The focus is on analysing articles from three major newspapers in Bengaluru—Bangalore Mirror (The Times of India Group), Deccan Herald, and The Hindu—covering the period from 2017 to 2024. These newspapers were selected due to their significant presence in regional reporting and their comprehensive coverage of local issues. The content analysis will target 31 major articles that highlight key themes, including issues of lake degradation, efforts to bring about changes, and development initiatives.

The analysis will involve systematic coding and categorization of these articles to identify recurring narratives, framing techniques, and patterns in the portrayal of lake-related topics. Key aspects such as the frequency of coverage, thematic emphasis, and shifts in narrative over time will be evaluated to understand how media coverage has evolved and its impact on public awareness and policy discourse. This methodology aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how lake issues are represented in the media and to assess the role of media in influencing environmental outcomes in Bengaluru.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The study may not encompass all relevant media sources, potentially missing key insights.
2. Full articles from The Hindu were inaccessible due to paywalls, limiting comprehensive analysis.
3. Differences in article depth and quality may affect the overall analysis.
4. The study primarily includes English-language media, potentially excluding important perspectives from publications in other languages.

DATA ANALYSIS

Frequency, Scope, and Depth of media coverage related to lake degradation in Bengaluru

The media coverage of lake degradation in Bengaluru is both frequent and diverse, as evidenced by numerous articles from the Bangalore Mirror, Deccan Herald, and The Hindu over recent years. For example, articles such as "79 Industries Asked to Shut for Polluting Lake" and "Sewage, Encroachment Dooming Sarakki Lake" highlight ongoing issues of pollution and encroachment, reflecting a broad scope of coverage that addresses regulatory actions, environmental crises, and specific incidents of lake mismanagement (Bangalore Mirror, 2020; Deccan Herald, 2019).

The depth of coverage varies among articles. Some provide detailed accounts of problems and solutions, such as "BWSSB to Wipe Sewage Out of Arakere Lake in 30 Days" (Bangalore

Mirror, 2019), while others offer more general overviews of systemic issues, as seen in "Bengaluru Lakes Are a Cesspool of Lies" (Bangalore Mirror, 2017). This variation illustrates the different levels of detail and focus in media reporting on lake degradation.

Media framing and narrative techniques

Media narratives employ various framing techniques to convey issues related to lakes. For instance, the articles "Karma Is a Breach: Hulimavu Lake Redevelopment Plan Goes Awry, Floods Homes" and "Death of a City Lake" use dramatic language and metaphors to emphasize the severe impacts of poor planning and neglect on lake environments (Bangalore Mirror, 2020; Bangalore Mirror, 2017). These articles frame lake issues in a manner that underscores the catastrophic effects of mismanagement.

In contrast, the article "Denmark's Lake Knud Becomes Tumakuru's Bheemasandra Lake" frames lake revival efforts as a positive and inspiring example of international collaboration, using optimistic language to highlight successful restoration projects (Bangalore Mirror, 2019). This framing illustrates how media can influence public perception by focusing on either the negative consequences of lake degradation or the positive outcomes of successful management and restoration efforts.

Impact of media coverage on public awareness and policy responses

Media coverage significantly influences public awareness and policy responses. For instance, extensive reporting on "Work to Clear Encroachers from Arakere Lake Begins" (Bangalore Mirror, 2018) and "Residents Plan to Move SC to Save Pattandur Lake" (Bangalore Mirror, 2018) demonstrates how media can mobilize community action and influence policy by highlighting local and legal responses to lake issues. These articles showcase how media attention can drive community engagement and prompt legal interventions.

Additionally, articles such as "City Needs 400 Km More Sewage Lines to Keep Lakes Pollution-Free" (Deccan Herald, 2023) and "BBMP Allocates Rs 35 Cr for Works in 13 Lakes" (Deccan Herald, 2023) illustrate how media reporting on policy actions and budget allocations can emphasize the need for infrastructural improvements and shape public expectations regarding government accountability. The media's role in highlighting these issues can significantly affect both public perception and policy-making processes related to lake conservation and management.

Gaps and opportunities for improved media coverage

Despite extensive media coverage, several gaps and opportunities for improvement are apparent. For example, many articles concentrate heavily on the problems and controversies related to lake issues, often neglecting successful restoration efforts and long-term solutions. Articles such as "This Lake Can Breathe Easy" (Bangalore Mirror, 2016) and "A Group That Has Revived 15 Lakes Is Looking at Ways to Ensure Effort Is Sustainable" (Bangalore Mirror, 2017) offer positive insights but are less frequent compared to those focusing on crises and failures.

There is also an opportunity to enhance coverage by including more in-depth analyses of policy impacts and community engagement strategies. Articles like "Bengaluru's Sarjapura Residents Go All Out to Make a Transplanted Tree Live" (Bangalore Mirror, 2018) reflect community involvement but could benefit from broader discussions on how such efforts contribute to overall lake health. Addressing these gaps could lead to more balanced and comprehensive reporting on lake management and conservation.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

1. Extent and nature of media coverage

Media extensively covers lake degradation in Bengaluru, highlighting pollution and encroachment issues. While coverage is broad, it often emphasizes crises and failures over solutions and successes.

2. Media framing and narrative techniques

Media employs dramatic language to frame negative aspects of lake issues, such as pollution and mismanagement. Positive narratives, like successful restoration projects, are less frequent and often portrayed as isolated successes.

3. Impact on public awareness and policy responses

Media coverage has significantly influenced public awareness and policy responses, drove community action and shaping policy decisions. However, the impact varies, with some reports prompting immediate action and others exposing systemic issues.

4. Gaps and opportunities for improved coverage

Media coverage tends to focus on negative aspects, lacking balance in reporting successes and long-term solutions. There is an opportunity to improve by highlighting both challenges and achievements and providing deeper analysis of policy impacts and community involvement.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Balanced reporting in highlighting environmental issues

The analysis reveals a tendency for media coverage to emphasize the negative aspects of lake management, such as pollution and encroachment, while providing less frequent coverage of successful restoration efforts (e.g., Sewage, Encroachment Dooming Sarakki Lake; A Group That Has Revived 15 Lakes Is Looking at Ways to Ensure Effort Is Sustainable). To address this imbalance, it is recommended that media outlets strive for a more balanced representation by reporting on both the challenges and successes in lake management. This approach would provide a comprehensive view of the issues and offer a fuller picture of progress and setbacks.

Need for in-depth articles

Although some articles provide detailed insights into specific problems and responses (e.g., BWSSB to Wipe Sewage Out of Arakere Lake in 30 Days), many lack an in-depth analysis of broader impacts and policy implications. To improve reporting, the media should include more thorough analyses that explore the effectiveness of interventions and policies. This would offer a deeper understanding of the outcomes and contribute to more informed public and policy discussions.

Media should promote community and policy engagement

Articles such as Residents Plan to Move SC to Save Pattandur Lake highlight community mobilization, while others discuss policy responses (e.g., BBMP Allocates Rs 35 Cr for Works in 13 Lakes). Increased coverage of both community actions and policy measures is recommended to encourage greater public and governmental involvement in lake management. By highlighting these efforts, the media can help drive further engagement and accountability.

Addressing systemic problems is the key

Several articles identify systemic problems, including regulatory failures and land encroachments (e.g., Bengaluru Lakes Are a Cesspool of Lies). It is recommended that media focus on exposing and addressing these systemic issues while advocating for improved governance and enforcement. This focus would help in addressing root causes of lake degradation and fostering more effective solutions.

Media should promote more collaborative efforts

While some coverage reports on collaborative efforts and international models (e.g., Denmark's Lake Knud Becomes

Tumakuru's Bheemasandra Lake), there is less emphasis on cross-sector collaboration. Media should highlight successful collaborations and international practices that could be adapted locally. This would promote the sharing of best practices and enhance local lake management strategies.

CONCLUSION

The narrative surrounding Bengaluru's lakes extends beyond mere environmental issues; it embodies a tale of hope, resilience, and community determination. The media coverage reviewed paints a vivid picture of a city grappling with severe lake management challenges—ranging from pollution and encroachment to systemic failures and inadequate infrastructure. Yet, amidst these trials, there is a story of individuals, communities, and organizations working diligently to rejuvenate and safeguard these essential water bodies.

Frequent media reports reveal the stark reality of Bengaluru's lake crisis, highlighting severe issues such as pollution, as seen in articles like *Sewage, Encroachment Dooming Sarakki Lake*. These stories expose the deep-rooted problems caused by rapid urban expansion and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and effective policies to tackle lake degradation.

The media also chronicles hopeful efforts and innovative solutions driving lake restoration. Reports on successful initiatives, such as *A Group That Has Revived 15 Lakes Is Looking at Ways to Ensure Effort Is Sustainable*, showcase the dedication of local activists and organizations. These accounts of progress and perseverance highlight the power of collective action and community involvement in overcoming environmental challenges.

Nevertheless, there is a critical need for more balanced media coverage. Current narratives often emphasize crises, overshadowing the successes and effective solutions being implemented. Expanding media coverage to include both the ongoing challenges and the achievements will play a crucial role in fostering a more informed and engaged public.

Bengaluru's lakes symbolize the city's broader struggle with urban growth and environmental stewardship. The media has a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to shape this narrative by offering a balanced perspective that includes both problems and solutions. By celebrating successes and advocating for sustainable practices, media coverage can inspire continued efforts to restore and protect Bengaluru's lakes, ensuring their vitality for future generations.

However, as Bengaluru navigates the complexities of urbanization and environmental conservation, the media's role in portraying a hopeful and action-oriented narrative will be essential. By highlighting the full spectrum of lake issues, the media can drive awareness, inspire action, and contribute to the ongoing preservation of these vital water resources.

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