

# Tanks of Karnataka

*A historical perspective*

Vatsala Iyengar

*Historical records highlight the fact that rulers in India have placed utmost importance to the construction of tanks. The rock inscriptions as well as Kaifiyats confirm this. The Puranas too uphold the significance of the tanks. This article draws attention to the relevance of the experience in history.*

From pre-historic times, the rain dependent state of Karnataka has been witness to continuous efforts by the rulers and the people to set up efficient systems to harness and collect water. In fact, during the Bronze Age and the Megalithic Age, the people of South India were regarded as leaders in constructing water-harvesting systems, especially at places where rivers were not present.

Historical evidence indicates that as early as 300 B.C. the communities of Karnataka knew the technique of constructing tanks as well as were aware of the importance of maintaining them. Thousands of inscriptions in the post-Mauryan period detail out information on canals, bunds, depth of water, costs for construction and in fact, every aspect of tank construction. To cite some examples:

- A rock inscription of the 4th century which is in the reign of the Kadamba King Mayura Varman describes a tank built by the king in the village of Chandravalli in Chitradurga District.
- Another inscription of the same dynasty record details of a tank built near the Pranaveswara Temple of Talagunda in Shimoga District.
- An inscription in a place that is presently in Andhra Pradesh is considered to be a handbook on the construction of tanks during the rule of the Vijayanagara king, Bukka.
- The Munirabad inscription near Hospet describes in a poetic manner the canal dug from the Tungabhadra River to construct a tank.
- Another 1,000-year-old inscription found in Bethamangala of Kolar District testifies to the existence of a tank there.
- An inscription found in the Venkataramana Temple to the east of Rajagundlahalli in the same district details the method of construction and the materials used.
- The 1371 Bolakyanahalli inscription in Arakalagudu, Hassan District describes the financial contribution given by the community of Nanjapura village to maintain the tank. It also states that four bullock carts were



given by the villagers for this purpose. The inscription further stipulated that the tank beneficiaries bear the cost of the bullocks, the stoppage-pole, iron and oil needed to run the carts.

- According to the 1310 Holenarasipura inscriptions which belong to the reign of the Hoysala King Viraballala, the Prime Minister, Madigadeva Dandanayaka, purchased four villages after paying about 2,300 gold coins as toll offering to God Padumaleswara. The king issued a letter in this regard and also recorded that certain taxes levied on the citizens be dropped. The subsequent portion of this inscription quotes the tank built by the Prime Minister in the name of his wife, Mayidevi Damnnayiti, at a cost of about 3,060 gold coins.

### **And the Kaifiyats say....**

There is interesting information regarding tanks and ponds in the Kaifiyats of the State. Some of the unusual cases of people who constructed tanks were documented in the Kaifiyat, such as :

- The cowherds of Kokkasamudra in Bellary District built a tank and erected an image of a dog there
- A dancer built a tank in Yagati
- A prostitute in Nagamangala sacrificed her life for the sake of the tank
- A call-girl called Sringeri made a generous contribution to renovate a tank
- The watchman of a village constructed a tank and temple.

- Unable to witness the plight of his elephants, a Mahout built a tank for their benefit.

These are only selected cases. There are many more instances documented in the Kaifiyats which highlight the generosity and social awareness exhibited by people belonging to all classes and communities which provided water to the parched lands and relief to the communities.

Apart from the inscriptions and Kaifiyats, numerous 'hero stones' also reflect the sense of sacrifice exhibited by the people for the welfare of others. For instance, at the time of constructing the tank in Akkinalu village, Chennamma, the eldest daughter-in-law of the village chief came forward to sacrifice her life as an offering as the tank failed to yield any water. Pleased with her devotion, the Water Goddess gushed forth, flooding the entire area. Caught in the force of the sudden gush of water, Chennamma lost an arm. She subsequently came to be worshipped as a village deity by the name *tholgai* Chennamma.

### **A royal duty**

While commoners built small water bodies for the benefit of the community, kings and rulers undertook large irrigation works as part of their religious and social obligations. They provided incentives to build tanks in new settlements, made land grants, and even exempted taxes for people who built tanks. The royal families provided generous financial support towards building tanks and temples. This was also evident when the rulers set up Brahmin colonies called Agraharas where a tank was built along with a temple. Many of the Brahmin settlements were named after the tanks which were constructed for use by the temple as well as for the welfare of the people.

In history records, construction of tanks witnessed a golden era during the reign of the Kalyana Chalukyas (973-1336). Of the total number of tanks built during this period, 50 per cent of them were constructed under Tailapa II, the founder of this empire; the rest were built by the subsequent kings including Vikramaditya IV. These tanks provided immense benefits to the regions of Dharwad, Bellary, Chitradurga and Shimoga.

During the rule of the Hoysalas, who were considered master builders, the regions of Hassan, Chikamagalur, Tumkur and Mandya enjoyed plentiful water, thanks to the rulers. These tanks were so expansive that they were often compared to the seas and named as Hoysala Samudra, Vishnu Samudra etc. These kings had also decreed that the citizens should spend an annual amount of 30 *gadyanas* towards the maintenance of the canals and outlets of the tanks.

Apart from the Hoysalas, the rulers of the Rashtrakuta, Ganga, Chalukya, and Vijayanagara Empire also gave high priority to the construction of these water bodies.

## The travellers say...

Foreign travellers Paes and Nuniz have given a graphic description of the massive tank built by Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara. Paes says: "...The king made a tank there, which, as it seems to me, has the width of a falcon-shot (an old piece of artillery). It is at the mouth of two hills, so all the water which comes from either side collects there. Besides this, water comes to it from more than three leagues by pipes that run along the lower parts of the range outside. This water is brought from a lake, which overflows into a little river. The tank has three large pillars handsomely carved with figures; these connect with certain pipes from which they get water when they have to irrigate their gardens and rice-fields. In order to make this tank, the king broke down a hill, which enclosed the ground occupied by the tank. In the tank, I saw so many people at work. There must have been 15,000 to 20,000 men who looked like ants. One could not see the ground on which they walked; there were so many men. The king portioned out this tank among his captains, each of whom had the duty of seeing that the people placed under him did their work, and that the tank was finished and brought to completion. The tank burst two or three times, and the king asked his Brahmins to consult their idol and find out the reason why it burst so often. The Brahmins said that the idol was displeased, and desired that they should make a sacrifice, and should give him the blood of men and horses and buffaloes. As soon as the king heard this, he forthwith commanded that at the gate of the pagoda, horses, buffaloes and the heads of 60 men should be cut off. This was done at once."

Nuniz, in continuation of this description says, "This king also made in his time a lake, which lies between two very lofty Serras. But since he had no means for making it, nor anyone who could do it, he sent his people to Goa to ask the Governor to send some Portuguese masons. The Governor sent him Joao della Ponte, a great worker in stone. The king explained to him how he wanted to tank to be built. Though it seemed impossible to this man (mestre, modern maistry), nevertheless he told the King that he would do it and asked him to have lime prepared. To this the King laughed, for in this country when they build a house, they do not understand how to use lime. The King commanded to throw down quantities of stone and cast down many great rocks into the valley, but everything broke into pieces. All the work done in the day was destroyed each night. The King, amazed at this sent for his wise men and sorcerers and asked them what they thought of this thing. They told him that their idols were not pleased with this work, and that unless he spilt the blood of men or women or buffaloes, that work would never finish. So the King sent to bring hither all the men who were his prisoners, and who deserved death, and ordered them to be beheaded there. With this, the work advanced. He made a bank across the middle of the valley, so lofty and wide, that it was a crossbow shot in breadth and length, and had large openings (shuices); below it he put pipes by which the water escaped, and when they wished to they could close these. By means of this water, they made many improvements in the city, and many channels using which they irrigated rice-fields and gardens, in order to improve their lands. He gave the people lands which are irrigated by this water free for nine years."

## Individual responsibilities

In more recent years, during the era of the Wodeyars of Mysore, there are instances of land grants being made to individuals on the condition that they used a portion of the land for a tank which they would build from their own resources. For instance:

- A land grant was made to Narahari Shastri on April 11, 1761 for his livelihood. He committed to build a tank to help the community and several generations thereafter.
- Two villages were given to Lakshmi-Nidhitirtha of Gopanahalli. However since the tax to be paid for very high, the condition was laid that if they constructed a tank, the tax would be two *varahas* per 10 *khandugas* of Devadaya lands. Thereafter, for wetlands, the tax was fixed at one *varaha* per 10 *khandugas*. Furthermore, income from two *khandugas* of wetlands and two contractual lands was exempted and this money was diverted to maintaining the tank.

## And the scriptures state...

Ancient texts also have several references to tanks. Arthashastra, while upholding the importance of tanks, has specified that a king must build a water source that does not dry up during the year. If he is not able to do so, as an alternative, he should provide the land and other essential material to anyone who voluntarily offers to build a tank. The text has also laid down some stipulations for those who are not able to do this directly, but wish to participate. For instance, anybody who stays away from any kind of cooperative work should provide workers and bullocks for the work and should bear a part of the expenses; but he should not expect any returns. In addition, it lays down that the natural flow of water from a higher tank to a lower one should not be stopped unless the lower tank has been rendered



useless for three consecutive years. Those who indulge in such a practice should be punished. Those who draw water before turn or those who prevented water flow into other fields or those who emptied the tank should be penalised, states the Arthashastra.

Agni Purana avers that a person who constructs a tank receives 100 million times more merit than those who perform the ritual of *Ashwa medhayagna*. Such a person also goes directly to heaven in a fine chariot. Furthermore, since cattle and other animals drink water from the tank, the person who builds a tank is absolved of any sin in life. Gifting water through construction of a reliable water source was also considered to be more meritorious and more important than having 1000 sons.

As per the Agni Purana, Sundays and Tuesdays are considered to be inauspicious days to dig a tank. Several stars of the constellation and conjunction of planets are considered to augur well for the construction of a tank. This Purana has also specified some rituals while laying the foundation for the tank. As Lord Vishnu is considered to be the embodiment of water, his image as well as that of Varuna, the rain God, are worshipped. The scripture states that a rectangular or octagonal or circular pole should be erected at the centre of the tank, prior to which gold and fruits are placed at its base. For a tank, 20 hand-lengths should be dug and 25 hand-lengths for a pond at the point where this pole is placed alongwith chanting of hymns.

Water collected in the tank was also sacred. Gautama Dharma Sutra, a treatise, says that people should not defecate in these waters nor should they enter the water wearing footwear.

### **From the pages of literature**

The tank is not regarded as a mere source of water; it has also been the fountainhead of inspiration for art and literature. Vriksha Ayurveda, a work by Surapala gives details about reservoirs and tanks while different literary works in Kannada also have traditional knowledge about tanks. A work by the Vijayanagara king Krishna Devaraya in Telugu language proclaims that both righteousness and economy will be augmented only when irrigation canals and tanks are built.

There are tanks and Pushkaranis that have created a world of art through depictions of scenes from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other epics on the pillared halls used as bathing ghats.

### **Water for worship**

Water is an absolute necessity in the Hindu mode of worship and almost all the rituals use offering of water to the deities, sipping of water, and personal anointments. All these require an extensive use of water. As a result, most, if not all major temples of Karnataka have built a tank or the Pushkarani next to the temple. In

cases where there is a river or stream nearby, water is drawn from this source through canals.

Some temples have the Sanctum Sanctorum in the middle of the pond and have a small bridge from the bank to the premises. Several such temples can be found along the coastal region, the prominent ones being Madhva Sarovar of Udupi, Mahadevalaya of Kumbashi, Chaturmukha Basadi of Karkala, Anantha Padmanabha temple of Kasargod, among others. Madhava Vijaya, a text says that Ganga Bhagirathi, the river goddess manifests herself in the Madhava Sarovar once in every 12 years. Stone platforms were built around this pond in the 16th century in order to strengthen the structure.



The Chamundi temple near Mysore also celebrates the *Teppotsava* after Dussera in a water body called Devikola atop the Chamundi Hill. The Koti Thirtha pond in Koteswara of Coondapur Taluk is in an area of 4.5 acres and is the largest tank in the entire belt. It is the focal point for many festivals held by the temple and the people here believe that holy waters are found here.

The tanks of Karnataka were classified on the basis of their size and accordingly were called a big tank or small tank, while new tanks were called virgin tanks.

Through the concerted and continuous efforts of the citizens, rulers, feudal lords, landowners, communities received several centuries, even at the end of the 19th century. 60 per cent of the region of a total area of 27,269 square miles continued to enjoy the benefits of tank water. Major R.H.Sankey, the Chief Engineer of Mysore during the colonial rule says, "Unless there were exceptional circumstances, water

from the tanks spread over 16,287 square miles and was not allowed to overflow. To such an extent has the principle of storage been followed that it would now require some ingenuity to discover another site within this area that is suitable for a new tank.”

A recent press report states that Bangalore once boasted of 596 tanks to provide drinking water to the city, and that this the number has dwindled to 64. Two historic tanks in the city are dying and on the verge of drying up; groundwater levels have fallen and floods are becoming a common feature during monsoons.

This situation is not limited to Bangalore. It is a well-known fact that the other parts of Karnataka face a similar situation. It, therefore, becomes the prime duty of the public and the administration alike to appreciate the practice of our ancient rulers regarding the construction and management of tanks and ponds and learn from the pages of history and tradition.

---

*Vatsala Iyengar is a senior writer and has worked as a newsreader and translator for All India Radio. She has to her credit extensive research work on the temples of Karnataka that have been published by the Government in three volumes.*