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Dr T V Ramachandra, co-ordinator, Energy & Wetlands Research Group, Indian Institute of Science. Credit: DH Photo/Pushkar V

"The Mekedatu will create a disaster," said T V Ramachandra, a professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science at a Bengaluru 2040 panel discussion about protecting and restoring the biodiversity of Bengaluru. "The project will submerge 5,000 hectares of forest. Instead, we should look at local solutions like rainwater harvesting." The forests in the area have a catchment capacity of 100 TMC, replacing that with a dam that has a storage capacity of 65-67 TMC is a myopic decision, he said.

The other panelists explained that such large projects that would impact people and the environment significantly need to be approached with a participatory lens. Disha Ravi, a climate justice activist

"We have heard enough about how we (the youth) have to approach the government," she said. "Whenever attempts are made, they have not been receptive. Maybe more people in the government need to understand how to engage with citizens better and take criticism well."

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This lack of consultation is nothing new. According to Leo Saldanha, coordinator of the Environmental Support Group, there is a trend towards centralisation. "Is it not a paradox that our leaders are elected for the state but they are focused on the development of one city?" he asked.

The Cauvery has been exhausted, and instead of focusing on local systems of water management, the focus is on large-scale projects. "The rajkaluves (stormwater drains) have been encroached upon and we have not followed the recommendations by the Justice N K Patil committee to protect lakes," he said. "Endemic vegetation can be planted along the drains so natural filtration happens. The need is for low-cost solutions."

Intergenerational participation

Merely three per cent of Bangaloreans were aware of or displayed interest in matters related to the environment, according to a study. To bridge this disconnect between people and the natural environment that surrounds them, Disha said that there was a need to build intergenerational participation in environmental movements. "One thing that I have learned is that as young people we may make many mistakes, but there is always space to learn," she said.

It is also not possible to separate environmental activism from politics as is commonly suggested, according to Disha. "When the decision to take away land from the Adivasis is political, when the result of political decisions have kept our air and water polluted and is causing lung problems, why should environmental activism not be political? It is impossible to separate," she said.

The increasing tendency to privatise public spaces or limit access is also political in Saldanha's opinion. "There have been many judgements in the past that limit the access of common people," he said. "Keeping peanut sellers out of Cubbon Park is one such move. Those who are in power are limiting access to people to whom these spaces belong."

There is also a need for more government support towards environmental research efforts. As Ramachandra said, "It is not that we don't receive support. There is a 40 to 50 per cent effort. But if I