

# Implications of Neoliberal Urban Beautification for Social Spaces and Marginalised Communities

## A Case Study of Bada Talab at Ranchi

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*How to cite this article:*

Bhardwaj, Shubham and Anju H. Bara. 2024. 'Implications of Neoliberal Urban Beautification for Social Spaces and Marginalised Communities: A Case Study of Bada Talab at Ranchi'. *Sampratyaya*, 1(Spl. Issue No.1): pages 29-40. DOI: 10.21276/smprt.202408.1s1.a3

### Abstract

Urban beautification projects have become increasingly prevalent in cities worldwide, driven by neoliberal ideologies that prioritize economic growth and private investment over social and ecological concerns. This neoliberal influence has also shaped urban development policies in India. This paper examines the impact of neoliberal influence on urban social spaces through a case study of the Bada Talab beautification project in Ranchi, India. The study analyses the transformation of this urban lake, a crucial urban social space, into an ecological park and tourist destination. By employing a qualitative approach, including interviews with government officials, residents, and user groups, the research explores the interplay between neoliberal policies, urban development, and the exclusion of local populations. The findings reveal the prioritization of aesthetics and monumentality, gentrification processes, and the systematic displacement of marginalized communities, who rely on the lake for their livelihoods. The study highlights the pervasive influence of neoliberal hegemony in shaping urban landscapes, often at the expense of social equity and ecological sustainability and calls for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to urban planning that balances economic growth with the preservation of ecology and livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal Urbanism, Urban Beautification, Social Spaces, Gentrification, Marginalisation

### 1.0 Introduction

Urban beautification initiatives, a type of urban restructuring project, have become increasingly popular in recent years as cities around the world are making significant investment in these projects. However, these initiatives are often criticised for prioritising the neoliberal economic policies and political ideologies over those of social and ecological needs of the city (Banerjee-Guha 2009, Kumar & Banerji 2018, Peck et al. 2009 and Sharma

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2010). These projects aim to improve the visual appearance and aesthetics of urban spaces. The dynamics of urban spaces have continuously been examined by the several academic disciplines, placing a specific emphasis on social spaces within cities (Andersson 2016, Jabareen & Eisenberg 2021 and Qi et al. 2024). Urban social spaces are public spaces found within cities where social interactions take place alongside the spatial elements of the place. The spatial elements, including seating arrangements, open areas, or the presence of greenery and ecological resources, all play a role in shaping how people use and interact within space (Raipat 2022). They hold an important place in the urbanisation process and the link between social spaces and its planned beautification needs to be explored in the context of neoliberal, socio-political and ecological issues.

Social spaces include green spaces such as public parks, urban lake, rivers, waterfronts, and open grounds, as well as civic spaces like pedestrianised streets and walkways, town squares, community centres and markets, and public transportation hubs (Nared & Lamovsek 2015 and UN-Habitat 2018). These spaces cater to both dominant groups as well as the marginalised, thereby shaping the socio-spatial fabric of the city. The nature and use of social spaces are influenced by societal factors like social dynamics, power structures, and cultural significance (Qi et al. 2024) as well as the neoliberalisation processes that alter global, national, regional, and local dynamics, thus impacting the nature of urban social spaces (Jabareen & Eisenberg 2021). These spaces have a multi-dimensional nature, emphasising the need to view them not merely as physical environments but also as spaces infused with social, cultural, and ecological significance. (Andersson 2016). Urban social spaces are often the target of city beautification projects. The goal is to enhance the quality of these spaces, making them more inviting and aesthetically pleasing for residents and visitors. However, it is essential to ensure that the beautification initiatives go beyond mere visual appeal and prioritise the functionality and inclusivity of these spaces (Pai & Thoopal 2023).

In the era of globalisation, neoliberalism influences city beautification policies and practices by prioritising market-oriented economic growth and emphasising the aesthetics and infrastructure that appeal to global capital. This approach often leads to the privatisation and commodification of social spaces, focusing on creating visually appealing environments to attract investment and consumption, rather than addressing the needs of local communities (Harvey 2009 and Jessop 2002). Neoliberal urban planning initiatives, driven by the goal of creating an enabling environment for foreign investment, may result in the construction of infrastructure that neglects essential services for residents and local communities, leading to hidden poverty and social inequalities within cities.

## 1.1 Objective

The present study examines the production of urban social spaces under neoliberalism by examining the planned beautification of an urban lake in Ranchi, India, to analyse the relationship between neoliberalism, planned beautification, and the exclusion of local marginalised population. The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the influence of neoliberalism on the transformation of urban social spaces, using the Bada Talab<sup>1</sup> beautification project in Ranchi as a case study. The research aims to uncover the underlying motivations, power dynamics, and consequences of neoliberal urban policies on marginalised communities and their access to social spaces. By exploring the complex interplay between economic interests, aesthetics, and social equity, the study seeks to

contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential solutions for inclusive and sustainable urban development.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the neoliberal influences on the Bada Talab beautification project and its impact on urban social spaces. The primary data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with government officials involved in the project, as well as interviews with local residents and user groups, such as the fisher and washer communities. These interviews aimed to understand the motivations behind the beautification project, the perceptions and experiences of different stakeholders, and the implications for marginalised communities. Additionally, observational data and document analysis of relevant policies and reports were conducted to contextualise the findings within the broader neoliberal urban development framework.

## 1.3 Literature Review

Following theme based literatures have been reviewed for a better understanding of the topic of reset:

### 1.3.1 *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism emerged as a dominant economic philosophy in the latter half of the 20th century, largely as a response to the perceived failures of Keynesianism and the desire to strengthen free market principles (Nofal 2023, Quiggin 2022 and Thorsen 2010). Proponents of neoliberalism, such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, argue that market-driven approaches in cities can lead to greater efficiency, innovation, and economic growth (Perucich 2018:21 and Mudge 2008). They advocate for policies that attract private investment, promote entrepreneurship, and create a business-friendly environment (Harvey 2005). However, neoliberalism raises concerns about its impact on social equity, affordability, and the environment, as argued by critics like David Harvey, Saskia Sassen, and Neil Smith (Harvey 2005, Sassen 2001 and Smith 1996). Market-driven approaches often prioritise the interests of developers and corporations over the needs of marginalised communities, leading to gentrification, displacement, and growing inequality (Sassen 2001). Moreover, the neoliberal emphasis on privatisation and deregulation can undermine the provision of essential public services and infrastructure, leading to issues such as inadequate affordable housing, transportation congestion, and environmental degradation (Smith 1996).

According to David Harvey “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve the institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (Harvey 2005:2). Initially, neoliberalism was primarily concerned with economic policies, aiming to reduce the role of the state in economic affairs and promote market-driven solutions. But “neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse and has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey2007:23).

### ***1.3.2 Neoliberal Hegemony***

Neoliberal hegemony describes how neoliberal ideas have become the "common sense" for policymaking, even among those who do not explicitly identify as neoliberal (Cerny 2010)<sup>2</sup>. It has been facilitated by the ability of powerful economic actors, such as multi-national corporations and financial institutions, to shape policies and regulations in their favour (Harvey 2005). Two of the key proponents of neoliberal hegemony have been the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank; these institutions have often made the implementation of neoliberal policies a condition for providing loans and financial assistance to developing countries (Stiglitz 2002). The concept of neoliberal hegemony highlights how a network of neoliberal think tanks, intellectuals, and organisations have effectively disseminated and embedded neoliberal ideology across political, economic, and social spheres.

### ***1.3.3 Urban Neoliberalism***

Over time, the concept of neoliberalism has evolved beyond its economic roots to encompass various aspects of society beyond just the economy. Neoliberalism has permeated into areas such as governance, social policy, and urban planning, shaping the way cities are developed and managed (Quiggin 2022). Not a surprise, its impact extends in the shaping of the very fabric of our cities. This expansion of neoliberalism's influence on urban policy and planning is referred to as "neoliberal urbanism" (Beatty 2014, Jessop 2002 and Peck et al. 2009). Urban neoliberalism involves applying neoliberal principles to urban planning and development, often with a focus on market-oriented solutions to urban problems. This can include policies such as privatisation of public services, deregulation of land use and zoning laws, and the promotion of public-private partnerships for urban development projects.

## **1.4 Urban Neoliberalism in India**

The economic liberalisation of India in the 1990s marked a significant shift in the country's development trajectory. This period saw the embrace of neoliberal principles, an economic ideology emphasising free markets, deregulation, and limited state intervention. This philosophy significantly impacted urban development policies, shaping the landscape of Indian cities in the 21st century. Neoliberalism views cities as "engines of economic growth". Indian urban policies, aligned with this perspective, have prioritised attracting foreign investments and fostering a business-friendly environment.

The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) is credited for the first nationwide urban planning policy of urban neoliberalism. Attributing the acute urban crisis in the country to the relentless process of urbanisation, the central government of India launched its largest post-independence urban planning initiative in December 2005. This initiative, named after Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime of India, aimed to transform 63 Indian cities into "world-class" sustainable urban centres. Since the early 1990s, the notion of "livable Indian cities" has been supplanted by the idea of "world-class cities" in Indian planning discourse (Banerjee-Guha 2009). Consequently, the primary focus of the mission shifted towards infrastructure development, including wide roads, flyovers, tunnels, skyways,

airports, mega commercial complexes, real estate projects, and recreational open spaces, all with the aspiration of meeting international standards (ibid).

One of the most visible manifestations of urban neoliberalism in India is the "Smart Cities Mission." Launched in 2015, this initiative aims to leverage technology and private investment to create efficient, technology-driven urban centres. While the vision claims improved infrastructure and services, critics (see Datta 2015) argue that it prioritises profitability. The focus is on attracting private investment and creating business-friendly environments, potentially overlooking the needs of low-income residents. The emphasis on technology and smart solutions can lead to a top-down approach where solutions are imposed without adequate consideration for local contexts and community needs. Concerns exist that these "smart" developments might displace existing communities and businesses, leading to gentrification and social exclusion (Shaban & Datta 2017).

#### ***1.4.1 Production of urban social space under neoliberalism***

Urban beautification projects, advocated under the banner of urban renewal, have been instruments of neoliberalism. These projects often prioritise aesthetics over functionality. They might focus on creating visually appealing spaces for leisure and consumption, neglecting the need for multi-functional spaces for social interaction and community activities. Driven by competition in the global market, local governments are increasingly partnering with private developers to transform cities and social spaces. Gentrification policies have emerged as a crucial urban strategy, driving city beautification projects that aim to foster an appealing image for the global market to attract investment. Frequently, public spaces undergo renovations incorporating imposing architectural elements or monumental statues, intended to inspire a sense of awe and reverence through their grand visual presence.

##### *1.4.1.1 Prioritising aesthetics and monumentality*

As urban social spaces are the city's central showcases and significantly shape its overall image, maintaining an appealing aesthetic is crucial for attracting capital investment. The drive for city beautification has prioritised aesthetics of its social spaces as a key strategy, often at the cost of displacing the marginalised populations who rely on these spaces for their livelihood (Dassé 2019). The main aim becomes making urban public spaces look visually appealing and attractive but designed primarily for activities related to consuming goods/services and spending money. These beautified spaces do not adequately accommodate or facilitate more spontaneous social gatherings and community uses that are not focused on commercial transactions or profit-making.

Social spaces are increasingly being designed by integrating grand architectural elements or statues, conveying a distinct and comprehensible meaning through awe-inspiring imagery. However, this monumental facade masks a deeper complexity. As Lefebvre says "monumentality, for instance, always embodies and imposes a clearly intelligible message. It says what it wishes to say - yet it hides a good deal more: being political, military, and ultimately fascist in character, monumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought" (Lefebvre 1991:143).

##### *1.4.1.2 Gentrification*

Gentrification, as seen through the lens of beautification, is a complex interplay between enhancing social spaces, increasing property values, and potentially leading to the displacement of long-term residents (Smith 2002). The gentrification-beautification nexus exposes the complexities of social spaces. According to Smith, “gentrification is a collective social phenomenon, integrally connected to the social, economic, and political restructuring of cities...” (Smith 1992:114), often resulting in the displacement of long-time, lower-income residents and changes to the cultural and social fabric of the area.

The process of gentrification typically begins when developers and investors identify undervalued or neglected urban spaces with potential for revitalisation. These social spaces often have natural environment, historic architecture, or proximity to central areas, making them attractive to newcomers seeking urban living experiences (Vives Miró 2011). As investment pours into the space, the nearby property values begin to rise, leading to increased rents (Dassé 2019). This can make housing and living unaffordable for existing residents, particularly those of low-income groups. As a result, long-time residents may be forced to move out of the space, either due to rising costs or direct displacement through loss of livelihood due to denied access to the social space (Ghertner 2015). Simultaneously, the character of the social space undergoes significant changes. Local businesses catering to the new, wealthier residents may replace longstanding establishments, and cultural institutions may shift to accommodate the preferences of the incoming population (ibid). This can lead to the loss of community spaces and a sense of displacement among long-time residents who feel alienated from the evolving space identity. Overall, gentrification is a multi-faceted phenomenon with far-reaching social, economic, and cultural implications. While it can bring investment and revitalisation to urban social spaces, it also raises important questions about equity, inclusion, and the right to the city for all residents. As cities continue to evolve and grow, addressing the challenges of gentrification will remain a critical issue in urban planning and development.

## **1.5 City Beautification Projects in Ranchi**

Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, India, serves as a prime example of how neoliberal principles influence city beautification projects. In recent years, the city has undertaken various initiatives like constructing flyovers, redeveloping lakes, and building landscaped parks. These projects, while aiming to improve the city's image, raise concerns about their alignment with neoliberal urbanism.

### ***1.5.1 Study Area***

Jharkhand State was carved out from the former Bihar state on 15 November 2000. Ranchi town which used to be the summer capital of undivided Bihar state became the capital of the new state. Ranchi has a rich mineral resource and industrial base and is also fast developing into a major economic and commercial centre (Mehta & Kumar 2019). Ranchi was accorded a “hill station” status due to its pleasant weather and occasional rainfall all-round the year, but rapid population growth and industrialisation have caused a marked change in its weather patterns and an increase in average temperature. In the 1950s and 1960s, the city had a large number of public sector enterprises. This was primarily because the area around Ranchi was

richly endowed with minerals. The city has since grown at a rapid pace. With the accord of a capital city status, the rapid pace of growth is likely to continue (Mehta and Kumar 2019). Ranchi was the administrative centre even under British rule. After the establishment of Heavy Engineering Corporation in 1958, it became an administrative-cum-industrial town. And on 15 September 1979, Ranchi Municipal Corporation (RMC) was formed by merging the erstwhile Ranchi Municipality, Doranda Municipality, and the Ranchi-Doranda joint water board. It was the second Municipal Corporation of erstwhile Bihar. As mentioned, on 15 November 2000, Jharkhand was carved out as a separate state from Bihar, and Ranchi city became the capital of the new state. The city has seen rapid growth after getting the status of a capital city and all these have transformed the land use and land cover of this area (Kumar et al. 2011).

Ranchi district has one parliamentary constituency and seven assembly constituencies, and for administrative setup, the district is divided into 02 subdivisions with 18 blocks. Ranchi Municipal Corporation has 55 administrative Wards, and the corporation's jurisdiction extends over an area of 175.12 sq. km. Rapid growth and urbanisation in Ranchi come at a cost of continuous neglect of natural resources and the tribal population. About one-fourth of the total population under Ranchi Municipal Corporation belongs to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. Tribal villages of Ranchi engulfed by urban development and the rise in population have turned into urban slums.

Geographically, Ranchi city is heterogeneous and due to its varied topological features, the development process disturbs land, village forests, and natural resources (Gupta & Sen 2008). The major land cover types that dominate the area are agricultural land, built-up land with and without vegetation, dense and open forest, dense shrub, plantation, and water bodies comprising mainly reservoirs, lakes, rivers and their tributaries, and numerous ponds (Kumar et al. 2011).

### ***1.5.2 Policies for the development of Ranchi***

For the development of the city, the first master plan was proposed for Ranchi in 1972 for the years 1972-83, covering an area of 65.04 sq.km; but lack of sectoral planning has led to unorganised development (Ministry of Urban Development 2013). The revised master plan of 1983–2001 included 175.05 sq. km of Ranchi urban areas, which comprised five urban centres i.e., Ranchi, Doranda, Jagannathnagar, Kanke, and Namkum (ibid). The latest proposed revised master plan for 2037 has been prepared by the consultant's Feedback Infra Private Limited and BE Consultants for an area of approximately 652.20 sq.km (including Greater Ranchi Phase –I area of 8.32 sq.km); clients being Urban Development and Housing Department, Ranchi Municipal Corporation and Ranchi Regional Development Authority (Anand 2017). The Government of Jharkhand has envisaged the planning, design, and development of a new capital city of about 5 lakh population at a location near the existing city of Ranchi (CRISIL Infrastructure Advisory 2013). It is to be mentioned that Ranchi was selected as one of the 13 fast-track cities in 2016 under the Smart City Mission's City Challenge. The Smart City Proposal of Ranchi envisages Greenfield development of 341 acres of land, situated near the proposed capital. Proposed Ranchi master plan 2037, which aims at developing Ranchi as a large city covering the surrounding villages mostly inhabited by the scheduled tribes, has been passed in the state assembly in November 2015.

### **1.5.3 Bada Talab: the case study**

Bada Talab, also known as Ranchi Lake, is a historic 52-acre man-made water body located in the heart of Ranchi, the capital city of Jharkhand. Constructed in 1842 by British agent Colonel Onsely with the help of prisoners, the primary objective was to maintain the groundwater level of the city, which is situated over 2,100 feet above sea level. It was initially built to address the dual problems of flooding during monsoons and water scarcity during summers faced by the residents of Purani (old) Ranchi, located near the lake.

The lake is located amidst dense population areas, primarily utilised by two distinct groups: the user group and the non-user group. The user group comprises individuals who rely on the lake water for their livelihoods, namely the washer community and the fisher community. The washer community gathers daily near a Ghat to wash and dry clothes as a means of sustenance. Although the fisher community has been displaced following the extinction of native fish species due to construction within the lake, they previously depended on fishing for their livelihood. Conversely, the non-user groups, who do not use the lake water directly, consist of nearby residents and shop owners who use the lake space as recreational activities.

### **1.5.4 Beautification project of Bada Talab**

In 2013, the Ranchi Municipal Corporation (RMC) drafted a renovation and beautification plan for Ranchi Lake. The 1st phase of the beautification and conservation work on Ranchi Lake began in May 2017. During the first phase, various tasks were undertaken, including the construction of a boundary wall, a pathway, lighting, and sitting arrangements, along with general beautification work. Environmentalists initiated protests while the construction of the boundary wall was ongoing, expressing concerns that it might obstruct the flow of rainwater into the lake. As a result, parts of the concrete boundary wall already constructed were demolished, and iron bar railings were installed to fence the lake. The beautification project resulted in a 02km-long, 10ft-wide concrete pathway encircling the lake, which is bordered by a 3ft-high railing and adorned with 40 vintage lamps of 10 feet height.

In the 2nd phase of the project, which started in 2018, a 33 feet giant bronze statue of Swami Vivekananda was installed by the Tourist Department with financial support from MECON, which was inaugurated on 12 January 2019 by Chief Minister of Jharkhand. Additionally, a 200-meter-long and six-meter-wide bridge was constructed to connect the main entrance with the island where the Vivekananda statue stands.

## **1.6 Result and Discussion**

In interviews with officials of Ranchi Municipal Corporation, it was disclosed that the project's objective is to establish an ecological park and tourist destination, complete with a yoga and meditation centre. When questioned about the rationale behind creating an ecological park featuring statues and pathways for joggers, as well as a yoga and meditation centre, they responded “*aisa sab jagah horaha hai, aap Mumbai ke Marine Drive dekhlijiye, ya Gujrat se Sardar Sarovar Dam Dekhlijiye*” (this kind of development is happening everywhere, such as Mumbai's Marine Drive or Gujarat's Sardar Sarovar Dam). This reliance on replicating existing projects, without a specific ecological focus for the new park, reflects



a tendency towards "neoliberal hegemony," where market-driven solutions and standardised development models are prioritised over unique local needs and environmental considerations.

Interviews conducted with local communities and residents have revealed a wide array of values attributed to the water body. The user group, comprised of the fisher and washer communities, holds the Bada Talab in high regard due to its role in providing them with livelihoods. Despite being disproportionately affected by the beautification project, they express approval of the enhanced aesthetic appeal of the lake. However, they also emphasise the need for the government to consider providing them with alternative nearby locations for their livelihood activities or offer employment opportunities. Conversely, nearby residents do not view the washer and fisher communities as pollutants of the lake but rather as contributors to its diminished beauty. However official said "*Talab keliye itna kharcha hua hai phir ye log isme kapda saaf karenge to talab gandha hi hogana!*" (A lot of money has been spent on the pond, but if people wash clothes in it, the pond will get dirty, won't it!). Their perspective reflects a broader narrative of neoliberal influence, extending beyond attracting foreign capital. Deregulation of land use policies has facilitated the transformation of existing social spaces, resulting in significant alterations to the urban landscape. This scenario exemplifies a case of gentrification, wherein marginalised users of the space has systematically been displaced.

## 1.7 Conclusion

The case of the Bada Talab beautification project exemplifies the pervasive influence of neoliberal hegemony on urban development and spatial transformation irrespective of its benefit to the native people in the area or not. Project's objective of establishing an ecological park and tourist destination, complete with statues, jogging pathways, and a yoga/meditation centre, aligns with the neoliberal agenda of commodifying public spaces for economic gain and attracting investment at a macro level.

The justification provided by officials, referencing similar developments elsewhere, such as Mumbai's Marine Drive or Gujarat's Sardar Sarovar Dam, highlights the normalisation and ubiquity of such neoliberal practices, perpetuating a hegemonic discourse that prioritises capital accumulation over social and ecological considerations.

While the fisher and washer communities, who rely on the Bada Talab for their livelihoods, express appreciation for the enhanced aesthetic appeal, they simultaneously emphasise the need for the government to provide alternative locations or employment opportunities, as they are disproportionately affected by the beautification project. This tension between economic development and the displacement of marginalised communities is a hallmark of gentrification processes driven by neoliberal policies.

Furthermore, the officials' categorisation of these communities as "pollutants" that compromise the investment in the lake's upkeep reflects a broader narrative of neoliberal influence, which extends beyond attracting foreign capital. The deregulation of land use policies has facilitated the transformation of existing social spaces, resulting in significant alterations to the urban landscape and the systematic displacement of marginalised users.

This case study highlights the complex interplay between neoliberal hegemony, urban development, and the marginalisation of certain communities. It underscores the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to urban planning, one that balances economic growth with social equity and ecological sustainability, while also preserving the livelihoods and cultural identities of marginalised groups.

## Notes

1. Bada Talab also known as Ranchi Lake. After the construction of Vivekananda Statue now it is known as Vivekanand Sarovar.
2. For details see Philip G. Cerny (2010:128-156), particularly chapter 7, titled *Embedding Neoliberalism: The Evolution of a Hegemonic Paradigm*.

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