

Will Bangalore learn from the city that turned around?

Instead of wanting a chain of coffee shops 'like in the US' or an eye-popping hotel 'like the Burj Al Arab', we should aim to be like the Kitakyushu in Japan

Recently I met Morofuji Miyoko, the director of the Kitakyushu Environment Museum in southwest Japan as part of the 5th Asian City Journalist Conference organised by the UN-HABITAT and the Nishinippon Shimbun. Miyoko grew up here. Her city became a symbol of Japan's progress in the 60s. Steel from the factories in Kitakyushu went into laying the rails for Japan's iconic Bullet Train. What more could residents ask for?

The steel plants spewed vile smoke. Amazingly, the more colourful the Kitakyushu air got, the more it was celebrated. For it meant that the city was contributing to rebuilding Japan. Residents had a song called 'Rainbow Smoke', which, says Miyoko, she happily sang as a child. When asked to draw the nearby ocean, she used the most frightful colours, for that was how she knew the polluted sea to be. In fact, the nearby Dokai Bay had become a dangerous ocean of sludge in which no fish could survive. Pictures from the late 1960s of Dokai Bay show it as orange-red in colour. Dokai Bay came to be called "Sea of Death".

The main conversation in the city, says Miyoko, became the direction of the wind. For with it came soot, toxic fumes, and disease. The children of the city began to fall ill and schools had regular medical check ups organised for children who suffered from respiratory diseases. And in one telling series of pictures in the Environment Museum are shown women cleaning and dusting homes covered in layers of soot. Upset with the deteriorating health of their families, the women of Kitakyushu made an 8mm documentary film about their city heart wrenchingly called *Desire for Blue Skies*. It brought Kitakyushu into national focus.

By 1970, the women had managed to convince industry, academia and the city administration that instead of the economy, they wanted the environment first.

The turnaround in Kitakyushu is stunning. The ocean has been cleaned out; the skies scrubbed squeaky clean. The city is implementing smart grids for its power supply, the hydrogen produced as a by product of the steel

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plants is used to fuel hydrogen-powered vehicles, solar power is being deployed, eco-friendly housing is being put in place, and car pooling and bicycle sharing have been created along the "from sole ownership to joint ownership" models. Today, the city is leading the way to a low carbon society and has become the world capital of sustainable development.

This year, one of the world's largest sewage treatment facilities commissioned in the city looks at sewage as a resource for wealth rather than as waste that needs to be 'somehow managed'. The recycled water is used to power the steam turbines that produce electricity and for use in public parks and fountains.

But hang on. This is not a bid to turn the tale

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of a women's movement into legend and folklore, even though we do have lessons to learn from it for Bangalore. This is not about treating sewage — which too Bangalore can learn from given that at least the restored Lake Ul-lal needs to be filled up with water before the chief minister inaugurates it — which the BDA commissioner says will be done using treated sewage if we don't have enough rains in time. In fact the BDA commissioner, innovatively, plans to use treated sewage for 13 of Bangalore's lakes. More importantly, this is about turning a set back into an advantage — an advantage so powerful that it has the capability to reshape the world.

Today, Kitakyushu is selling its environment technology to the rest of the world. Two hundred engineers from Kitakyushu are in various parts of Asia, assisting governments and cities to manage their waste, bring down pollution, encourage recycling (uniforms of city officials in Kitakyushu are made from recycled pet bottles!) and create sustainable cities. What Kitakyushu has produced is highly valuable and sought after knowledge. It is the Big Business of the Future, perhaps as big as information technology.

Bangalore has two things to learn from the success of Kitakyushu: a people's movement has the ability to reshape anything; and our lakes like Iblur, where fish are dying could well be an opportunity to create game changing solutions.

The Karnataka high court recently set up a six-member committee headed by chairman of the high court legal service authority to chalk out a plan to preserve the lakes in Bangalore. A division bench comprising chief justice JS Khehar and justice AS Bopanna set up the committee while hearing some public interest litigation aimed at the restoration and preservation of our lakes. The committee has been mandated to submit a report by 31 January. Chances are the report will lead to even more committees being set up. Could we have lost an opportunity, in a small way, to be another Kitakyushu?