

Where Concept of a "Pet Rock" Has Reached Its Apex

New York Times, Asia Pacific

Published: August 17, 2007



The great granite boulders scattered across the Deccan Plateau gain their prominence from outcroppings in Hyderabad, where residents are trying to save them from developers' dynamite. (J. Adam Huggins for The New York Times)

HYDERABAD JOURNAL

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By Somini Sengupta

Published: August 17, 2007

HYDERABAD, India: They rise unexpectedly between glass office towers or at the base of a 12th-century fort. Sometimes they are perched precariously, one on top of another, as though they were the left-behind playthings of a civilization of giants. More and more, they are broken into bits, first by dynamite, then painstakingly by hand, so that the earth can be flattened and new office towers can come up.

They are the primordial rocks that litter this boomtown. Over the years they have earned nicknames that hint at their improbable shapes: Bear's Nose, Stone Heart. Some have become Hindu temples and Sufi Muslim shrines; others, on occasion, have become billboards.

Today, as Hyderabad builds at breakneck speed, the rocks have become the focus of one of India's many emerging citizens movements. The Society to Save Rocks, as it is called, aims to protect the geological heritage of the city against the swift march of urban development.

The rocks, formed at least two billion years ago, remain a peculiar feature of the vast tableland, the Deccan Plateau, where Hyderabad sits.

Boomtowns across India have spawned movements of similar vigilance, part of a tiny but visible trend among middle-class Indians to save something of the natural or cultural heritage of their cities against the onslaught of the new.

In Chennai, on the southern coast, neighborhood groups have mounted campaigns to restore Hindu temples' traditional water tanks, which have either been built over or fallen into disrepair, depriving the city of its water storage areas and worsening floods during the monsoon.

In Mumbai, formerly Bombay, preservationists have campaigned to save colonial-era buildings, and in New Delhi, a government plan to widen a road for big new buses has encountered a movement to save the imperiled trees in its path.

Of course, these first hints of resistance conflict with urban India's other needs and desires.

To developers in Hyderabad, for instance, the rocks, mostly granite and granite gneiss, are encumbrances that must be cleared for construction projects.

Hyderabad's population has nearly doubled in 25 years, to an estimated 4.2 million. Once a quaint city of monuments, it is now one of India's new technology hubs. Developers are rushing to erect office towers and multiplex cinemas. The building frenzy is visible in every corner.

In one of those corners, an ambitious 110-acre development called Lanco Hills is under way, an office park for technology companies, high-rise apartments, two hotels and one of the largest shopping malls in the country. There are no boulders anywhere in its promotional materials, as though the landscape had been scrubbed clean.

In fact, that is exactly what is happening, and at a hefty cost to the developer. On a company tour of the site one afternoon, a drilling machine ground its way through the large boulders, cutting holes for dynamite. Once the bigger boulders were dislodged, the process would start again on smaller boulders, until the rocks were small enough to go into a crushing machine and turned into a fine powder used to fortify concrete.

On a summer Sunday afternoon, Vasu Nugala and C. J. Rao stood on a bluff overlooking the construction site, watching machines gouge out the underside of the hill, as though carving a side of roast beef. The bluff itself, home to a 14th-century Muslim shrine, was not endangered, and on this day families came to picnic and worship, huddling under outcroppings of the giant boulders when the dark rain clouds burst.

Neither Nugala nor Rao were averse to the changes sweeping through Hyderabad. In fact, they were part of it — Nugala being a software man, recently returned from Tucson, Arizona, Rao being in real estate.

"I know we're not going to stop the development," Nugala said. "I just hope we ease up a little."

Rao added, "These rocks can't go up again once they are gone."

Their campaign has succeeded in creating a rock park in the heart of the city, overlooking a lake. It has also led to the designation of nine rock formations as heritage sites, including the Bear's Nose, which is to sit smack inside a proposed hotel in what is known as the Cyber City neighborhood. Some of the technology campuses have artfully incorporated the boulders into their design, transforming them into rock gardens.

But enforcing the heritage designation requires constant vigilance by citizens groups, said Narendra Luther, a longtime member of the Society to Save Rocks. He should know; he spent his entire career in the Indian government bureaucracy. "We are very poor in implementing our laws," he said.

Luther lives with the rocks. One dominates his living room, forming a wall that divides the sitting area from the dining room. The same boulder shoots up through the ceiling into the apartment upstairs, where Luther's son lives with his own family. His 5-year-old grandson, Rishab, scrambles up and down its steep smooth side.

"I came in 1958. I was fascinated by it," Luther said of his obsession with the city's ancient boulders. "First, the sheer presence of the rocks and the fantastic shapes, sometimes defying gravity, one right over the other. It looks like somebody has placed it there and you can give it a slap and it will fall."

Developers have approached with sweet offers for his house, which occupies a big plot of land in one of the best neighborhoods in town. He has brushed them off.

Source : The International Herald Tribune,

URL: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/08/17/asia/17india.php>