Environmentalism and Contestation Over Land: Actor-Networks in the Kancha Gachibowli Auction Dispute

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Abstract: *This paper examines the controversy surrounding the proposed auction of 400 acres of land in Kancha Gachibowli, Hyderabad, through the lens of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The dispute, involving student activists from the University of Hyderabad, civil society groups, the Telangana state government, and multiple non-human actors such as land, wildlife, laws, and digital media, reveals environmentalism as a dynamic political network rather than a fixed moral stance. By analyzing media narratives, legal interventions, and environmental claims, the study highlights the contestation over the land's identity - as an ecological habitat, academic commons, and economic asset. The paper further explores the role of AI-generated misinformation, celebrity advocacy, and judicial mediation in shaping public discourse and policy outcomes. Through this perspective, the paper elucidates how environmental debates in urban development contexts reflect broader struggles over legitimacy, power, and governance, with nature constructed and performed by heterogeneous networks of actors.*

Keywords: Kancha Gachibowli, Actor-Network Theory, biodiversity UoH, environment, Hyderabad

1. Introduction

During a ten-day period overlapping the months of March and April, 2025, students of the University of Hyderabad (UoH) led a campaign to reverse a state government decision to auction around 400 acres of land for a new I.T. park. The land was in Kancha Gachibowli village, adjacent to the University. The fact that the state government had a clear title to the land in question was made insignificant as was the fact that the land was not recorded as 'forest land' in government records. The students, with some voices of support from civil society and political parties, constructed an environmentalist campaign and projected a picture of 'biodiversity under threat' and, for some time, even the university being under threat, as evident in the hashtag 'saveHCU'. (HCU stands for Hyderabad Central University and is colloqially used to refer to UoH). Analysing how they were able to do so is the subject of this article.

At the heart of the conflict is a contest over how nature is politically constructed. In other words, environmentalism in the context of urban development cannot be understood merely as a moral or ideological stance, but as a political network of competing actors — each vying to define and control the land's value, use, and meaning.

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and his work on the politics of nature offers us a lens to understand how claims about the environment are made by a broad network of actors, and the role they play in stabilising or challenging dominant political and economic narratives. Latour's perspective sees environmentalism as not a static or purely altruistic cause but as an ongoing struggle over legitimacy, power, and control. Nature, in this view, is not an objective fact to be preserved or exploited, but a political matter of concern constantly redefined by the networks of actors that engage with it. By examining the students' campaign through this theoretical framework, this paper highlights how

environmental debates are inherently tied to elite claims and contestations over resources, value, and governance.

This paper will explore how the actors in this case — from student activists to the state government to civil society actors -- mobilise various non-human entities such as the land, the wildlife, the regulations and laws, and the media to make their claims and influence public discourse. This paper seeks to demonstrate that, far from being an external force in political decision-making, nature itself is constructed through the very networks of power that shape urban planning and development decisions.

2. Review of Literature

Narratives about the environment are not simply reflections of objective reality but are actively constructed, mediated, and contested through multiple actors and platforms. In contemporary environmental struggles, narrative-building becomes a central site of contestation where different groups --- activists, corporations, governments, and media --- compete to define what counts as "nature," "sustainability," and "progress." This process of environmental storytelling is shaped by power, politics, and the strategies of those involved.

Cronon (1996) explores how the construction of "wilderness" and "nature" in the American environmental movement was historically influenced by cultural and social forces. He emphasises that environmental narratives are selective constructions of nature that align with particular social and political agendas, often excluding human influence on landscapes that have long been inhabited or altered. Cronon's analysis is particularly useful in understanding how land is framed as either "untouched" or "developable" in contemporary environmental debates.

In a more specific case of narrative framing, Maniates (2001) highlights the role of media and cultural narratives in constructing the environmental consumer identity. The paper argues that environmentalism is often presented through the lens of individual responsibility (e.g., reducing one's carbon footprint) rather than addressing structural issues like corporate pollution or industrial practices. Maniates critiques how media outlets and corporations have redefined environmentalism in ways that shift the burden onto individuals, thus distracting from the political and economic systems responsible for environmental degradation.

The role of media in environmental narrative-building has received a lot of academic attention, with scholars examining how news outlets, documentaries, and advertisements frame environmental issues to influence public opinion. Cox (2010) discusses how environmental issues such as climate change are portrayed in the media as either an urgent crisis or a technological challenge, depending on the interests of the media outlets. Recent work has also explored how media platforms selectively highlight certain environmental crises while downplaying others.

In India, Banerjee and Gupta (2018) explores how national media frames environmental issues like forest preservation, river conservation, and urban development. They argue that mainstream media in India often portrays environmental issues through a nationalist lens, framing them as integral to the country's development or cultural heritage. In such narratives, the local resistance against industrial projects or urban expansion is often marginalised, while government-backed developmental projects are highlighted as national progress. The authors suggest that media narratives are shaped by powerful corporate and state interests, and thus environmentalism is often framed within the context of economic growth and modernity.

While traditional media continues to shape public understanding of environmental issues, social media platforms have introduced new dynamics in narrative-building. Digital activism plays a significant role in amplifying grassroots environmental movements, providing space for marginalised voices and rapidly mobilising collective action. Hashtags, memes, and viral campaigns on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have transformed how environmental concerns are framed and discussed.

In India, social media has become a powerful tool for activists to challenge mainstream environmental narratives. Mitra and Bandyopadhyay (2017) discusses how student-led movements in urban centres use social media to frame environmental protests against urbanisation and land use. For example, during protests against urban land acquisition for smart-city projects, activists used social media to expose the environmental and social costs of development, framing these projects as forms of ecological colonialism.

The construction of environmental narratives is a dynamic and contested process, where a variety of actors --- from activists and media outlets to corporations and governments --- compete to define what is natural, sustainable, and ethical. As this literature demonstrates, media plays a crucial role in shaping the public's understanding of environmental issues and often reinforces the political and economic interests of powerful actors. However, social media and digital activism have created new possibilities for counter-narratives that challenge these dominant constructions of nature, offering a space for marginalised voices and grassroots movements to frame environmental struggles in ways that reflect local realities and concerns.

This body of work lays the foundation for exploring how student protests, particularly those that utilise social media, engage in this larger struggle over narrative control and political legitimacy in environmental debates.

Approach: Qualitative Analysis of stories from The Hindu

The controversy exemplifies ANT's core concept of translation - the four-stage process through which actors attempt to build stable networks. The problematization stage emerges clearly when UoH students frame the land auction as environmental destruction. As one senior academic noted, "Complex issues are involved in giving shape to a 2,000-acre eco-park, taking over 1,600 acres from the University". This problematization creates what Latour calls an "obligatory passage point" -- the need to address environmental concerns becomes unavoidable for other actors. (Eco-park-at-UoH-not-a-feasible-idea_7-April-2025.jpg)

The government counter-translates by establishing alternative problematizations. Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka asserted that "not even an inch of the land belonged to the University of Hyderabad," armed with "records of land from the Revenue and Forest department". This demonstrates the interessement phase - using legal documents and revenue records as "inscription devices" to convince others of their version of reality. Not-even-an-inch-of-Kancha-Gabhibowli-land-belongs-to-UoH_2-April-2025.jpg

ANT's principle of generalised symmetry -- treating human and non-human actors equally -- is vividly illustrated throughout the controversy. The network includes crucial non-human actants that actively shape the unfolding drama: the 400 acres of land itself, legal documents, survey numbers, peacocks and endangered species, and even AI-generated content.

The Supreme Court observed that "peacock, deer and birds were seen in the area, prima facie, indicating 'that there existed a forest inhabited by the wild animals'". These non-human actors don't merely serve as passive resources but actively mediate relationships between human actors, forcing judicial interventions and government responses. When civil society activists identified "seven species of fauna listed under the Schedule-I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972," including "Bengal monitor lizard, Indian rock python, Indian star tortoise, four horned antelope, osprey and Indian Chameleon", these biological entities became powerful actants in the network, compelling legal and administrative responses. Destruction-of-forest-area-alarming-says-SC_4-April-2025.jpg+1

Technological Mediations and Digital Actants

The emergence of AI-generated misinformation adds a contemporary dimension to ANT's understanding of technological agency. The government flagged "Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated misinformation on the Kancha Gachibowli lands," with officials explaining that "fabricated media, including audio of distressed peacocks and videos showing deer injured by bulldozers, had gone viral". This demonstrates how digital technologies don't simply transmit information but actively transform and mediate social relationships, forcing new governmental responses and highlighting what Latour calls the "social life of things." Govt-flags-AI-gen-fake-content-on-Kancha-land_6-April-20225.jpg

Judicial and Legal Actants as Mediators

The legal system functions as a powerful mediating network within the broader assemblage. The Supreme Court's intervention represents what ANT calls mobilization - when allies are successfully enrolled to support a particular translation. The Court's directive that "Chief Secretary would be held personally liable if further activity, other than protecting the remaining trees, was undertaken" demonstrates how legal instruments become active mediators, reshaping the behavior of other actors in the network.Destruction-of-forest-area-alarming-says-SC_4-April-2025.jpg

The High Court's issuance of notices to government departments further illustrates how legal actants create new obligatory passage points, forcing responses and counter-responses that reconfigure the entire network. HC-notices-to-govt-on-land-abutting-UoH_4-April-2025.jpg

Celebrity Networks and Cultural Translation

The enrollment of Bollywood actors represents another form of translation, where cultural capital becomes mobilized within environmental discourse. Actor Dia Mirza's statement that "The destruction of 400 acres of forest in Hyderabad goes to show that the lives of your kids don't matter. We have learnt nothing from our gas chamber like existence in the north" demonstrates how celebrity networks extend the controversy's reach, creating new alliances and translation possibilities.Actors-voice-concern-over-biodiversity_3-April-2025.jpg

Competing Translations and Network Instabilities

The controversy reveals what ANT theorizes as the inherent instability of networks. The government's assertion through empowered committees competes directly with student mobilizations demanding "cancellation of the 400-acre land auction". Each actor attempts to create stable translations, but the network remains in constant flux as new actants emerge and existing alliances shift.State-govt-clears-the-air-on-400-acres-of-land-to-empowered-committee_11-April-2025.jpg+1

The formation of a "ministers' panel to meet students, civil society groups" represents an attempt at re-translation - creating new negotiation spaces where competing interpretations might be reconciled or where new hybrid arrangements might emerge.Ministers-panel-to-meet-students-civil-society_4-April-2025.jpg

This comprehensive controversy demonstrates ANT's core insight: social order emerges not from pre-existing structures but through ongoing performances of relationships between heterogeneous networks of humans, technologies, legal instruments, biological entities, and institutional processes. The Kancha Gachibowli case perfectly illustrates how "the social" is continuously constructed through what Latour calls "the collective" - an assemblage that includes far more than human actors alone.

Network Formation and Translation

ANT foregrounds how actors (both human and non-human) are enrolled into networks via "translation"—a dynamic process where relationships are forged, roles are negotiated, and stability is sought. The Supreme Court, for instance, becomes a pivotal site of translation and power, stating:

> "It is for the State to make a choice between restoring the forest or having the Chief Secretary and officials in prison."
>
> (Rajagopal, 2025)

Here, the *legal threat* acts as an inscription device—a durable record compelling new behavior and alignment, echoing Latour's insight that inscription devices anchor and mobilize networks.

Hybrid Actants and Inscription Devices

ANT insists on "generalized symmetry"—assigning agency to both humans and non-humans equally. In these stories, trees, "the ruined acres of Kancha Gachibowli forest," and scientific reports (e.g., "a Forest Survey of India report … over 60% had been moderately and heavily denser forest") function as active intermediaries, shaping both the court's concerns and policy responses. The court's direction that "a huge afforestation programme was underway in the area" (Rajagopal, 2025) demonstrates a continuous negotiation where nature and law co-construct reality.

Contestation and Network Stability

The translation process is *contested*. Senior lawyers, state officials, and scientific panels advocate for (or against) particular interpretations:

> "The committee has added a recommendation to the State government for declaring the land as conservation reserve in accordance with the provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. … 56% of the land supported significant forest cover."
>
> (Vadlamudi, 2025)

The ANT frame here highlights that documents, expert reports, and even legal categories like "forest" are not merely passive facts, but outcomes of continuing negotiations among heterogeneous actors—scientists, judges, land, state officials, legal texts, and biodiversity itself.

Shifting Obligatory Passage Points

Both articles demonstrate the creation and contestation of obligatory passage points (the roles or positions others must pass through to achieve their goals). The Supreme Court's warning—*"The State was complying with the court's direction in letter and spirit"*—exemplifies how *judicial*

orders become such obligatory points, structuring the action of all other entities. The recommendation to reconstitute the expert committee with "field-level forest officers, ecologists, IT and remote sensing professionals, and survey agencies" (Vadlamudi, 2025) further expands the network, inscribing a broader array of actants with power to define the land's status.

Outcome: Relational and Performed Networks

In summary, ANT allows us to see these controversies not as linear battles over land or law, but as emergent, dynamic assemblages where trees, laws, satellite data, expert opinions, and judicial threats equally shape the path and meanings of "forest," "development," and "compliance." All actors—human and nonhuman—are continually performing and negotiating the network.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The controversy around the proposed auction of 400 acres of land in Kancha Gachibowli demonstrates how urban development disputes can be understood through Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). At the centre of this network lies the land itself, a non-human actant that acquires multiple and competing meanings: as real estate to the government, as academic commons to the University of Hyderabad (UoH), and as biodiversity-rich habitat to environmentalists. Its capacity to be mobilised in different translations makes it a boundary object that brings otherwise divergent actors into conflict.

The Telangana government and its industrial agency, TGIIC, attempt to stabilise the land within a "development" network by linking it to infrastructure expansion, IT hub growth, and fiscal needs of the state. This translation draws support from real estate investors and bureaucratic machinery. Non-human allies in this network include planning documents, auction notices, and economic promises, which together frame the land as a monetisable resource.

Opposing this, students, faculty, and environmentalists form a counter-network that mobilises both human and non-human actants. Biodiversity — including peacocks, migratory birds, lakes, and heritage rock formations — is enlisted as evidence of ecological value. Petitions, protests, and PILs extend this ecological narrative into legal and political spaces. Here, non-human actors like online platforms (Change.org) and ecological surveys acquire agency by amplifying resistance.

The courts and police function as mediators but in different ways. The judiciary, through past rulings on land allocations, shapes legitimacy and keeps the dispute legally unsettled. The police, by detaining student protestors, temporarily suppress resistance but simultaneously intensify the visibility of the counter-network, as repression itself becomes a political issue.

The media acts as a translation hub, circulating competing framings. Reports of biodiversity and student unrest destabilise the government's "development-only" narrative, while official statements attempt to reduce resistance to "political obstruction." Opposition parties also intervene, seeking to enrol the dispute into electoral politics, further widening the actor-network.

What emerges is a fragile and contested assemblage. The government's initial framing of the land as a mere economic asset faces constant interruption from alternative translations that emphasise ecological, academic, and democratic values. The fact that the government subsequently announced it would "reconsider" the auction highlights the instability of its network: alliances with land, law, and legitimacy have not held firmly against competing mobilisations.

Through ANT, this dispute can be seen not simply as a clash of "development versus environment," but as a dynamic process of translation where human and non-human actors alike shape the trajectory of Hyderabad's urban future.

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