The last of the lakes built by Ibrahim Qutb Shah, Ibrahimpatnam lake is now a sad remnant of a thriving habitation

Ibrahimpatnam is marked by the big lake that comes up on the right side of the road as you drive out of Hyderabad towards Vijayawada after crossing the Outer Ring Road. At least it used to. There is no lake now. The lake bed is a vast grazing ground for sheep and goats. A few houses are also coming up on the lake bed as earthmovers raise dust scooping up earth to raise pillars for houses. The earliest human civilisation began on the banks of rivers. The Nile, the Indus, the Yellow, the Mississippi are all places where some of the earliest human habitations and signs of culture were discovered. But what do you do in a landlocked place like the Deccan plateau? You build lakes and tanks. In the present Telangana region, the Kakatiya rulers began the tradition of creating water bodies that could sustain agriculture and help the people through the harsh summer months. Later, the Qutb Shahi rulers continued the tradition by adding Persian engineering skills to the native tradition.

Sultan Ibrahim Qutb Shah began his rule by cleaning up and rebuilding the Pangal lake about 100 km from Hyderabad. Ibrahimpatnam lake was among the last lakes planned and built by Ibrahim Qutb Shah during his 30-year reign between 1550 and 1580 AD. It was built just after the Hussainsagar lake was constructed on his orders. History has it that Ibrahim’s daughter Khairatunnisa kept indifferent health and the king ordered that a house near a water body away from the fort would be good for her. Ibrahim’s son-in-law Husain Shah Wali took up the job and finished it by 1565. The area where the couple moved in is still called Khairatabad though it is difficult to imagine the lake water near the Khairatabad masjid that is surrounded by habitations.

The Ibrahimpatnam lake is one huge earthen work and a sluice gate. The sluice gate is not just a functional piece of architecture. It is a three-storied structure with steps leading all the way down to the lake bed. There is covered staircase with multiple chambers with profusely moulded lime plaster. The top storey is a room with a view, seating arrangement and dozens of nooks where lighted lamps would have created a perfect ambiance for an evening of pleasure. Inside and outside the structure at various stages is moulded lime plaster work that has survived four centuries. The sloping roof is held up by various fantastic beasts of imagination ranging from birds and elephants.

The lake has seen its use being modified from a source of drinking water and irrigation to a storage tank by the Nizam’s government. One of the minimal modifications has been the addition of danger marker and water levels in meters. It has also seen the addition of a wheeled controller for lowering and raising the sluice gates. In the absence of water, none of it is needed now. A few vandals have cut out the wheel and the screw used for controlling the sluice gate. “The water used to fill up the lake till that high tree. We used to go for a swim in the lake. There has been no water for the last few years. This is the worst. I cannot even wash clothes in it,” says Sultan, a wizened old resident of the village, who has seen the ebb and flow of the lake. There were countless trees lining the bund, most of which have been cut away for laying the road. As drivers zip in and out of the city, they cannot imagine that just off the road is a work of art and a sign of civilisation.