

BENGALURU

## NGT bristles as life ebbs out of water bodies

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### Tribunal's orders force government and civic agencies to act

Another year, another fire: 2018 began with a raging fire in the middle of the wetlands of the severely-polluted Bellandur lake in January.

Later in the year, the government was forced to own up to the responsibility of protecting lakes in the city, though the progress on that front has been debatable.

News of the fire caught the attention of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in New Delhi, which had taken up a *suo moto* case after a similar fire in 2017.

An evidently irked NGT took the Karnataka government to task over recurring fires and froth in Bellandur. Slamming the State government for not taking preventive measures, a bench,

headed by NGT acting chairperson U.D. Salvi, directed the government to submit a time-bound action plan by the end of January.

Within days, the government got its act together and formulated a holistic and time-bound action plan. But, the NGT expanded the net of scrutiny to include Varthur and Agara lakes, and asked the State government to come up with plans for their revival as well.

Also, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc.) was directed to carry out a pilot study on the macrophytes.

The NGT further made it clear that the 99 apartments in the Bellandur catchment area, which were served notices before, must install sewage treatment plants.

Going a step ahead, in April, the NGT constituted a panel comprising a professor from the IISc., the commissioner of the civic body, secretary of Bangalore Development Authority and senior scientists from central and State pollution control boards, to inspect the Bellandur, Agara and Varthur lakes.

### **'Shut down industries'**

In one of its strictest orders, the NGT, in a follow-up hearing in April, directed shutting down all industries around Bellandur and announced that anyone polluting the lake would have to pay an environment compensation of ₹5 lakh. The government was directed to take up one-time cleanup of the lake in a month. The government failed to meet the deadline and asked for more time.

In a further rap to the government for its poor management of Bellandur lake, the commission, directed to monitor the cleaning operation, submitted a scathing report in June stating that the de-weeding activity was not only futile, but could further harm the water body. The committee also put the spotlight on Varthur lake and called it an aggravated calamity.

### **Hefty penalty**

In its most recent order on December 6, the NGT again came down heavily on the State government for failing to protect Bellandur, Agara and Varthur lakes. It directed the government to transfer ₹500 crore to an escrow account to utilise for execution of the action plans to clean the lakes. The green body also directed the government to deposit ₹50 crore with the Central Pollution Control Board as environment compensation, and the BBMP was told to pay ₹25 crore.

Another panel, headed by former Supreme Court judge N. Santosh Hegde, has been set up to monitor implementation of the action plans.

The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike has decided to appeal against the NGT order in the Supreme Court.

While the cases will continue to be heard by the NGT, the saga of fires, froth, and indiscriminate dumping of garbage and sewage in the city's lakes continues.

### **Some lakes spring back to life**

While Bellandur, Varthur, Agara, Kalkere, Kaggadasapura and Mestripalya lakes were in the news for all the wrong reasons, there was a glimmer of hope for Madiwala, Hebbagodi and Jakkur lakes.

Madiwala lake underwent a massive transformation. The 272-acre water body in BTM Layout, which was under development since the end of 2016, became home to many native species of flora and fauna. The transformation was the result of a proposal by the Karnataka Knowledge Commission to develop the lake into a unique biodiversity park. The developed lake now has an open butterfly park, conservatory of insectivorous plants and orchids, cycad and palm grove, herbal garden, an island ecosystems and a scented garden.

A CSR initiative saw the revival of Hebbagodi lake, off Hosur Road near Electronics City. It has a new embankment with a fence, increased water holding capacity and a waste segregation yard. The work was carried out by Biocon Foundation, the CSR arm of Biocon Ltd. and Syngene International Ltd.

A collaborative project by students of Srishti School of Art Design & Technology and artists from Germany led to the creation of a floating island made out of waste at the Jakkur water tank, next to the lake. The island is expected to serve as a platform to connect the community with the lake.

### **Threat of green cover receding**

From trees making way for 'developmental projects' to allegations of illegal mining in a forest, Bengaluru's green cover continued to face threats from multiple fronts.

The year began with thousands of citizens raising their voices against quarrying and mining around Bannerghatta National Park. They pointed to environmental violations in the buffer zone of the park and mining in eco-sensitive elephant corridors.

A new draft notification for BNP by the Ministry of Environment and Forests signalled further danger to the ecology of the forest. The draft trimmed down the Eco-Sensitive Zone around the park from 268.96 sq.km. to 169 sq.km. This means opening up more area for mining and commercial development.

The new year may not hold any good news either. The coalition government's big ticket infrastructure project – elevated corridors – announced this year, is expected to result in the axing of as many as 3,000 trees, and pruning of another 2,000 in various parts of the city. Citizen groups are awaiting public consultations to put forth their objections.