

## NGT fines govt, Palike for failing city's two big lakes

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*Constitutes a committee, headed by Justice Santosh Hegde, to oversee the restoration plan*

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has come down heavily on the state government for failing to protect the lakes in the city. The latest NGT order specifically mentioned about the two largest lakes — Bellandur and Varthur which hit international headlines when it “frothed and fumed”.

The watchdog has slapped Rs 50 crore fine on the state government and Rs 25 crore on the BBMP. Besides, the state government has been directed to deposit Rs 500 crore in an Escrow Account to execute the Bellandur clean-up plan.

The tribunal has constituted a committee, headed by Justice Santosh Hegde, former Supreme Court judge, to oversee the action plan.

The Tribunal said the two biggest lakes in the city have turned septic tanks due to sheer callousness and indifference of authorities.

“The lakes are filled with sewage, effluents, solid municipal waste, construction and demolition debris and weed. Resultantly, there is not even one millilitre of clean water in them,” it said. The tribunal observed that this was nothing short of an environmental emergency.

The tribunal further said authorities have miserably failed to discharge their duties.

“Their sheer colossal neglect has caused immense harm to citizens and brunt of which will be borne by several generations. There is no justification for such environmental loss,” the tribunal said.

Considering various reports including the Report of the Panjwani Committee, the Tribunal also issued the following findings and directions. “Water pollution is a criminal offence apart from measures to control such pollution and close polluting units. The Pollution Control Board has statutory powers under the Water Act to inspect and take preventive measures in respect of water bodies,” it said.

Despite constitutional and statutory framework, the state government and BBMP have failed to protect the lakes. The Tribunal has jurisdiction to slap fines on persons responsible for the environmental damage caused. The Tribunal said that officers assigned with specific duties are accountable.

The Tribunal also directed that the recommendations made by the Panjwani Committee in its report (dated May 31, 2018) will be carried out with a view to ensuring that no pollutant or waste is discharged into the lakes and rajakaluves. No solid waste is dumped, and encroachments in the catchment areas be removed. Accepting the recommendations of the Panjwani Committee Report, the tribunal has constituted a committee to oversee the implementation of these directions.

This committee will be headed by Justice Santosh Hegde, former Supreme Court justice. Besides Hegde, it will have Professor T V Ramachandra, senior IISc scientist and nominees from Central Pollution Control Board, KSPCB and a nominee by Additional Chief Secretary. It also said that the Justice Santosh Hegde Committee shall oversee the timelines and action plans prepared by the government within a month. The state government has been directed to transfer Rs 500 crore in an Escrow Account for execution of the action plans and implementation of the Panjwani Committee Recommendations.

The Justice Hegde Committee will decide the additional amount required to set up STPs. Towards environmental compensation, the state has been directed to pay Rs 50 crore. The BBMP too has been asked to pay Rs 25 crore to Central Pollution Control Board, out of which Rs 10 crore shall be transferred to Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) for providing logistical support to the Justice Hegde Committee.

Additional Chief Secretary, Urban Development Department Mahendra Jain, will identify officials to implement the plan. The tribunal was hearing a petition by Sajan Poovayya, a senior advocate, who appeared for Namma Bengaluru Foundation.

### **Watchdog fumes**

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