

## Bengaluru Lakes: Red Alert from Green Tribunal

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*Above: Bellandur lake on fire/Photo: UNI*

**The NGT has pulled up Karnataka for the sorry state of its lakes and appointed Supreme Court judge Santosh Hegde to head a lake conservation panel**

**By Stephen David in Bengaluru**

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) headed by Justice AK Goel has ordered the Karnataka government to immediately salvage Bengaluru's largest lake, Bellandur, and two other critically ill lakes. In addition, it has appointed former Supreme Court judge and former Lokayukta of Karnataka Santosh Hegde to head a panel of experts to ensure that its order is carried out.

Bellandur lake dates back to the 10th century Ganga dynasty. Seaplanes would land there in the pre-Independence era, but now a survey has dubbed it the largest septic tank in the city.

Several civic affairs and green groups have been working to save Bengaluru's lakes. The city once boasted over 100 lakes but thanks to fast urbanisation, the number of well-preserved lakes is down to single digits. Bengaluru is home to nearly 10 million people and this population continues to be on the upswing, putting undue stress on land development patterns. In addition, it causes enormous damage to old water bodies that gave the city its sobriquet, Garden City of India.

"The NGT rap is a good thing as it will encourage every citizen to be wakeful and watchful," said a lake conservation activist. The NGT's proactive action was triggered when Bellandur lake actually caught fire some months ago. At times, the water would froth and foam, too. The NGT found the efforts of the city corporation, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), to douse the fire wanting. While hearing a case pertaining to saving Bellandur lake, it directed the Karnataka government to pay Rs 50 crore to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) while the BBMP was asked to deposit Rs 25 crore. The order also called for setting up a special panel to be headed by Justice Hegde. The panel will also include a representative from the CPCB and senior scientist TV Ramachandra from the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru.

In one study, Ramachandra and his team of researchers reported that almost 54 percent of lakes in Bengaluru had been "encroached with construction activities and turned into garbage dump yards". The study, following the frothing at Varthur lake on the edge of the city, showed that the city's lakes were in peril. While sewage accounted for 66 percent of the content in the lakes, 14 percent of the lakes were surrounded by slums. A majority of them had also lost their catchment areas, which meant that when heavy rains lashed the city, there was no scope to harvest the excess water.

In one of its earlier orders, the NGT had ordered closure of industrial units in the vicinity of Bellandur lake where the effluents were over permissible limits. In that suo motu order, the green bench had banned the dumping of municipal solid waste as well as construction debris in the lake or the buffer zone. Heavy fines were to be slapped on violators—individuals, industries, developers, etc. At the time, the NGT had asked the state government bodies—Karnataka Pollution Control Board, Bangalore Development Authority and the Lake Development Authority—to nominate a member each to a monitoring committee to oversee the lake's clean-up.

The December 6 order of the NGT was also its way of showing that it was unhappy with the pace of restoration of lakes by various government bodies. Justice Hegde told India Legal that he would call for a meeting of the panel members on December 31.

"I look forward to undertaking this task," he said. The Hegde panel has to set up a website where inputs will be received from citizens and lake conservation experts. The panel will also study action plans

prepared by the state government. The NGT has given a month's time from December 6 to prepare an action plan showing specific measures it intends to undertake.

The NGT's order did not stop with that—it said that if the Karnataka government failed to implement the plan, it will be forced to pay an extra Rs 100 crore fine. The order has asked the CPCB to make suitable guidelines and regulations denoting the penalties and amounts to be recovered from individuals and institutions for failure to comply. Capital expenses like building sewage treatment plants will be billed to the Karnataka government.

Leo Saldanha of the Environment Support Group told India Legal that the spread of urbanisation was threatening natural water bodies like lakes in the city. "We have to work hand in hand with every stakeholder to save our lakes," Saldanha said.

According to the Indian Institute of Science study on Bellandur lake, the priority should be to immediately halt the slush inflow as water storage capacity has come down by 30 percent in four decades. A large part of the lake area has hydrophytes (floating plants that prevent oxygen exchange with the atmosphere and photosynthesis in the water). Scientists say that uncontrolled growth of floating plants will reduce oxygen in the water and kill fish.

One survey of Bellandur lake showed that over 100 million litres of treated and untreated sewage are pumped into it every day. This area is home to several Special Economic Zones with famous software and consultancy companies and its catchment area has over 800 residential and commercial establishments. Shockingly, only some 500 projects have their own sewage treatment plants.

While the NGT has asked the state government to leverage drones and satellite imagery for its clean-up act, plans are afoot to challenge the NGT order in the Supreme Court, especially the Rs 500-crore escrow amount to be deposited by January.

The Justice Hegde Committee "may issue necessary instructions to the authorities from time to time for the purpose" and is "at liberty to co-opt any other experts or take assistance from such person or persons as may be deemed necessary," said the NGT order. It may "set up its own website for receiving and disseminating information and suggestions, including inviting volunteers, as may be deemed proper. Achievements may be put on the website so that the same can be replicated wherever relevant".

While green groups have been "red flagging" the governments of the day over these lake bodies for several years, Justice Goel's "fine order" from the NGT has come as a shot in the arm for the green

cause.