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Clean air, water: A pipe dream for Bengaluru city

DC | Amit S. Upadhye and Sangeeta Bora | June 03, 2015, 06.06 am IST



The borewells located around Bellandur lakes where water contamination is rampant show the presence of heavy metals

Bengaluru: Researchers from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) have warned that Bengaluru was heading towards its worst crisis in clean water and air quality. Given the current trend of destruction that was being caused to its lakes and open areas, the researchers suggested that urgent remedial measures were required to reverse the damage.

They say, borewells in Bengaluru city meet about 40 per cent of the water needs of the people, and many of the borewells are now reporting the presence of heavy metals, rendering them non-potable. This is due to solid waste dumping in open areas and the contamination of water in lakes of the city.

"The wetland experts have been asking for the treatment of the sewage before letting it into the lakes but the BWSSB has hardly done anything about it. In fact over last two weeks the treatment plant at Jakkur Lake has been not operating and the untreated sewage has been entering the waterbody. This shows the seriousness of the government agencies in protecting the water resources of Bengaluru.

The water contamination in the lakes has also led to the depletion of the ground water quality in the surrounding areas. The borewells located around Varthur and Bellandur lakes where water contamination is rampant are showing the presence of heavy metals," said Dr T V Ramachandra, head of Energy and Wetland Research Group, IISc. Similarly the city authorities will also have to think big about ensuring clean air for its citizens.

As it is, the particulate matter has been recording above the danger levels in many parts of Bengaluru and the researchers noted that the transport sector alone was contributing 43 per cent of the total carbon emissions in Bengaluru.

"A recent survey conducted by the IISc about the carbon emissions in the Indian metros showed that cities such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru where the public transport system is poor, contribute larger volumes of carbon emissions in the transport sector. It's important that the state government ensures that steps are taken to improve the mass transport system in Bengaluru. Instead of working towards planning a local train transport within the city, the state government sees the BMTC as a profit-making entity. Such policies will not work in encouraging people taking up mass transport modes," he added.



A survey conducted by IISc showed that Bengaluru contributes larger volumes of carbon emissions in the transport sector

The water experts point out that the water yield in river Cauvery, which is the major water source for Bengaluru, is coming down each passing year. "We must intensify protection in the catchment areas of the Cauvery in Coorg district. At the same time the government must ensure that no untreated sewage from Bengaluru and Mysore enter Arkavathi and Cauvery rivers respectively. And the government must establish multiple sewage treatment plants so that water can be recycled and reused in city. There is technology available and a number of foreign countries have achieved success in reusing treated water for non-potable purposes," Ramachandra added.

Need to restrict vehicles in areas where pollution levels are high

Removal of garbage, reduced number of vehicles and a political will can bring clean water and air back to the city, say experts. Karnataka State Pollution Control Board Chairperson Vaman Acharya feels that the garden city has nothing to worry about as far as drinking water is concerned as the Kaveri has been providing the city with clean water.

However, with regards to clean air a lot has to be done. He says, "In order to cleanse the air and bring down the pollution, we need to restrict vehicles in areas where the RSP levels are very high. We have released a report on the localities that are highly polluted.

"The government agencies can very well restrict the vehicles in such areas and anybody who dares to enter has to pay a penalty. Such things have been done in various parts of the world. Look at Cubbon Park now. Nothing has gone wrong by stopping the entrance of vehicles there. These things can be done with a normal executive order starting from tomorrow, but unfortunately nobody is willing to take a daring step."

But, civic expert Meenakshi Bharath said, "Garbage and traffic are the main causes of these two problems. Garbage is the main contributor to water pollution. The authorities along with the citizens should manage garbage in a proper way. Every citizen should segregate and look to decentralize the management of waste. And the authorities should look at it as waste management and not merely as waste disposal. Then we need to improve the public transport system by increasing the number of buses and the last connectivity. Put commuter rail in place and small buses for the last connectivity. We are heading the same way as Delhi. If we go on like this for another 10 years, then people will stop coming here. The responsibility has to be shared by both the citizens and the government."

Urban expert and member of WACIA, R K Mishra says, "It is simple, and the CM needs to pay attention. All depends on the CM's will. If he takes a decision, it will happen. We have enough resources and expertise to implement these things. When he had decided to remove encroachments and demolish them, it happened. Similarly, he needs to take a call on this as well."

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