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An Indian Institute of Science (IISc) study on Bengaluru's wetlands provides shocking insights into the extensive damage and destruction being done to the City's lakes. Fifty-four per cent of Bengaluru's water bodies are encroached upon for illegal constructions, 66 per cent are sullied with sewage, 14 per cent surrounded and strangled by slums and 72 per cent have lost their catchment areas. Bengaluru's rapid and unplanned growth has eaten into its lakes. Between 1973 and 2013, concretisation of the City, which surged by 925 per cent, was accompanied by a sharp decline in its natural resources in this period and green spaces and water bodies shrank by 78 and 79 per cent, respectively. Although there are good environmental laws in place, they have not been implemented. The nexus between politicians, police, construction companies, etc has resulted in laws being flouted brazenly and no action being taken against violators. This nexus enables unlawful constructions getting the stamp of legality. What is more, there are far too many para-state agencies dealing with the issue. Lack of co-ordination among them, accompanied by absence of accountability, has facilitated the depletion of lakes. The study's findings are a damning indictment of the City's governance.

Thankfully the situation is not hopeless. It is not impossible to halt the conversion of water bodies into real estate or to prevent the dumping of construction debris and untreated sewage into lakes. It requires robust implementation of environmental laws, application of the polluter pays principle in dealing with construction companies and polluting industries besides awarding of stringent punishment to encroachers as well as sewage and debris dumpers. Public awareness of environmental issues is growing. Civic activism could force authorities to prioritise public well-being over unsustainable development that thrives on destruction of water bodies and green cover. IISc's scientists say that Bengaluru's polluted lakes can be rejuvenated in 15 months by adopting the integrated wetlands ecosystem model rather than setting up sewage treatment plants that are not only more expensive but also ineffective in dealing with all the contaminants pouring into the lakes. The approach to rejuvenating lakes must be determined not by vested interests in the environment infrastructure business but by strategies directed by scientists and environment experts.

Bengaluru's numerous water bodies and green cover were responsible for its cool climate. With their rampant destruction, life here has become uncom-fortable and unhealthy. This can be reversed by acting immediately on encroachment and contamination of its lakes. It requires summoning the political will to breathe new life into our dying lakes.