

# Saving Bellandur lake

## A desperate rescue effort

For years, Bengaluru's largest and most polluted lake has been left to rot. Desperate pleas by residents, lake activists and scientists to save the lake have gone unheeded. Will another resurgence of this collective activism work?

**P**olluted to the core, encroached all around, vandalised mercilessly, Bellandur lake remained orphaned for years. But even as the city's biggest lake gasps agonisingly in its deathbed, a faint ray of hope has arisen: An unprecedented collective push by locals, scientists, lake activists and students for a final solution.

That passion to save the lake somehow was clearly evident on Friday, as a bunch of active stakeholders met in Varthur to chalk out a plan of action.

Many of the stakeholders had been fighting for the lake's cause for years on end without much effect. Yet, their spirit appears unwavering.

Yes, a concrete, workable solution is nowhere in sight. Neither the government nor the civic agencies have woken up from their deep slumber. But concerned citizens are teaming up, in big numbers.

### Human chain, marches

First on the agenda is a 1,000-strong march and a human chain with schoolchildren, all designed to attract the State's attention in the next few weeks. The big idea, as veteran lake activist Narayana Reddy asserts, is to spur a multi-agency, coordinated response to revive the lake.

There is just no time to lose. "The lake is totally contaminated due to sustained inflow of industrial effluents and untreated sewerage, large-scale dumping of building debris and solid waste. Stormwater drains and the lakebeds are encroached," reminds **Dr T.V. Ramachandra**, Indian Institute of Science.

Armed with lake research reports spanning decades, he draws attention to another dangerous twist: Contamination by heavy metals, a sure recipe for groundwater pollution in all areas surrounding Bellandur lake. High Nitrate



**Deccan Herald** is kick-starting a campaign to revive Bellandur lake by partnering with the local communities, students and other stake-holders involved. Today's **PointBlank** is the first part of this campaign

in the water could take health concerns -- hitherto restricted to skin allergies, asthma and other lung ailments -- to more serious, cancerous levels, warns the scientist.

### Ineffective STPs

An estimated 40 per cent of the city's sewage ends up untreated in Bellandur lake through a chain of lakes and Stormwater Drains (SWD). One standard solution offered by the government is the sewage treatment plants (STPs). But the cost to build, operate and maintain them is

prohibitive. For proof, check the partly dysfunctional 248-MLD capacity Koramangala and Challaghatta Valley STP.

Part of the treated water from this STP does get into Bellandur lake. But it quickly gets mixed with untreated sewage that comes in through the other inlets, negating the very treatment exercise. Several activists, scientists and urban experts repeatedly stress that smaller STPs of capacities in the range of 10 to 20-MLD could be cheaper and more workable.

Yet, the civic agencies push

for large STPs, eyeing lucrative contracts and potential for kickbacks.

### Localised solutions

The priority then should be to explore localised solutions. But opinion is divided over the issue of drying up and desilting the lake.

Bellandur Gram Panchayat ex-president and long-time lake campaigner, Jagannath K prefers to first divert all water entering the lake and then take away the muck accumulated over decades.

However, many fear that drying up the lake could be a risky proposition. It would be an invitation for further encroachments by builders and other vested interests, including government agencies. Dr Ramachandra suggests a different approach: Wet-dredging.

He explains: "Desilting the lake without draining out the water is possible through wet

dredging. The Navy, for instance, uses this method even in the sea, at the ports." The same strategy had been adopted to desilt Ulsoor lake too, although subsequent entry of untreated sewage negated the benefits. Once the accumulated silt is removed, options will open up to store rainwater and eventually recharge the groundwater resources in the surroundings.

The solutions proposed are aplenty. But nothing can work without a sustained, collaborated approach by all the stakeholders involved. The local communities, lake activists, scientists and concerned environmentalists are readying for a final push to save Bellandur lake. But caught up in blame-game, are the City's civic agencies ready to shed their fragmented ways and willing to participate in this big campaign?

**Rasheed Kappan**

**Untreated sewage directly enters the lake from four main feeder drains and 13 other smaller inlets. This blatant contamination is out in the open.**

**Though in existence for several years now, the froth has led to widespread attention on the pollution of Bellandur and Varthur lakes in recent months.**

**Lack of functional STPs and well-networked UGD lines in many villages around the lake has forced residents to directly let waste water into the lake.**