

FIRSTPOST.

NGT's well-timed order on penalising construction companies can help revive Bengaluru's damaged lakes

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#Bengaluru #Bengaluru Agara lake #InMyOpinion #Mantri Techzone #Namma Bengaluru Foundation #NewsTracker #NGT

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On Tuesday, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) slapped a penalty of Rs 117 crores on Mantri Techzone and Rs 13.5 crore on Core Mind Software, for construction around the Bellandur and Agara lakes of Bengaluru. The developers were asked to restore the encroached 3.10 acres lake bed area and cancelled and quashed all environmental clearances and sanctioned plans. The NGT also directed the civic authorities to demolish or disallow any further construction around 75 metres from a lake and 50 metres around primary storm water drains.

The NGT was presiding over the PIL filed by the Namma Bengaluru Foundation (NBF) and several other citizen forums. The judgement couldn't have come sooner.



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Kshitij Urs, who heads the Karnataka office of ActionAid India told Firstpost, "In the 'polluter pays principle' the defaulters have to pay for the damage and mess they have created, but that doesn't mean they can continue doing what they were doing."

Only a few days earlier, Prof TV Ramachandra and Dr Bharath H Aithal of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) had declared that Bengaluru would be a dead city in five

years. Their study stated that Bengaluru which had been a witness to an alarming unbridled growth of 525 percent of built up area in the past four decades, 78 percent decline in vegetation had also seen a decline in 79 percent in water bodies.

The IISc report referred to 54 percent of lakes encroached by illegal buildings; untreated sewage being sent to 66 percent of lakes; 14 percent lakes surrounded by slums; 72 percent lakes had loss of catchment area; and the lack of proper policy on land use and water.

So shocking is the condition of the lakes in and around Bengaluru that only some 17 healthy lakes exist today. At one time, Bengaluru was referred to as the city of 1000 lakes with several bunds constructed by Bengaluru's forefathers - the Kempe Gowdas and then later developed by the Wodeyars of Mysuru and the British. These wetlands not only sustained a variety of water birds and aquatic life and also provided drinking water to several residential areas. But by 1960, Bengaluru had only 280 lakes, and sadly, by 1993, the number of lakes had dropped to a dismal 80.

The disappearance of lakes not only lead to rising temperatures, water shortage, reduced rainwater storage basins, as lakes also have catchment areas for collecting rainwater, high dependence on already depleting underwater water sources and poor oxygen levels from reduced foliage.

Leo Saldana, campaigner of environment protection and coordinator for the Environment Support Group (ESG) told Firstpost, "The NGT judgement is a good indication of the judicial will, but how far can this be implemented?"

The reason for caution is because the NGT judgement would mean that the civic authorities would have to launch a massive demolition drive, alongside rehabilitation and relocation of people displaced.

How feasible would this be?

Can civic authorities really impose maintaining a distance of 75 metres around a lake and 50 metres around any primary storm water drain?

For sadly, much of the city has developed over tank bunds, and many residential buildings have extended over storm water drains. For instance, the [Lake Development Authority](#) (LDA) states on its website that the Bangalore city bus stand was once upon a time the Dharmambudhi Tank, the Karnataka Golf Association's Golf Course was the Challaghatta Tank, the sports complex was earlier the Koramangala Tank and a sports stadium was earlier the Sampangi Tank.

Many of the major industrial townships and arterial roads like the Ring Road run parallel to primary storm water drains. "Many of the poor live bordering these storm water drains," says Saldana.

"Encroachment in villages is easy to clear, as these would probably be a fence built by an influential individual which juts into a lakebed. This can be easily demolished, but implementing the same in a city would be very difficult," says Urs.

In April 2015, several middle class homes, schools, medical centres, including a government office were demolished in JP Nagar in Bengaluru near the Saraki lake. Several buildings were also demolished in Banaswadi. [The New Indian Express](#) reported that the demolition drive, perhaps the biggest ever in the city, hoped to recover 33 acres of encroached land worth about Rs 2,000 crore for the Bengaluru Urban district

administration. Around 3500 Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) plots in various neighbourhoods too faced the threat of demolition.

This was part of the massive drive the civic authorities took up to clear the lake beds that had been encroached upon. There was also an earlier attempt in 2010 to demolish some 70 houses, which had encroached on the Puttenahalli Lake at JP Nagar.

Some of the residents of JP Nagar got a respite, when the court stayed the demolition of their homes according to a report in [The Times of India](#)

Encroachment by builders is one of main reasons for the complete disappearance of the wetlands in and around Bengaluru. Many lakes were converted to bus stands, golf courses, playgrounds and residential colonies or leased out by the government. Then the rest were encroached by slums and builders, some dried up, or turned into human and toxic waste cess pools.

However encroachment is not the only problem Bengaluru's lakes face.

“Most of the lakes are being used as cesspools, untreated sewage is being directed to these lakes and construction debris is emptied into lakes,” says Urs.

[The Bangalore Mirror](#) reported that the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), and the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) were planning to go on night patrolling to save the lakes from dumping of debris. The paper had earlier reported massive debris in the Kundalahalli Lake in Whitefield.

The city has been steadily losing its lakes over the past few decades to contamination from immersion of idols, sewage inflow, debris lining the shores, erosion of tree cover and unrestricted commercial fishing.

The People's Campaign for Right to Water, a forum in which Urs is also part of, has been campaigning to protect and conserve the water commons such as public lakes and tanks in Karnataka. The forum is a community of people and organisations in Karnataka campaigning for public access to free and clean water. The forum also fights against the privatisation, commoditisation, degradation and encroachment of water throughout the State.

The effort of the People's Campaign for Right to Water has been to save Bengaluru's remaining lakes, so as to reduce the over-dependence on Cauvery River for the city's drinking water needs. Not only is the forum working on preserving the wetlands and lakes, but also the canals leading to it.

For as Saldana puts it, “No lake can exist on its own, it needs canals to feed it.”

The dire situation of the lakes in Bengaluru has even attracted the attention of the central government, which has sanctioned Rs 800 crore under the under Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) scheme to Karnataka to mitigate pollution in the lakes, according to a [NDTV](#) report this week.

Out of the Centre's grant of Rs 800 crore, Rs 500 crore is for laying a 74-kms trunk sewage pipeline and Rs 162 crore to construct four Sewage treatment plants in Bellandur lake.

With concern for Bengaluru's lakes spreading across the state and centre, let's hope that the NGT's order will revive as many of the city's lakes as is possible.

“In principle if the order is implemented we can save around 400 lakes in and around Bengaluru in 2/3years,” says Saldana.

Urs adds, “It’s a start and the next step is for civil society to take it forward.”