

BLink

Bengaluru's dry patch

Deepa Bhashthi



Fragile beauty: Ulsoor lake in Bengaluru has been waging a decades-long battle against pollution. Photo: G R N Somashekar *Business Line*

The few lakes in pub city that have escaped land sharks are today little better than sewage that bursts into flames, and another that kills masses of fish

Where do you begin to tell the story of a thousand deaths? Should you begin at the beginning, and then stop? Perhaps. But the story of the lakes in Bengaluru would hardly

Earlier this month, the Ulsoor lake — famed for its gorgeous sunsets sliding behind a t against the champagne skies and a popular refuge from the sweltering summer days — Hundreds of dead fish washed up on the shores, raising a mighty stench for passers-by lake-view apartments in the vicinity.

The news and pictures got a few column inches in the papers and a bit of airtime, but r Eutrophication was old news even a decade ago.

The once quiet, sleepy town of Bengaluru had under its belt several sobriquets like the lakes' (the nearly 300 that came into being along with the city in the 16th century). The that line the roads and parks in nearly every neighbourhood — however ill-maintained sobriquet. But the city grew into the gargantuan it is today by swallowing many of its l over several decades now.

Of course, not many people had stopped to notice.

According to a committee set up by the Karnataka legislature in 2014, an estimated 11, encroached on, from 1,545 lakes, in both Bangalore Urban and Rural districts. One-third the Bangalore Development Authority and the rest by private land developers. Even urban boasted 280 water bodies; today not more than 17 have survived.

A 2005 study by TV Ramachandra of the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, says waterbodies have shrunk from 3.4 per cent of the city area in 1973 to 1.47 per cent in 2005. In 2005, 27.3 per cent to 45.19 per cent in the same period.

The fallout: flooding at the first hint of rain, changes in micro climates and drastic changes in bird life. Not to mention the cultural changes to the face of the city, the death of snakes, fish in the vicinity, and the redundancy of a whole way of life — of fishermen, farmers and other craftspeople. The lakes and helped keep them healthy and alive.

While environmentalists and residents have been crying hoarse over the encroachments since the 1970s, it was the almost surreal foaming of Bellandur lake — the largest lake in the city — that caught national attention.

Reports of foam formation from the detergents and other chemicals draining into the lake started in the 1980s.

But one day last year, the foam, already blowing on to windshields of cars and into the faces of commuters, caught fire. Cooking oil from the thousands of household drains that empty into the lake, along with detergents and other toxic chemicals to burst into flames.

Most of the city's lakes were created more than 400 years ago by damming three natural streams: Koramangala-Challaghatta, Hebbal and Vrishabhavathi.

The way it worked was that rainwater would fill the lakes and the excess flowed down stormwater drains, or raja-kaluves.

Today, untreated sewage flowing into the stormwater drains is, in turn, polluting the lakes. This has made the water undrinkable. The springs at the bottom of some of the lakes, which also supply water to the city, are clogged by decades of piled-up silt. A lot of Bengaluru's water supply today is dependent on rivers.

The history of attempts to save the lakes has been a chequered one. Along the way, the government has tried to privatise the lakes and get large companies to adopt, clean and give the lakes — and the animals dependent on them — a fresh stab at life.

This step was met with a lot of resistance from the public and was eventually overturned. While the government drives achieve what they can, but saving the lakes is an undertaking that demands a lot of money. Dealing yet another blow, the 2016 State Budget allocated a grossly insufficient ₹100 crore for the lakes.

Citing the most recent fish-kill at Ulsoor lake, Ramachandra says the solution lies in treating the water. He explains that due to the higher temperatures in summer, there is an increase in the level of nutrients in the lakes, leading to depletion of oxygen and the death of fish. The high levels of ammonia in Ulsoor lake. However, rather than a simple sewage treatment plant, the government has tried to treat the water but is also not cost-effective, what is needed is an integrated plan, like the one in the US.

algae pond and wetlands remove 90-95 per cent of the nutrients and the rest is removed the way," he says.

Leo F Saldanha, coordinator at the Environment Support Group (ESG), an organisation to save the city's lakes, points out that there are no easy answers.

He lays the bulk of the blame at the door of the big builders who have violated all guidelines for lucrative apartments and villas offering lake views.

"An encroacher is effectively a polluter," he says, pointing to the waste that enters the lakes. The politics of the states is financed by real estate. Even when the encroachments are demarcated after the weak guys. Unless we go after encroachments, nothing effective can be done,"

Pegging the health of lakes as a much more vital issue than road congestion, which gets government funds, Saldanha says investment in road development was aimed at the elite, much to the chagrin of the farmer. A farmer will tell you that water needs to flow on soil, not on concrete. Break the concrete and plant shrubs along the edges," he adds.

Calling the state of lakes a "ticking bomb waiting to explode in our faces", Saldanha does not display the nerve to act against encroachments. "Some predict that by 2025 we will have no lakes in the city. We already don't have any. What we have in Bengaluru is what we are stealing from Mandya, and so on," he points out.

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