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# NGT directive can save 93 city lakes, clear up buffer zones

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**B**ENGALURU: The National Green Tribunal (NGT) order in connection with the Agara-Bellandur wetlands comes as a reprieve for many lakes and water bodies which are choked and crying for intervention. TOI learnt that if the state government is able to implement the green bench order in true spirit, at least 93 lakes can be brought back to life.

Check this out: In January this year, a team of researchers headed by Professor TV Ramachandra from the Energy and Wetlands Research Group, Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc, came out with a report after studying the wetlands of 105 lakes in the city. The study revealed that 98% of lakes - meaning around 93 - were encroached and wetlands here were devastated. Bellandur, Varthur, Maragondanahalli, Rampura and Sarakki were the worst hit, said the study.

Now, with the NGT directive setting a higher threshold for the buffer zone around the lakes, increasing it from the existing 30 metres to 75 metres, environmentalists and lake activists say all the state government needs to do is clear encroachments on buffer zones and crack the whip against encroachers.

Ramesh Sivaram of Forward Foundation, one of the petitioners before the NGT, said, "It is a big moment against the developers' mafia. This verdict is perhaps a sign indicating the law framework in the country is no longer being pushed by the builder lobby. We expect the state government to follow the NGT order in full spirit."

As Prof TV Ramachandra of IISc points out, the devastation of wetlands is due to a lack of sincerity and poor decision making by the bureaucracy. "There is a serious problem with governance and poor implementation of regulatory norms. There is a lack of coordination between many para state agencies who are custodians of lakes, leading to their poor maintenance. This needs to be corrected," he added.

A senior official with the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) said the NGT directive is a boon for them as well.

"The problem with agencies like KSPCB is they lack teeth and never go beyond issuing notices to violators. Now, with a clear directive from the NGT, violators can be nailed and also made to pay for whatever damage they have done," he added.

Another bureaucrat from the environment department, however, said they need to wait for the official copy of the directive to chalk out the plan of action.

## TIMES VIEW

The National Green Tribunal's directive is a huge triumph for Bengaluru's citizen activists striving to protect our lakes. Clearing encroachments is the first step to reclaim ecologically crucial wetlands. The order promises to breathe new life into our water bodies and do what successive governments have not just failed to, but also abetted, as the land mafia systematically killed the city's lakes. If the government reads the writing on the wall right and feels the public pulse, it should go ahead and implement the order, though it would mean rubbing builders the wrong way.