



## HOMES AND GARDENS

# Rejuvenating the city and a water body

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**Given the will, the toxic waters of Bellandur Lake can still be cleaned of pollutants and rendered friendly for aquatic life. By M.A. Siraj**



Fire in a lake can be expected only on the celluloid screen or in a fantasy. But Bengalureans were witness to the spectacle twice in the short span of two months. Nothing could be a more poignant commentary on the state of environment of a city than the toxic sludge of a prominent lake catching fire.

Froth, fume and fire in Bellandur Lake caught the headlines in the international media. The lake refuses to retreat from headlines. In one sense, it represents the tragic state of affairs of the city's management. Reports emanating from experts say that the population boom and consequent leap of the city into the world's major technology hubs, has led to extreme degradation of the ecosystem inasmuch as some do not feel any qualm in predicting a doom for the city by the year 2025. It is only after the massive public outcry that the city fathers have launched the deweeding campaign and are seen to be taking some measures to cleanse the highly polluted lake.

Speakers at a conclave held recently in the city to discuss ways to rejuvenate two major water bodies in South Bengaluru viz., Bellandur and Varathur Lakes, were unanimous that mismanagement in the BBMP, BDA, and Lake Development Authority, excessive greed for land, and corruption were responsible for the death of several lakes and degradation of the remaining ones. It was pointed out that the encroachment of land by dumping of debris had reduced the area of Bellandur Lake from the original 890 acres to less than 750 acres now. Seven upstream STPs were either defunct (due to deficient power supply) or were inadequate to treat the entire quantity of sewage from the 17 inlets into the lake.

It is estimated that of the 460 MLD (million litres per day) of sewage coming through these inlets, only about 40% gets treated by these STPs whose designated capacity is to treat only 248 MLD but usually operate at two-thirds of their capacity. Over and above this, the 110 villages brought under the municipal limits of the city in 2007, have no sewerage. The sewage from these villages flows into the lake untreated together with rainwater. Latest estimates put the figure of sewage entering the lake to be of the order of 605 MLD.

The allegation that several apartments around have no STPs was pooh-poohed by environmentalist TV. Ramachandra of the Indian Institute of Science who said the apartments were contributing only 30 MLD while the industries were contributing the remaining 430 MLD.

### Major polluters

“Why not focus on the major polluters, the industrial units?”, he questioned. Prof. Ramachandra, whose reports in the past had raised alarms about the state of the Bellandur Lake (he is coordinator, Energy & Wetlands Research Group of Centre for Ecological Sciences in the IISc) says: “There should be no deviation of sewage from the lake. It should be treated within the lake”.

According to him, the lake had accumulated seven million cubic feet of silt which could be sent away to farms for replacing fertilizers. “The silt could earn Rs. 15,000 crore for the BBMP,” he pointed out. He warned that the city was left with just about 197 lakes and water bodies and relentless borewell digging had led to the water table falling to 1,200 ft., a depth at which water with heavy metals can be found.

Leo Saldanha, Coordinator, Environment Support Group (ESG), sees colossal

laxity in management of the water bodies. He says the administration need not look for solution beyond the report compiled following a directive from Justice K. N. Patil of the Karnataka High Court in 2010-11.

Mr. Saldanha says solid waste was being dumped into the Rajakaluves and no STP can treat water laced with solids. He alleged that under the garb of development, a city lake was assigned to a company whose registered office in Hyderabad was found to be in a residential flat. The Patil Report had directed the 840 km of SWDs to be lined with trees, grass and bamboo clumps which would have allowed the water to cleanse itself.

### Rampant violation

He also pointed out that the directive for 30-metre exclusion of foreshore zone around the lakes has been rampantly violated. Mr. Saldanha said the authorities committed a monstrous folly by constructing the National Games Village in the lake bed of Koramangala. "Do sportsmen coming for an event reside in a city for ever", he questioned.

### Not unique

Ritesh Kumar, Conservation Programme Manager, Wetland International South Asia, said Bengaluru was not unique in matters of eco degradation. Nearly all cities were invariably in the same league. He referred to Chennai where gobbling of wetlands led to flooding in December 2015 leading to a loss of the order of Rs. 10,000 crore to the automotive industries alone. He emphasises conservation of wetlands as the fate of the cities is critically linked to water bodies.

### 15,000 tonnes of weeds

P.N. Nayak, Member-Engineer, BDA, briefing about the Authority's plan for Bellandur, said 3,000 tonnes of weeds had been removed since the deweeding work was taken up on April 15. The lake has accumulated nearly 15,000 tonnes of weeds and it may take another three to five months for the first phase of the work to complete. Mr. Nayak says the Authority has now requisitioned two floating cranes, and dumping of debris had been stopped. According to him 18 vehicles found dumping debris into the lake have been seized and 12 persons arrested on the charges of illegal dumping.

Minister for Bengaluru Development and Town Planning K.J. George refuted

the charge that the inferno witnessed upon the islands was caused due to presence of hydrocarbons. He attributed it to dried grass over the sludge. But scientist Ramachandra refuted it and said the flames were not blue (as it happens in the case of methane) but orange which signals presence of petrochemicals being let out by several industrial units surrounding the lake. Mr. George said power supply to the units flouting pollution norms was being disconnected.

### Foreshore zones

The participants urged desilting of Bellandur and Varathur Lakes, treatment of wastewater through algal ponds, restoring nullahs interconnecting the upstream lakes with downstream ones, serious checks against any major alterations in the city's topography, and creation of the mandatory 30-metre foreshore zones around the lake and ensuring their inviolability.

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