

# POINT BLANK

## Lake borders sacred no more

In the last 18 months, no long-term measures were taken to address encroachments based on the house panel's earlier recommendations

Shock, anger and extreme frustration greeted the legislature panel revelation that 10,785 acres or almost a fifth of Bengaluru's lake area has been encroached. But why did the government sit on the panel's recommendations on reviving those lost areas, expert advice submitted 18 months ago?

This is a critical question that demands immediate answers. In 18 months, much could have been done to address those encroachments. But beyond short-term, cosmetic measures, precious little was done, notes senior scientist Dr T V Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian In-



stitute of Science, who, as an active member of the panel, had offered well-researched scientific inputs on ways to arrest the dramatic decline of the city lakes.

**Lake connectivity**  
De-silting and establishing the connectivity between the lakes was a key input.

"The Rajakaluves have to be cleared at any cost. Diverting them is suicidal. Any concession on this front looks like guided by political motives. This give and take policy is just not acceptable," says Dr Ramachandra.

In total disregard to the National Greens Tribunal (NGT) order, the buffer zones around

the Rajakaluve linking the Bellandur and Varthur lakes have been encroached. This violation is both by private interests and by government-sanctioned projects.

"They talk about inter-linking of rivers. First, let them demonstrate how they can re-establish the links between the city lakes."

### Mafia back in action

Demolition of illegal structures on encroachments had created much hype. But once it died down and faded from public memory, the encroachment mafia is back at its old game. The tell-tale signs of its deeds are visible on lake areas across the city. Construction debris and solid waste are being dumped, some under the cover of darkness and some, openly.

The encroachment pattern is similar across water bodies: Debris is dumped surreptitiously or otherwise; mud is overlaid and the land compressed over months. Once it settles adequately, the earthmovers and monster drillers come in. This has been clearly visible on the wetlands of Bellandur lake for years, a pattern visible now in Varthur lake as well.

### Well-oiled nexus

The house panel has named the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) as one of the biggest offenders. Residential societies were built over 41 lakes. But officials of civic agencies were also hand-in-glove with private builders, allowing huge apartments to come up, violating every norm. Land records were fabricated and maps altered. Insiders say local corporators are also often part of this mafia, striking a deal of silence in return for a few flats.

Official apathy in lake upkeep has been another key factor in promoting encroachments. For instance, the Pattandur Agrahara lake, the Bagalagunte lake, Sadaramangala lake and the water body in Hoodi are in a deplorable state. For several years now, no official has turned up to undertake restoration work.

### Official apathy

It has been almost 20 years since the Pattandur Agrahara lake in Kadugodi dried up and started losing a part of its area to encroachers. Recently, hundreds of people and school-children living near the lake formed a human chain and protested against the indiscriminate dumping of debris. Citizens had complained that about 50 loads of debris are dumped every night.

Even the local corporator, S Muniswamy joined the protest. Although the dumping of debris has stopped for now, the lake survey or restoration work is yet to begin, say the residents. "We have learnt that the government is planning to build a road cutting through the lake. This is a clear violation of the NGT rule, which bans construction of any structure in the buffer zone of the water bodies," says Sandeep Anirudhan, who had initiated the protests.

A new link road is being constructed from Varthur Kodi main road to 80 feet ITPL main road. This will not only lead to felling of hundreds of trees but also pass right through the lake and a school nearby.

### Buffer zone encroachments

The case of Bagalagunte lake near Dasarahalli Metro station is even worse. It has been dead for a while now. The recent rains had filled up the lake. Yet, it has now been transformed

into a garbage dumping yard, laments a local resident. Another localite points to a slum with several houses that has emerged right on the lake bed, earmarked as the buffer zone.

The Sadaramangala lake near Hoodi is another case in point. Residents there had complained against private encroachments that were even drawing water illegally from the lake. The BBMP has now begun a survey to restore and rejuvenate the lake. This lake too was filled up after the heavy rains. "We hope that the lake revival efforts will bear fruit," says Balachandran, a resident actively involved in mobilizing support to save the lake.

**Rasheed Kappan and Madhuri Rao**



**B N S RATNAKAR**  
Financial consultant

RWAs play an important role in completing the efforts of civic agencies. Their support should be enlisted at all stages to ensure effective management of storm water drains. Encroachments across the city must be cleared and severe penalties imposed on violators.



**MURALIDHAR KOPPARAM**  
RWA secretary

In many cases, the land mafia has shifted the drain itself. However, the BBMP has not taken any action against them. Even the BDA has encroached many areas. The scope for RWAs and citizen driven initiatives is limited if the civic agencies remain non-responsive.



**SIDDHARTH VARMA**  
Budding psychologist

Civic agencies should do more. All they seem to do is dig up roads to lay pipes and leave behind a mess. I doubt there is a single place in the city which has an efficient SWD. The water will obviously stagnate when it has nowhere to go, leading to deterioration of roads.



**SUNIL MALAPAT**  
Businessman

Encroachment can be seen all across Sadaramangala lake. In the last 5-6 years, the lake is getting smaller and smaller. There is a nexus between government officials, elected representatives and the land mafia, all out to grab the lakes in any way possible.

**Zikran Shamshuddin**

## Dumping debris in Bellandur lake: Penalty up to Rs 5 lakh

For Bellandur lake, the BBMP has a strict rule that states if anybody dumps garbage or debris in the lake, penalty of up to Rs 5 lakh will be imposed, says the Palike Commissioner, N Manjunatha Prasad.

"We are planning to bring this rule for every lake in the city during the next council meeting. Even the inclusion of CCTV cameras would help in preventing this problem," he informs.

## Precursor to house panel report: A 2016 January statement

As early as January 2016, the Chairman of the House Committee on Tank Encroachment and Rejuvenation, K B Kolwad had stated this in a press conference: Various government agencies have encroached 3,287 acres of lake area. Private builders and slum dwellers have taken over 7,185 acres. The encroached lake land value was estimated at over Rs 1.5 lakh crore.

## Grim reminders from the house committee's final report

- About 25% of the lakes have been encroached upon.
- Varthur lake water is polluted beyond permissible limits of chemicals and the vegetables being grown using this water around the lake could be harmful.
- Agara lake has been polluted due to the inflow of water from storm water drain from Koramangala, Madiwala and HSR Layout.
- Flooding in low lying areas such as Koramangala, Madiwala and Wilson Garden can be prevented if lakes in the city are restored.
- Although the report clearly states that the encroachments affect the ecology, the panel gives relief to the residential encroachments near the lakes. However, criminal action is recommended against commercial encroachments 'if there is a chance of rejuvenation of the lake.'

23

Bangalore Development Authority is the single largest civic agency to have encroached upon 23 lakes to an extent of 384 acres for building layouts.

158

As many as 158 lakes have not been encroached upon. The government should take necessary steps to safeguard them, says the house panel report.

73

Among the 73 identified encroachers are a multinational softdrinks major and two tech parks.

18

Eighteen of the encroached lakes are in Bengaluru East, 17 in South, 16 in Anekal taluk, 14 in Bengaluru North, five in Nelamangala and Devanahalli.

Out of a total of 1,547 lakes (837 in Bengaluru urban district, 710 in rural district), 10,785 acres have been encroached. This amounts to 18% of the total lake area.

18%



Garbage dumped inside Bagalagunte lake



Construction debris on Varthur lake bed



Garbage dumped on the canal linking Bellandur & Varthur lakes



Daylight encroachment of Sadaramangala lake

## Citizens campaign against encroachers, yet efforts flounder

Encroachment of lakes and storm water drains (SWDs) in Bengaluru has assumed monstrous proportions in recent years. Result: Large parts of the city have now been left extremely vulnerable to inundation and floods, as illustrated by the copious rainfall over the last few months.

To know what exactly this means to the man on the street, DH spoke to a few Bengalureans. One of them, Ameeruddin D A, a teacher and long-time resident near Sarakki lake in JP Nagar, has this to say: "The land mafia and the public as well are largely responsible for encroachment of lakes."

He describes the process that put Sarakki lake in dire straits: "Over a long period they began dumping sand and built many buildings to occupy the land illegally. The

government has not been vigilant enough to evict these occupants. The lake is now dying slowly."

Shreya Praveen, a Residents Welfare Association member in Sector 7 of HSR layout speaks for the residents of 197 apartments. "We are facing the issue of illegal construction on the storm water drain here and fighting it. Constructing any sort of structure over the drains will not allow periodic inspections and de-silting of the drains," she explains.

Citizens and RWAs, she says, can play a vital role since public service personnel are stretched in their roles. "Need of the hour are technology-enabled platforms where citizens forums can login real-time challenges of illegal construction/encroachments. This can trigger complaints and can allow the respective author-

ity personnel to address these challenges," notes Shreya.

B N S Ratnakar, an independent financial consultant says, "Storm water drains are important outlets not only for draining the water during rains but also a conduit for flooded lake water to enter the city areas. They must be laid scientifically and maintained well."

According to him, RWAs and other citizen forums play

an important role in completing the efforts of civic agencies.

"Their support should be enlisted at all stages to ensure effective management of storm water drains. Encroachments across the city must be cleared and severe penalties must be imposed on errant citizens. The BBMP should also educate the public through various media about proper maintenance of drains."

Muralidhar Kopparam,

RWA secretary of HSR layout sector 1, talks about encroachments by both the government and the public. "In many cases, the land mafia has shifted the drain itself. However, the BBMP has not taken any action against them. Even the BDA has encroached many areas," he explains.

The scope for RWAs and citizen driven initiatives is limited if the civic agencies remain non-responsive

or demand bribes to do the work they are supposed to do. "Whenever we meet higher officials, they talk positively and build up our hopes. However no action actually takes place on the ground," points out Muralidhar.

Siddharth Varma, a budding psychologist wants civic agencies to do more. "All they seem to do is dig up roads to lay pipes and leave behind a mess. I doubt there is a single place in the city which has an efficient SWD. The water will obviously stagnate when it has nowhere to go, which leads to deterioration of roads," he says, suggesting an interconnected drainage system which runs below the roads.

Businessman Sunil Malapat, who lives in Whitefield near Sadaramangala lake says, "There is a group of people who are trying to work

closely with authorities to save Sadaramangala lake. However, there are vested interests within the government who make sure things don't get going."

The citizens had taken up this issue with multiple government authorities. "Everyone does sugar-coating and talks sweetly in public forums. On the ground no work happens. Encroachment can be seen all across Sadaramangala lake. In the last 5-6 years the lake is getting smaller and smaller," he says. He is convinced that a nexus between government officials, elected representatives and the land mafia are all out to grab the lake in any way possible. "Even grabbing a few acres gets them a fortune, so they do it."

