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Why Bellandur lake clean-up exercise could snap many human linkages

By [Bharath Joshi](#) & [Umesh Yadav](#), ET Bureau | Updated: Apr 28, 2017, 11:58 AM IST

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Bellandur lake, the city's largest water body, is different things to different people. For Bengaluru, it is a dump that collects 45 per cent of the city's sewage. For livestock, it is a source of a nutrient-rich variety of grass that increases milk production. For farmers and fishermen, it was once a source of livelihood. The Economic Times discover the several human linkages the lake continues to have and how a clean-up exercise — as mandated by the National Green Tribunal — might snap them.

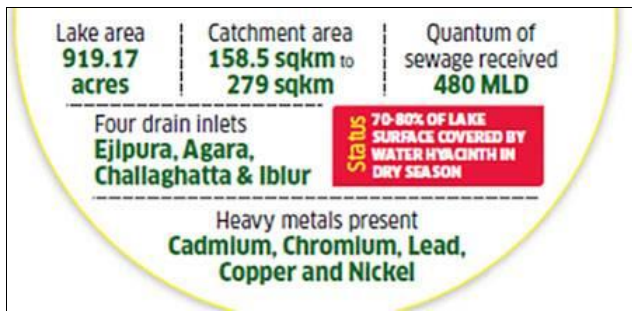


Coming down heavily on the authorities responsible for the water body, the NGT has been prescribing a list of dos and don'ts.

In 2015, just before the monsoon arrived, Bellandur lake hit international headlines. High wind coupled with rainfall caused massive froth and aerosol formation that spilled into its neighbourhood. The same year, there was fire on the waters of the lake. When a much bigger fire broke out this February, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) thought it had had enough.

Coming down heavily on the authorities responsible for the water body, it has been prescribing a list of dos and don'ts. In its latest directive, the green panel has asked for proof of action before May 18, leaving the Karnataka government with less than a month to take necessary steps. Accordingly, the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) has taken up de-weeding, an exercise to remove hyacinth that covers the lake's surface.

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Interestingly, a similar exercise at the Doddanekkundi lake, which is not far away from Bellandur, ended up in a blanket cleaning-up exercise that erased all the grass. The unique variety of grass that grows on Bellandur lake's surface — as it did on Doddanekkundi's — is livelihood for over 150 families from villages such as Siddapura, Ramagondanahalli, Gunjur, Sorahunse besides Bellandur and Varthur.



A few villagers cut grass grown on Bellandur lake's surface every morning.

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The drive to clean up the lake has them worried. The sewage-fed lake has become infamous for its blackened water and pungent smell but this does not deter 40-year-old Suresh, born and raised in the Iblur village, to row his raft to the middle of the lake as he has done for the past twenty years. About two hours later, he rows back with over 40 kg of fodder that feeds his ten cows.



A villager finds a good catch.

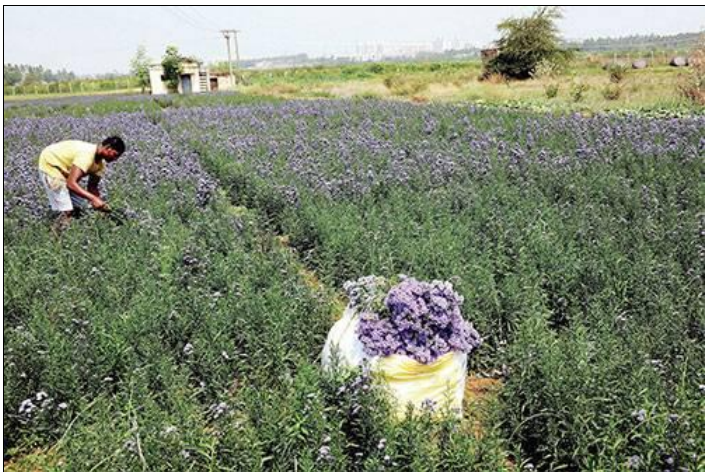
VILLAGERS STAKEHOLDERS TOO

People like Suresh have forged such precious relationships with the lake over centuries. Every morning, many other villagers raft across for the same purpose. Each raft can carry up to 100 kg of fodder, which reaches many cowsheds and markets in Koramangala, Tannery Road and Shivajinagar. Fodder from this lake even reaches the Bannerghatta Biological Park.



The grass is bundled and sold on the lakebed

“As many as 5,000 cows need this lake,” said Chinnappa from the Srinivagilu village. While there is an agreement among villagers that de-weeding is necessary because hyacinth restricts the growth of grass, the worry is that it should not be a repeat of Doddanekkundi. “The village folk are real stakeholders and I’m not sure if authorities have included them in their scheme of things right now,” said Jagadish Reddy, an activist who is trying to make the villagers’ voice heard.



A few farmers opt to grow decorative flowers using the polluted waters of Varthur lake.

“We have suggested setting aside a 10-acre parcel where villagers can access the fodder. The rest of the lake can be cleaned up as the authorities seem fit,” said Reddy, who works for a US-based consultancy firm. He is the grandson of award-winning organic farmer Narayana Reddy. Whatever happens to Bellandur lake has a bearing on the Varthur lake, which is downstream. From these twin lakes, water flows down the plateau and joins the Dakshina Pinakini river. Shankar Reddy, 50, is holding on to a three-acre land abutting the Varthur lake. Because the water is polluted, he stopped growing paddy five years ago. There was a time he reaped 150 sacks. Recently, he tried growing coriander but the crop failed.

“This (polluted) water allows me to grow only blue daisies, a flower used at weddings for decoration. The income is negligible.” Jagadish Reddy pointed out that agriculture was the predominant occupation for the native population till 2006. “The real estate boom happened in 2007 when this region was brought under the city municipal limits.

Villagers saw money they never had and sold their land to developers,” he said. Fishing stopped about five years ago. The only species that survived is the hardy catfish. Their numbers are also dwindling. The lake was originally built by the city’s ancestors to meet domestic and irrigation demands in the region. Bengaluru, situated on a 920 metre-high Deccan plateau, is divided into three valleys into which water drains — Vrishabhavathi (southwest), Hebbal (northeast) and the Koramangala-Challaghatta (southeast).

Located at the tail-end of the Koramangala-Challaghatta valley, Bellandur lake (and its smaller twin Varthur lake), receive nearly half of Bengaluru's sewage — or 'Bengaluru water' as locals put it. Srinivas Ramaiah, 45, from Yamalur village, depends on the sewage-fed joy weed which grows on the lake's surface. "The honagone soppu makes cows yield more milk," he said.

Venkatesh, a native of Bellandur, believes that the lake is in perfect condition but for the sewage and mosquitoes. As much as villagers blame Bengaluru, they also hold apartment complexes that have come up around the lake responsible for the sewage. "Why do apartments come up here? So they can let out sewage into the lake," he said.

INCLUSIVE DECISIONS

The time factor imposed by the NGT could be an impediment for making inclusive decisions. "But in the long run, nothing will be done without taking villagers into confidence," Karnataka Lake Conservation and Development Authority chief executive G Vidya Sagar said. While the government's drive to arrest pollution could affect the livelihood of families that depend on the lake's water directly, small-scale industries located far away from the lake and seemingly disconnected from it are facing the ire. More than 10 km away is Cubbonpet, home to several of the city's dyeing units, mostly home-based and familyrun.

"How am I connected to the Bellandur lake," Anees Ahmad, 52, wants to know. He runs the Nabila Processes unit that his father started. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) has asked dyeing units like Ahmad's, which are located in the Bellandur catchment area, to stop functioning for the time being. Reason: The coloured water let out by them are discharged into drains in the Challaghatta valley, which end up in the Bellandur lake. "We will drink the coloured water to prove it is not a pollutant. How can colour water generate froth and foam? They should go after the big industries," said Ahmad, who said dyers like him earn ' 10,000 for every ' 1 lakh they invest.

That a faraway lake would hit his livelihood is the last thing he expected. "These are home-based units. They don't have the space to install effluent treatment plants. So we have asked them to collect all their effluents in a tank, which will be transported in tankers to our common effluent treatment plant on Tannery Road," KSPCB chairman Lakshman said.

The regulator has identified 488 industries in the catchment area that generate effluents. Eleven have been identified for closure and notices have been issued to 16 others, he added. The earliest mention of plans to conserve Bellandur lake dates back to the city's Master Plan of 1965. Five decades later, the lake seems to have received everything but conservation.

HEAVY METALS PRESENT IN WATER

Environmentalist AN Yellappa Reddy batted for complete de-weeding of the lake, even if that means clearing the grass. "The fodder is growing in polluted water, which is harmful for cows and the milk that they produce. We can't kill thousands of families for the sake of a hundred." Their livelihood can be safeguarded by allowing fodder to grow with treated water on the wetlands.

TV Ramachandra, senior scientific officer, IISc Centre for Ecological Sciences, too supported the case for wetland: "The plan is to have constructed wetlands on which they can grow the fodder they need. We are aware of their requirement. Tests show that the fodder contain heavy metals such as copper and cadmium. The presence of such heavy metals is harmful to health." As far as industries are concerned, complying with the law is a necessity, according to Namma Bengaluru Foundation chief executive Sridhar Pabbisetty.

"Urbanisation is an uncomfortable process and livelihood poses a serious challenge. The government has to play an essential role by classifying industries properly and aiding them to be compliant under the Environment Protection Act and the Water Act," he said.

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