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Worried about water bodies frothing up like Bellandur Lake? Check your detergent

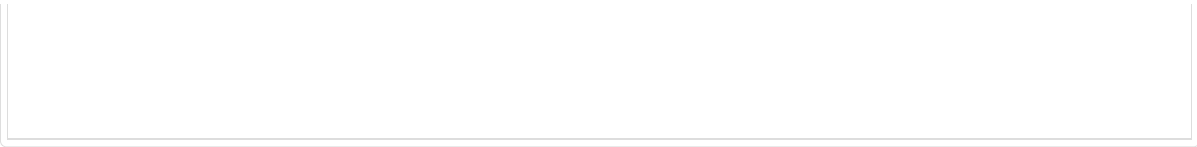
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Malavika Vyawahare
Hindustan Times, New Delhi





The foaming Bellandur lake has alarmed residents and environmentalists alike. (Kashif Masood / HT Photo)

The frothing of a lake is not to be taken lightly. Realising this, the National Green Tribunal on Wednesday shut down all industries around Bellandur Lake and imposed a fine of Rs 5 lakh on anybody found dumping waste in or around the water body.

This, however, was not some one-off freak show. Both Bellandur Lake and Varthur Lake, located in the outskirts of Bengaluru, have burst into froth on several occasions in the past decade.

Industrial pollution is only a part of the problem. Undertreated sewage, all 500 million litres of it, flows into Bellandur Lake very day. And that brings us to one of the main reasons behind the lake frothing – detergents.

India continues to use phosphate-infused detergents, although they have been banned in many other countries due to their polluting nature. While the government regulates the phosphate content in these consumer products (some would say poorly), it has shied away from completely banning it.

TV Ramachandra, a professor at the Indian Institute of Science-Bangalore, says the problem can be tackled through public awareness and the imposition of a ban on certain kinds of detergents.

The professor, who was part of an expert committee set up by the state government to look into frothing of lakes, said the ubiquity of washing machines in urban India and indiscriminate use of detergent by households have come together to turn Bellandur Lake into a foamy disaster. Incidentally, around 40% of 1,800 households surveyed in eastern Bengaluru (where the water body is located) were found to be using at least five kg of detergent in a month.

Many of the popular detergents used in India contain high levels of phosphate, Ramachandra said, adding that “while some firms do make phosphate-free detergent, it is usually exported”.

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The detergent market in India is worth an estimated Rs 20,000 crore, and growing. The three major players in this arena are Hindustan Unilever (HUL), Procter & Gamble (P&G) and the RSPL Group – a domestic manufacturer that produces Ghari detergent.

HUL, which owns Surf Excel, Rin and Wheel with a market share of nearly 40%, could not be contacted.

P&G, the multinational behind Tide, had stopped selling phosphate-infused detergents in the US after an outcry over the degradation of water bodies in the early 1990s. Since 2015, the company has been doing the same in India too.

To produce lather from hard water is – well – hard. Phosphates are used to soften hard water, enhancing the cleaning ability of the detergent. It was the availability of alternatives such as Zeolite, which manages to be environment-friendly without compromising on cleaning capacity, that allowed P&G to do away with phosphates altogether.

Consumer Voice, a consumer action group, tested 14 popular brands dominating the Indian market in 2015. It found that detergents like Henko Matic, Henko Stain Champion, Super Nirma Blue and Uni Wash contain phosphate in the range of 3.2-5.4%, making them the least eco-friendly products of the lot. While Ariel Matic was adjudged to be almost phosphate-free, the other nine brands contained limited quantities of the compound.

The numbers may vary, but it is clear that almost none of the detergents sold in India are devoid of phosphate. Not a single detergent brand displays the Ecomark label, which certifies a product as environment-friendly.

While phosphorus serves as a nutrient for plants, too much of it can choke up water bodies through algal blooms. In the absence of sunlight, the algae start consuming dissolved oxygen in the water. When they die, the decomposition process uses up oxygen too. In extreme cases, this leads to the formation of dead zones where marine organisms cannot survive.

There is another reason why using phosphate-free detergents may be a good idea. Phosphate, the mineral form of phosphorus, is a crucial resource that's found only in limited quantities across the world. While the chemical is largely used in fertilisers, it can be substituted with other eco-friendly compounds in detergents.

India, incidentally, is the largest importer of phosphorus compounds in the world. Former environment minister Prakash Javadekar had made some noises about making detergents phosphate-free in 2015, but nothing happened in the years that followed.

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