

## Can Bengaluru save its lakes?

Efforts taken by local civic authorities to save the dying lakes of Bengaluru have yielded little or no results



Local civic bodies in Bengaluru have served closure notices to industries located around Bellandur lake for releasing industrial effluents into the water body. Photo: AFP

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**Bengaluru:** The “lake city” of Bengaluru is facing an existential crisis with fast eroding water bodies and deficient rainfall causing acute drinking water shortage in recent times. But efforts so far by civic authorities have yielded little or no results to save its water bodies that are so critical to the city’s survival.

After the 19 April National Green Tribunal (NGT) ruling, local civic bodies in Bengaluru have initiated the process of inspecting over 400 industries located around the 800-acre Bellandur lake’s almost 300 square km catchment area and served closure notices to around 10 water-based industries (of the 97 identified) so far for releasing industrial effluents and sewage water, turning the once life-sustaining water body to a foaming toxic pool.

Experts say that local authorities’ apathy and continued misdirection in trying to resolve the polluting water bodies problem, critical for Bengaluru’s survival, has resulted in drastically reducing the number of lakes from around 700 a few decades ago to barely 200, which too are dismally maintained and are on the verge of disappearing.

“If there is (political) will, any lake can be rejuvenated in 18 months, if not even 100 years will not be enough,” said T.V.Ramachandra, head of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), who has served in the expert committees of rejuvenation programmes for various lakes, including Jakkur, Bellandur and Varthur.

Ramachandra said over 98% of lakes in the city are encroached upon and 90% have sewage water flowing into them, affecting fish and bird habitats, ground water and negating their purpose of being a drinking water source for the 500-year-old city, which has no river flowing within at least a 100 km radius.

He says all lakes combined in the city can hold 5 tmcft of water. Coupled with rain water harvesting, they have a potential of 15 tmcft, and can cater to Bengaluru’s 18-20 tmcft annual requirement of water, making the city self-sustainable and not be dependent on Cauvery river. The city’s taps are expected to run dry mid June due to deficient rainfall and rapidly decreasing water levels in major reservoirs of the state.

But current efforts by the local authorities are being termed an “eyewash” by environmentalists and groups rallying to protect the lake. “Conservation of lakes is the responsibility of the government and its agencies, they need to ensure that they don’t get directions from NGT,” Sridhar Pabbisetty, chief executive officer, Namma Bengaluru Foundation, a citizens rights group, said.

Government and civic body officials blame the degradation of lakes to the rapid and unplanned growth of the city.

Ramachandra, in his April 2017 report on Bellandur and Varthur lake, said that from 1973 to 2016, there has been a 1003% increase in concretisation of paved surfaces, 88% decline in vegetation, 79% decline in wetlands resulting in higher air pollutants, increasing temperature and sharp decline in groundwater table.

“Instead of treating waste water, it is released directly into *nalas* (drainage system) connecting to storm water drains which were meant to carry rain water into lakes,” a retired senior official told *Mint*, requesting not to be named as he continues to serve on various government boards. Bengaluru currently can treat only around 720 mld (million litres a day) of waste water as against the consumption of over 1,400 mld.

Chairman of the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) Lakshman, who goes by one name, said the involvement of multiple civic agencies in rejuvenation efforts, ownership of lakes, meddling of local politicians and mis-reporting air and water quality numbers by inspecting officials has exacerbated the problem in recent years.

The government has set up multiple expert committees to rejuvenate the lakes which in some cases can be counter-intuitive, experts said.

Ramachandra and the senior government official cited earlier agreed that such expert committees have a major role to play, but they can be effective only if it has the powers to implement the reports’ findings and recommendations.

Citing the example of Jakkur lake (in north Bengaluru), Ramachandra said the lake’s revival work was completed because the committee members were pro-active and people with expertise who identified the source of the problem and fixed it.

Even adoption of lakes, protests and vigilance by resident associations have failed to arrest the rapid degradation of lakes leaving little hope for a city that Lord Cornwallis in late the 1800s termed the “land of a thousand lakes”.