

## HOW CITIZEN ACTIVISM BROUGHT CITY'S BIG BUILDERS TO KNEES

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*Lakes invaded, Green Tribunal to the rescue*



*The land under the scanner*

The National Green Tribunal's damning verdict against Mantri TechZone Pvt Limited and Core Mind Software Services Pvt Limited, the two companies that mooted a Rs 2,300-crore Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project on the wetlands of Bellandur and Agara lakes, opens a new chapter in Bengaluru's citizen activism: It is a terrific story of how five civic-conscious citizens not only brought two powerful builder to their knees, but also exposed how governments have been contributing to catastrophes.

In fact, these Bangaloreans have, for the past three years, literally been focused on a single mission -- to save Bellandur Lake and its wetlands. They have been shooed away by officials and threatened by goons, but their resolve to protect Bengaluru's lakes from encroachers finally yielded result when the Tribunal ordered Mantri and Core Mind to pay Rs 117.35 crore and Rs 22.5 crore as compensation respectively for the "illegal and unauthorised" construction carried out in violation of the environmental laws.

The efforts of the five 'green warriors' should serve as a blueprint to protect city from greedy politicians, corrupt bureaucrats and land sharks. They recount their experiences with Mirror on the builder-official nexus that was posing a danger to the city's eco system:

It all started in 2012 when Rajendra Babu M, a civil engineer by profession, wondered why the excess rain water was not flowing through the storm water drains and was, instead, being thrown back into the lanes of Shrinivagilu, his neighbourhood. As the rains started pounding, he actually witnessed the reverse process and water started entering houses. A quick probe by him and his friends led to the startling revelation that the wetlands between ST lake and Bellandur were being levelled by a builder.

Speaking to Mirror, Babu, president of the Koramangala ST Bed Residents' Welfare Association said, "The reason for the storm water getting choked was construction activity around the Bellandur lake, one of the largest in the city. We were really worried and approached the builder as to what activities were being taken up, but there was hardly any response. Then, we had to approach the Bangalore Development Authority, but to our surprise we did not get an answer from them either. It was not just the water; we were also worried that the huge apartments in the vicinity could lead to chaotic roads."



Giving further insight into the issue, Muralidhara Rao, chairman of Praja Raag, an institution that petitioned the green tribunal, adds the development work was actually happening at the flood plains (a low lying wetland 10 to 15 feet from the road) of Bellandur lake. For years, it had remained the same, but slowly and systematically, some entities had started dumping debris on this flood plain land.

Recalling his experiences, Major (retired) Promod Kapur, 79, adds, "Now, our only route was to file an RTI and the reply that a huge building was to come up here was definitely shocking." The land had been allotted through Karnataka Industrial Area Development Board to a builder way back in 2007.

The entire wetland was being filled up with debris as a first step toward killing the Bellandur and neighbouring lakes. A total of 22 buildings were proposed to come up in the area. As of now, one building with three floors is being constructed. Since then, residents have been struggling to resolve the issue. "I was surprised when an official from the environment ministry blatantly told us nothing much could be done and, instead, it was time for us to support builders," recalls Major Kapur, adding that likeminded people in the locality, including resident associations, started pursuing the matter as the sight of the debris filling up the wetlands was horrifying. The activities were against nature and would prove disastrous, they knew.

As the residents started collecting documents, startling revelations started to emerge. Everything was illegal -- the government authorities had blatantly violated all environmental norms to facilitate the constructions. Meanwhile, the residents' associations approached the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), requesting them to carry out a detailed study on environmental implications of the project.

Prof Ramachandran of IISc carried out a thorough study and opined that such massive construction would prove disastrous for ecological balance of the area.

The study also elaborated on various other implications. Later, the matter reached the NGT's southern bench in Chennai in February 2014, said Nitin Seshadri, president of Koramangala third block residents' association, adding this was followed by a protest in April 2014.

Vijayan Menon, 60, a committee member of Citizen Activist Forum, exclaimed, "It is a fantastic judgment. However, this not an end, it is a direction toward change and the right direction has been shown. The judgement will send out a very strong message to the developer community who will now know they have to be careful before building on wetland or natural forest areas.

The next step would be to approach the state government and make sure that through this judgement not only this particular land, but also all lakes and wetlands in Bengaluru are protected. The aim of this fight was not to stop development but to protect the wetland. We will request the chief minister that the builders be given alternative dry land for development, and ensure wetlands are protected. The amount of support from various citizen organisations for our fight was commendable and shows the active involvement of citizens."

Kapur added there had been so much of hue and cry about lake encroachments, but wetlands had been ignored. "Without wetlands, where will the rain water seep in? If we don't take urgent measures, we should not be surprised if the entire Koramangala is flooded during heavy rainfall."

Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Chandrasekhar said he had also raised the matter in Parliament on Thursday and had demanded the Environment Ministry conduct an audit and review of all clearances and approvals to lakebeds and ecologically sensitive projects in Bengaluru on an urgent basis, to ensure no clearances and approvals have been given to these private projects on illegal or corrupt grounds.

The minister agreed to intervene and assured he would initiate immediate and strict action against officials who had been negligent, either by ensuring clearances without due diligence, or by failing to adequately monitor compliance.

In fact, more than six residents' welfare associations were part of the crusade and there have been instances when residents have come onto the roads and protested against the lake encroachment.

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