

Fire in the Lake Run Run, Run: The Burning Bellandur Lake – A Regular Embarrassment

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Introduction

Much has been said and written about Bellandur Lake which foams fumes and belches fire with notorious regularity. People living in front of the lake smell the fumes coming out of the lake every day. Despite the precautions, a massive fire broke out at the lake on January 19 over 50 acre area. The fire was so intense that it took nearly 24 hours for over 5000 personnel from the Indian army service corps and Fire Fighters to douse the flames. No sooner had the discussion on the river abated than we have headlines screaming of the fire raging in the Bellandur Lake in Bengaluru. The blaze started because of pollution in the water body worrying hundreds of nearby residents and creating untold damage to the environment with its poisonous smoke. On February 2 the fire in Bellandur lake returned to haunt the agencies responsible for maintaining the 750 acres of the severely polluted lake, a small fire started simmering some 20 meters away from the previous spot. This is the second time the lake has caught fire after the inferno raged on January 19th, similarly a small fire that broke on February 2nd started raging on in the evening by 5pm as a result of which fire engines were rushed to the spot. Meanwhile, the fire in the lake has also put some 99 apartment complexes in the dock.

Reasons for the Crisis and Its Impact

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has censured the Karnataka Government for failing to take any steps on the ground to check the incidents of fire in Bellandur Lake, the largest water body in Bengaluru. For the last three years, they were all saying that they have prepared an action plan, but nothing was submitted, the bench demanded an answer. The tribunal which is hearing the matter on its own directed the authorities to come up with a specific roadmap to protect the lake from such fires. The tribunal has issued a number of directions emphasising the need for removal of silt from the lake, treatment of municipal sewage which is going into the water body, closure of polluting industries, ban on dumping of municipal solid waste around the lake, penalty on apartment buildings in the area which are sending untreated sewage to the lake and an environmental fine of Rs 5 lakh on anyone found dumping waste in and around the lake.

From a source of drinking water until 1870s Bengaluru Lakes have become foaming, frothing cess pools that occasionally spit fires. Over the past 3 decades the number of lakes in the city has shrunk by 30% - from 285 in the early 1970s to just 194 in 2006.

Most of the lakes have vanished due to encroachment and construction activity for urban infrastructure expansion. The city once had 280-285 lakes of which 7 cannot be traced, 7 are reduced to small pools of water, 18 have been unauthorised encroached by slums and private parties, 14 have dried up and are leased out by the Government. 28 lakes have been used by the Bangalore Development Authority to distribute sites and build extensions for residential areas. The remaining lakes are in fairly advanced state of deterioration. "One of Kempegowda's titles was 'King of a thousand lakes', implying that Bengaluru was capable of taking care of drinking water needs of multiple cities of its own size". Today there are probably less than a hundred lakes in the city that still hold water. For a city that sources virtually all of its drinking water from distant districts, Bengaluru should be protective about its water resources. Instead, citizens- aided by Babus and Netas- are killing lakes letting rain water go down the drain and polluting ground water.

Fixing the Responsibility

The citizens cannot pass the responsibility to the authorities, saving a precious resource should be the main aim of every individual, and it should start at home. Some of the 99 apartments mandated to install sewage treatment plants (STPs) have the BWSSB's permission to let their sewage directly into lakes, the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board

learnt recently after the massive fire broke out on January 19. After 10 days that is on January 29, the National Green Tribunal ordered the KSPCB to direct 99 apartments to install their own sewage treatment plants. The apartments were seen as illegally discharging their sewage into the water bodies. The KSPCB also learnt that some apartments had taken permission from Gram Panchayats as they were part of 110 villages added to Bengaluru in 2007. These villages had no underground drainage lines or terminal STPs. Some apartments had already started installing sewage treatment plants after the tribunal's order came, other owners have sought more time to install sewage treatment plants, saying they have neither resources nor the provision to comply with the order. However, HRD Minister Prakash Javadekar said as former Union Minister of environment and forests; he had provided funds up to Rs.890 crore towards cleaning of lakes in the city, including Bellandur lake, which was frothing at that point of time. "However, the Karnataka government did not utilize the funds and the situation has now worsened".

Bengaluru city has an interconnectivity of 100 lakes, the state Government was serious about conserving these lakes nor used the resources to build a strong lake net work-(Reports say) The Report by the ministry of water resources states Karnataka has lost 14,918 water bodies' pollution and encroachments. Experts say that a good percentage of this is in Bengaluru. Multiple committees have pointed out a slew of cases about encroachments. Even the government has formed layouts on lakes. In cases where a lake is free of encroachment, it is polluted. The fires at Bellandur lake are one symptom of the malaise.

"The overexploitation of ground water resources is the warning that there will be major crisis by 2025 and people may have to be evacuated. Bengaluru heading for Day Zero as water crisis worsens. A water starved Bengaluru, it is believed might make matters worse as it is seen as edging towards a crisis of epic proportions. With natural water bodies becoming victims of concretization and rain water harvesting being a low priority, the tech capital's future appears grim in terms of meeting the water requirements of its one-crore plus people. In fact alarm bells rang loud to this effect when a BBC report, reportedly based on UN-endorsed projections, listed Bengaluru in the second position after Brazil's Sao Paulo among the second global cities that are likely to run off drinking water.

Bengaluru's lakes used to have a storage capacity of 35 tmcft of water in the year 1800, and the lakes had been interlinked in such a way that water was available throughout the year. Now a majority of the lakes have disappeared and the current storage capacity is now reduced to 2tmcft. Of this only 1.2tmc can be used because of massive siltation. When you are killing your natural resources of water supply, it will obviously create a scarcity drinking water. Consequently, Bengaluru had to face a harsh drinking water crisis in the past four summers. A lot could have been learnt and the situation could have been improved but there is no political determination and bureaucratic vision with regard to water for the city.

Lessons Learnt and Measures to betaken

Reacting to reports by BBC, which predict that Bengaluru will go the Cape Town (South Africa) way, when the state government is not providing a proper drainage line for all the sewage to flow, you will obviously see a lot of unwanted waste going into natural water bodies across the city, thereby leading to a water crisis. Despite, none of the 67 lakes and tanks in the city evaluated by the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board in December 2017 is fit for drinking or bathing. Only 46 of them were fit for propagation of wild life and fisheries, while 6 were fit for irrigation and industrial cooling. Only two could serve as a drinking water resource after undergoing conventional treatment and disinfection. Additionally, 13 of them were dry at the time of evaluation. The KSPCB tests water quality every month and the figures arrived at are an average of pollution levels from January to August for the year. "Sufficient water is available to meet requirements of all citizens provided water harvesting is undertaken", this requires rejuvenation of lakes and re-establishment of interconnectivity, harvesting of rain water (at decentralized levels), treatment and reuse of sewage". If 50% of all water that gets washed down storm water drains every year in Bengaluru is conserved, it

could cater to 17lakh citizens. Unless citizens revive lakes and protect existing ones, the city is bound to go dry sooner rather than later.

Conclusion

In what could be a major hit to all designers building their undertakings around lakes, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has conveyed a historic point judgment. The NGT judgment forces another cradle zone of 75 meters for lakes and wetlands which will be a no-development zone, instead of 30 meters of cushion prior. This will prevent every single new venture from getting built inside 75 meters of lakes, and will affect numerous current activities as well. The exertion of government so far has been responsive and contemptible, even after a few land stamp orders from high courts and suggestions from a few high power boards. Citizen gatherings are battling a back protect fight to spare lakes and the circumstance is alarming to the point that if the administration still does not take up lake revival at a war balance and in an organized way then the eventual fate of the city is damned. It is as yet conceivable to do it if every one of us can bring our voice up in help of the key requests that has been recognized by specialists from all NGOs and associations working for assurance of lakes.

The fire- spitting Bellandur lake once again brought into focus the plight of other water bodies like Varthur Lake, which are equally polluted. Residents hope that the National Green Tribunal's directive to state government to come up with a time bound action plan for both Agra and Varthur laketo change things on the ground. The tribunal also directed Karnataka State Pollution Control Board to maintain strict vigil with regard to industrial pollutants and effluents entering the three Lakes. There is no harm in giving attention to Bellandur Lake which is much bigger than Varthur Lake. We hope this move will lead better work on the ground. Short-term measures that need to be taken include harvesting of macro phytes, prevention of dumping of Debris and removal of encroachments. "The fire in the lake was a first-of-its-kind event in India. But this is a warning for every other city in the world which is developing,"