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Planet in Milky Way galaxy to be named after Bengaluru's 16 year old Sahithi

A minor planet somewhere in the Milky Way galaxy, many light years from Earth, will be called Sahithi Pingali.

Bharath Joshi | ET Bureau | Updated: June 07, 2017, 14:34 IST

A minor planet somewhere in the [Milky Way galaxy](#), many light years from Earth, will be called [Sahithi Pingali](#).

That is the name of a 16-year-old schoolgirl from Bengaluru, whose concern and work towards the city's polluted lakes have made her not only a star but a planet.

A minor planet will be named after Sahithi through the Ceres Connection programme run by the [MIT Lincoln Laboratory](#) and Society for Science and the Public. Fewer than 15,000 [people](#) in the world share the honour of having a minor planet named after them.

Sahithi Pingali won three special awards in addition to a second prize in the Earth and Environmental Sciences category at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair ISEF at Los Angeles. The awards were for an app-based system which she developed to monitor water bodies.

"Over 90% of our lakes are sewage-fed. What makes the issue worse is that there isn't enough monitoring," Sahithi, a student at Inventure Academy, told ET in an email interview. She is pursuing a summer internship at the University of Michigan's Environmental & Water Resources Engineering Centre.

Her app allows people to easily gather water testing data and understand it. The mobile-based kit works with electronic sensors and test strips to let the user collect physical and chemical parameters of a water sample. A colour recognition and mapping software built into the app captures the colour of the test strip to indicate the extent of contamination in water. This crowd-sourced data is then uploaded onto a cloud platform. She calls it a water health map.

Eldest among three sisters, Pingali was born in the US before her family moved to Bengaluru eight years ago. "I think the contrast between those two settings made me extra aware of the problems -our cities are literally dying, sucked dry and choked with pollution." Her project required her to pick up new skill sets such as programming and electronics, besides familiarity with colour science and water chemistry.

Her father Gopal Pingali, vice president and distinguished engineer at IBM Global Technology Services Labs, said she found mentors on her own, including IISc ecologist TV Ramachandra and Shiv Shankar from

Whitefield Rising. "No one in the family has achieved something like this to make the country proud. She's put our name in the sky," the father said.

At ISEF last month, Sahithi was up against 1,700 participants from across the world. She says she was lucky when Stanford scientist Manu Prakash advised her to share her work with others so it could grow beyond what she has done alone.

While she aspires to pursue science or engineering in one of the world's best institutions, Sahithi wants her work to be "constantly motivated by social needs, particularly in developing countries and disadvantaged populations."

Sahithi is brainstorming a new environment project, which she says is related to water. Meanwhile, the idea of a planet being named after her is yet to sink in. "I don't think it ever will. It's completely unreal that I've been gifted something so huge and permanent."