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Soon, detergent packs may have to disclose phosphorous content

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BENGALURU: The Union ministry of environment, forest and climate change has turned its attention to the issue of phosphorous content in detergents, laundry bars and industrial cleaners. This comes in the wake of research showing phosphorous is the prime cause for proliferating waterweeds and depletion of oxygen in waterbodies such as Bellandur Lake.

The ministry has sought inputs from the Central Pollution Control Board and other stakeholders in this regard. It has also requested the Bureau of Indian Standards and Central Drugs Standard Control Organization to look into phosphate content in detergents and appropriate labelling of detergent packets.

Lake activists hope the ministry's intervention will ensure transparency, by getting detergent manufacturers to specify the quantum of phosphorus content on the packets.

The ministry has outlined the measures it has taken in a letter to Bengaluru Central MP P C Mohan, who had urged it to ban phosphorous in detergents. TOI has copies of Mohan's letter to the ministry and Union minister Harsh Vardhan's response to the same.

"In my letter, I had cited from a study by IISc. Phosphorus is damaging our waterbodies. In my constituency, Bellandur, Varthur and Rampura lakes, which form a valley system, have been frothing and foaming for years now. Not just sewage, we also have to prevent entry of phosphorus into these waterbodies. I am glad the ministry has taken up the matter," he said, adding there was an urgent need to educate industries and put a cap of 2.2% on phosphorous content in every bottle and sachet of detergent and cleaning agent. T V Ramachandra and his colleagues from the centre for ecological sciences department, Indian Institute of Science, conducted several studies on the factors leading to pollution of waterbodies.

"Why waste money on phosphate when there can be alternatives? It should be banned immediately. From Yamuna to Bellandur, our waterbodies are frothing. But no government official is willing to accept this fact, despite there being scientific evidence. Instead, officials argue that the froth is because of filamentous bacteria. However, even these bacteria would need food to survive and they consume carbon and phosphates present in the lake. It's said that the same industries produce detergents without phosphorus for exporting, as phosphorus is banned in some western countries. However, in India, they sell detergents with phosphorus content," said Ramachandra.

The ministry's move has inspired hope in many who are working to save the lake ecology. "We hope this will be taken to its logical conclusion. The issue was discussed with the Parliament's standing committee on Urban development when the team visited Bellandur," said Elangovan K, member, Whitefield Rising.

"The ministry for environment, forest and climate change should also write to the ministry of chemicals, fertilizers and ministry of consumer affairs. Phosphorus helps in growth of algae and hyacinth and indirectly leads to foaming," said Almitra Patel, solid waste management expert.