

**THEWEEK**

# No smoke without fire

By Vinod Rai | From issue dated February 04, 2018

We have been drawing attention to and expressing concern for the gross neglect and irreparable degradation of India's water bodies, in these columns. The most classic area of neglect is the Ganga river, on which thousands of crores have been spent, and yet, there does not seem to be any perceptible improvement. 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. Let alone the city's fire service, it was reported that about 5,000 army personnel were deployed over two days to douse the fire.

Meanwhile, there was another news report that some ministers from Karnataka have submitted a proposal to the prime minister's office to make Bengaluru the country's second capital, on the ground that it was safe from natural calamities and attacks from external forces and would "help in the deeper integration of south India". A rational proposal, but it does not say how the government has augmented the infrastructure of the city in terms of roads, power, solid waste disposal, water, traffic, public transport, security of women, behaving a capital city. These are issues that need to be evaluated when deciding which city is 'citizen friendly'. Anyway, that aside, let us see how difficult it is for a state administration to actually block sources of pollution to the lake, and then go about in a scientific manner to clean the pollutants already in the water.

A study by the Indian Institute of Science has disclosed that the toxic foam emanating from the lake is carcinogenic and is caused by "sustained inflow of untreated sewage and industrial effluents". The lake reportedly receives 500 million litres of sewage a day, and the froth is a consequence of the detergents used by households. What is most distressing, and where the role of the government is found to be woefully inadequate, is that 90 to 95 per cent of the waste dumped into the lake is domestic waste, as per the state pollution control board. The study also reveals that the sewage finding its way into the lake also contains variable amounts of heavy metals, which leads to increase in the metallic concentration in the soil and vegetation. Citizens and the National Green Tribunal have repeatedly faulted the government and the civic body for this gross neglect.

Further enquiries reveal that the deficiency is of insufficient capacity of sewage treatment plants and the improper functioning of existing plants. There has been constant bickering between the Bengaluru Development Authority (BDA) and the Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), as the former refuses to take up the work of rejuvenation unless

the latter ensures that sewage water does not enter the lake.

Is it really so simple? A whole city is held ransom by these bickering agencies, with the government looking on helplessly. It speaks volumes of how we govern our country and how cheaply we treat the lives of our citizens.

A solution can emerge only if citizens force the government to clean up. Residents need to form vigilante bodies to force polluting industries to block inflow into the lake. They need to make the provision of adequate finances for STPs an election issue and force the government to set up a body to coordinate the BDA's and BWSSB's efforts to clean up. If the government delivers on this, they would justify the proposal to make Bengaluru the second capital of India.

Former comptroller and auditor general, Rai is head of the Supreme Court-appointed BCCI's Committee of Administrators.