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Once copious, Bengaluru's lakes left out to dry, die

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BENGALURU: From a source of drinking water until the 1870s, Bengaluru's lakes have become foaming, frothing cesspools that occasionally spit fire. Over the past three decades, the number of lakes in the city has shrunk by 30% — from 285 in the early 1970s to just 194 in 2006.

"One of Kempegowda's titles was 'King of a thousand lakes', implying that Bengaluru was capable of taking care of the water needs of multiple cities of its own size," Ramprasad, convener of Friends of Lakes, said. "Today, there are probably less than a 100 lakes in the city that still hold water. The problem is that lake rejuvenation and conservation policies are not being implemented properly."

None of the 67 lakes and tanks in the city evaluated by the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board in December last year are fit for drinking or bathing. Only 46 of them were fit for propagation of wildlife and fisheries, while six 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.

According to an IISc paper in 2006, the storage capacity of lakes in Bengaluru has reduced from 35 TMC (Thousand Million Cubic feet) in the 1800s to five TMC in 2016. Of this only 1.2 TMC can be used because of massive siltation. "Sufficient water is available to meet requirements of all citizens provided water harvesting is undertaken," the paper reads. "This requires rejuvenation of lakes and re-establishment of interconnectivity; harvesting of rainwater (at decentralised levels), treatment and reuse of sewage."

KC Subhash Chandra, hydrogeologist and former expert member of the Karnataka Groundwater Authority, said, "If 50% of all water that gets washed down stormwater drains every year in Bengaluru is conserved, it could cater to 17 lakh citizens."

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To reverse the prediction that Bengaluru could run dry, two things are imperative: The obvious one is to harvest every drop of water. Second, the city needs to be decongested through satellite cities since water use increases with population. Think of the number of private vehicles alone that are washed every day. It's ironic that the city is struggling to meet demands for drinking water since it receives a fair share of rain. But citizens cannot pass the buck to the authorities. Saving a precious resource is the responsibility of every individual, and it should start at home.