

# POINT BLANK

## Lake control, a deadly twist

Abolishing Lake Conservation & Development Authority will be disastrous as lakes will now be dubbed tanks and outside NGT's jurisdiction

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**P**ushed to the very brink, Bengaluru's once voluminous lake system is today crying out for a massive conservation effort. It has taken an unprecedented citizen activism to draw attention to our polluted, encroached, toxic, frothing lakes. Yet, through an amendment to the Tank Development Act, an officially sanctioned plan is on to undo whatever little has been achieved so far.

The Governor Vajubhai Ruadabhai Vala's green signal to the amendment spells the premature death of the Karnataka Lake Conservation and Development Authority (KLCDA). Constituted in 2016, the Authority had triggered a small yet determined push to rejuvenate and reclaim a few of the city's dying lakes.

Partnering with citizen groups and local communities, the Authority was on the right track. Lake activism was finally gaining its much deserved traction. But by bringing all the city lakes under the



Karnataka Tank Conservation and Development Authority (KTCDA), the government has effectively put the Minor Irrigation Department in charge.

#### Retrograde move

Lake conservationists, scientists and citizen groups are unanimous in their reaction to this move: Retro-

grade. "This is an intelligent way to mismanage so that all the urban lakes come to land sharks. The lakes were earlier with the Minor Irrigation department. The water bodies were taken away from the department due to its inefficiency. It just doesn't have the expertise," says Dr T V Ramachandra from the

Indian Institute of Science.

The amendment was passed in a clearly undemocratic manner in the State Assembly, he points out. "This decision was taken without the majority. The intention is mainly to loot the resources. The Minor Irrigation Department has no concern for conservation. The governor should have taken

expert opinion. This is a disastrous decision," notes Dr Ramachandra.

#### Reality check

To understand how the department works with lakes, a DH team visited Bellandur Ammanikere, the spot where a Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) is being built by BWSSB. Under a Minor Irrigation department project, treated water from this plant and the Koramangala-Chalaghatta Valley STP will be taken by pipeline to Kolar and Chickaballapur.

A road built by the department to aid the pipeline project has taken over much of the Rajakaluve, the critical canal linking Bellandur lake with Varthur lake. Much of this canal now stands filled with construction debris and mud. Adjacent to the STP, the canal width has been reduced to a few feet. This virtual strangulation spells imminent death for Varthur lake, as the Rajakaluve is the only way for water flowing out of Bellandur lake to reach the water body downstream.

time?" wonders WR member Nitya Ramakrishnan.

#### Lakes as tanks

By shifting control of the lakes to KTCDA, she says the lakes will now be considered as tanks. "Rulings of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) will now not apply. There is a dramatic difference. If lakes under KLCDA are encroached, there were criminal and punitive actions. This goes away when they come under KTCDA," she explains.

Active citizen's engagement could be another casualty of the shift. Take for instance, the recent frothing of the Varthur lake. A vigilant Whitefield Rising has kept the authorities on their toes by highlighting the development through different channels. Explains another WR member, Pravir Bagrodia: "Whenever it rains, the froth returns within two days. This is a byproduct of the contamination that has been going on. The scenario is worsening day by day."



Thanks to vigilant citizen activism, blatant encroachments and frothing incidents attract media attention. When it rains, the Varthur lake starts frothing within two days. Once Karnataka State Tank Development Authority (KSTDA) takes over city lakes, such citizen activism may not be entertained.



The Minor Irrigation department specialises at a different level. It lacks the capacity to handle real problems such as the sewage flow into the lake, encroachment by real estate developers, and solid waste management and debris dumping into the lake.

Minor Irrigation Department officials insist that local bodies such as BBMP and BDA will remain custodians of city lakes. According to BBMP data, the Palike has custody of 60 lakes, BDA has 123, KLCDA has four, Forest Department has five and Minor Irrigation has 18 lakes. However, only 34 are recognized as live lakes.



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#### Poor track record

It is now alleged that the KLCDA's objection to this road was what triggered the move to dilute and eventually kill the institution. Dr Ramachandra reminds that it was during the minor irrigation department's control that the problems of Varthur and Bellandur lakes worsened.

Unless there is a widespread campaign to restore its status, the KLCDA is practically finished. Its Chief Executive Officer, Seema Garg says the Authority now does not even exist technically as the KLCDA Act itself stands repealed. "We are waiting for a formal government order. Only the handing over process has to happen," she informs.

#### KLCDA's citizen connect

This is a sad end for an institution that had made that rare connection with the citizenry. The Authority had attended to over 100 lakes-related complaints since its inception. A Detailed Project Report (DPR) for rejuvenation of four lakes was being examined by technical panels. On its immediate agenda were the Nagawara, Hebbal, Agara and KR Puram lakes. The Agara lake was cleaned up and rejuvenated recently.

Spearheading the campaign for the rejuvenation of Varthur lake, the Whitefield Rising (WR) members acknowledge the Authority's work. "KLCDA was progressing towards some kind of meaningful ownership of all lakes in this area. It had given blanket approval for the lake's rejuvenation through public-private partnership. A DPR was recently submitted. Now with the new authority, DPR approval will be tough. Imagine going to KTCDA, a body which oversees 3,600 water bodies across the State. Do you think they will have the



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#### Ownership confusion

Minor Irrigation Department officials insist that local bodies such as the Bruhath Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) and Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) will remain the custodians of the city lakes. But there is no clarity on this. Says MA Khan, chairperson of the Varthur-based KK School, "Till last year, they said the lake was under BDA. Now we hear it is with Minor Irrigation. Every year, they seem to be changing ownership."

The revenue department, says Dr Ramachandra, is the actual owner of the lakes. Ultimately, he adds, this fragmented governance will optimise the gains for the bureaucracy. Therein lies the tragedy with a deliberate, mischievous twist.

**Rasheed Kappan**