



Death knell for citizen-led lake governance

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Bengaluru has become a bit notorious globally as videos of Bellandur lake catching fire and its froth blocking roads over the past couple of years have gone viral. But Bengaluru's lakes are also famous for another reason: the enormous citizen activism that has led to the protection, rejuvenation and beautification of many of its lakes, and the continued citizen efforts to save and revive the remaining ones.

While Hebbal highlights citizen resistance to lake privatisation, lakes such as Kaikondrahalli, Puttenahalli and Jakkur have become success stories of partnerships between the municipal government and local citizen groups, where the former contributes resources and the latter contributes location-specific ideas, awareness building and monitoring.

Unfortunately, the state government seems bent on destroying this slow progress towards decentralised and democratic environmental governance. Last week, it announced that all of Bengaluru's lakes would be handed over to the Minor Irrigation Department (MID). This move comes barely a year after more than 100

lakes were transferred from Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) to Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the urban local body.

This volte face has been justified on the grounds that “neither BBMP nor BDA have funds and manpower to maintain all the lakes” and that “the Minor Irrigation Department is in a better position because it handles water bodies all over Karnataka”. But in fact, the transfer to MID is neither legally tenable nor practically beneficial.

Principles of decentralised governance tell us that one should not centralise those activities that can normally be handled at the lower level. Devolution of power to local elected bodies will result in governance that is more transparent and responsive to local needs and conditions. Local bodies, in turn, can use various methods such as ward committees and MoUs with citizen groups to further enable citizen participation.

This not only strengthens democracy, but it also makes governance more effective, because communities can deploy their localised knowledge and monitoring abilities in the planning, design and implementation of any activity. This is the core logic behind the 73rd and 74th amendments to our Constitution and the recent high court



order requiring setting up of ward committees. The right to manage local water bodies for providing locals environmental amenities and functions is partly the right of local bodies. Handing over lakes from a municipal body to a state-level agency violates this principle.

The governments often justify not devolving control over environmental resources such as forests and water by pointing out that these resources have off-site or downstream stakeholders too. But devolution is never unfettered. In the case of lakes, laws such as the Wildlife Act, the Water Act and orders of inter-state water disputes tribunal will continue to apply. As

long as lakes are managed in conformity with these regulations or standards, the interests of offsite/downstream stakeholders will be protected.

Mismatched skills

It is true that almost all the “lakes” in Bengaluru were originally irrigation tanks, and the MID is the government department that manages these tanks. But even the MID has struggled to maintain these tanks and attempts were made to devolve their management to panchayats.

But more importantly, Bengaluru's lakes do not function as irrigation tanks anymore—they provide environmental amenities, recreation, recharge and possible repositories for treated sewage. The MID has no familiarity with or skills required for this multi-functional management.

Indeed, once the lake bunds and walkways have been rebuilt, their management does not require major engineering skills nor huge resources. It requires first of all people skills and simple green space management, like in BBMP parks. The BBMP's lakes wing had demonstrated some of these skills. And by entering into MoUs with citizen groups, BBMP has harnessed their skills and ensured that those lakes are

managed as per the citizens' needs.

Secondly, lakes often dry up because the storm water drains (SWDs) that bring water to the lake are choked or encroached. So protecting lakes requires control over solid waste disposal and encroachments, which only BBMP has.

Thirdly, the bigger problem with Bengaluru's lakes is that the SWDs carry untreated sewage and also that the Bangalore Water Supply & Sewerage Board (BWSSB) allows several sewers to empty directly into lakes or rivers.

Solving this problem requires a say in how BWSSB manages sewage. Treated sewage can be a boon to lakes that do not get enough storm runoff, but this is also currently in BWSSB's jurisdiction. The MID can do no better than BBMP in terms of influencing BWSSB.

Indeed, Bengaluru's lakes are already managed by too many different agencies. The catchment and SWDs are managed by BBMP, the sewage by BWSSB, the fish are owned by the Fisheries Department, while the Karnataka Lake Conservation and Development Authority is still trying to figure out its role.

No wonder the government had to set up a Monitoring Committee to coordinate the

actions of BWSSB, BBMP and other agencies to address Bellandur Lake's problems. How will bringing in the MID help?

In fact, it is possible that a state agency like MID may have different interests from those of Bengaluru's citizens. There are already plans to transport Bengaluru's treated sewage to irrigation tanks in Kolar and Chikkaballapura, where groundwater levels have dropped precipitously due to over-pumping.

While Bangaloreans may want to reuse the water stored in their lakes, MID may want to address its rural constituency, resulting in a conflict of interest. Bengaluru's lakes, like its parks, water and sewage, must be managed by Bangaloreans in as participatory a manner as possible, within the limits of existing environmental and water-sharing regulations.

The best way that the state government can help matters today is by keeping the lakes with BBMP, providing more lake-specific resources to BBMP, continuing to encourage citizen engagement and ensuring that BWSSB is more transparent, accountable and cooperative in its handling of sewage and treated water.

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