

‘A SINGLE, POWERFUL AUTHORITY ALONE CAN SAVE OUR LAKES’

Interview given to Deccan Herald by Mr. Zafar Futehally, published on April 14, 2011

That sewage has been polluting Bangalore’s lakes is a fact we have learned to live with. But now the Comptroller and Auditor General’s report has listed this callousness as leading to one of the more serious environmental hazards. It has exposed the ineffective identification and inspection of polluting industries by the Karnataka Pollution Control Board, many of such industries operating very close to the city’s water catchment areas.

On paper, Bangalore still has 386 lakes left, even if the status of 121 lakes is unknown. Up to 100 lakes have disappeared as they have been converted to various urban uses including bus stations, roads, layouts, garbage dumps, truck stands, etc.

Between toxic effluents and encroachments, the lakes of Bangalore were all set for a choking end. Luckily the high court of Karnataka has intervened in response to a PIL and accepted the recommendations of an experts committee it had constituted to study the city’s lakes. And now we have the CAG report that calls for a comprehensive plan to tackle the pollution.

In an interview with **Harsh Kumar**, the founder member of Bangalore Environment Trust, and reputed ornithologist, **Zafar Futehally**, talks about the city’s dying lakes and what it needs to breathe a fresh lease of life into them.

What do you think is the need of the hour?

It is encouraging that the high court appointed experts’ committee has come out with some good recommendations regarding the sewage and effluent problems. These have to be addressed before any lake conservation or restoration activity is undertaken. However, if any of the recommendations have to be carried out in earnest, there is need for a single authority to be in charge of our lakes instead of the multifarious bodies ranging from minor irrigation department to the BBMP. Logistically, it must be left to the Lake Development Authority, but this has to be a body with a permanent chairman who is both a technocrat and an administrator.

How can we address the serious effluents issue?

The effluents issue has been a serious one with discharge nearly tripling from 2007 to 2010. Much of this increase has come from the mushrooming of small industrial units which cannot afford a treatment plant. Given the sporadic inspection by the pollution control board, effluents are easily transported and dumped into water bodies. A better idea for the small units would be to come together and establish a treatment plant. The board has come up with this suggestion earlier but there have been few takers. Strict monitoring and penalty alone can stem the rot flowing into the lakes.

How will privatization of lakes impact the development?

The lease agreements were entered into by the Lake Development Authority for privatization, control and management of four lakes in Bangalore. Hebbal lake (Oberoi Hotel group), Nagavara (Lumbini group), Vengaiankere (Par-C group) and Agara (Biota). Some leases incorporated extraordinary terms leading to their creation of amusement parks. Having an oil-leaking launch sailing the waters is surely no act of lake conservation!

However not all the above cases can be dismissed. In the case of the Hebbal lake, the initial contract signed with the Oberois in August 2006 included the creation of a floating restaurant in the middle of the lake. But we were able to reason with the Oberois on the anti-ecological aspects of this and the plans were given up. The soup bowl approach at the lake has augmented storage by 35 per cent, the fisher folk continue to fish and the harvest has increased in the last two years and the public has access to the area too! This is proof of how private public partnerships can work well. It does not matter who executes the project. What matters is a powerful LDA.

Regarding the restoration of lakes, there seems to be some differences on the approach...

From a conservationist point of view, there has been much debate on whether to opt for the 'soup bowl' approach which essentially means deep lakes, as against shallow lakes bordered by grassy meadows that allow grazing, fishing and easy access. Our catchments are no longer open meadows and hillocks! Our bathrooms and sinks are our catchments from where the water has to be collected and recycled. Yes, the soup bowl will lead to the disappearance of smaller species of waders from the wetlands, but that's the price we pay for our hasty planning.

How significant are the lakes in an expanding city?

They are very significant. It would do well to remember that until 1974 Bangalore did not have water from the Cauvery, but relied purely on its tanks and lakes. However the population was then 2.3 million. It is now over 9 million and by 2015 will touch 10 million. Even the last phase of the Cauvery water supply scheme will not be able to take on these numbers for too long. It is very important to revive and sustain all the water bodies in order to augment the Cauvery water supply.