

Citizens revive Puttenahalli Lake

Author - Shyama Krishna Kumar, Published on - 25.9.2014



Old men on their power walks, children exercising, women meditating under a canopy, couples surreptitiously exchanging glances, a security guard making her morning rounds, birds bathing in pristine waters - these are sights one can enjoy as one step into the Puttenahalli Lake premises.

Life and decline

One of the recent success stories to emerge from the horror show that is the lakes of Bangalore, the Puttenahalli Lake is located in BBMP ward 187 between two residential apartment enclaves - Brigade Millennium and L&T South City. Puttenahalli Lake is the smallest of the three lakes in J P Nagar 7th Phase area in south Bangalore, the other two being Jarganahalli Lake and Chunchaghatta Lake. It has a recorded area of 13 acres 25 guntas with a perimeter of 1.1 km (measured walking track perimeter 920 m).

The lake, once a source of drinking water, was rendered unusable after developmental and infrastructural activity, encroachment by slum dwellers, indiscriminate dumping of debris and garbage and inflow of sewage, took its toll a few years ago.

"I have been living in this area for almost six years now. Earlier, I used to find it difficult to just walk by this lake, since all the sewage from the nearby areas used to collect there and garbage was also disposed into the lake, without a second thought," says Manoj Narayan, a resident of Brigade Millennium.

Restoration process

The lake's restoration process began around 2008, when Usha Rajagopalan, who had recently moved in the vicinity, noticed the terrible state of the lake and decided to start the 'Save the Lakes' initiative and consequently set up the Puttenahalli Neighbourhood Lake Improvement Trust (PNLIT).

The Trust intended to ensure that no sewage or pollutants are let in, rain water from all possible sources is diverted into the lake and that the lake is transformed into a secure avian habitat such that it encourages citizen participation in the restoration of other lakes in the city as well. "It's a learning curve, really. None of us is an environmentalist. We just want to change the condition of these lakes," says Usha.

Following the restoration, about 62 different species of birds can now be found at the lake, and about 15 species of butterflies have arrived here because of the various shrubs that have been planted especially to attract them. The lake also has a special track around the lake for joggers and walkers, and every few metres dustbins have been placed. More than 300 trees have been planted along the lake and a small canopy has been built for people to congregate at.

"Ever since I've moved to J P Nagar a couple of years ago, I've been coming to this lake everyday for my exercise. Over the last two years, I've noticed a gradual improvement. Earlier there were very few trees and the lake was completely dry. I think the people's initiative has worked. There are even security guards now. There have been instances of people getting drunk here post midnight and creating havoc. This has now stopped," says Rajshekhkar G, a resident of J P Nagar, 7th Phase.

Rainwater harvesting

The Trust got the BWSSB to divert sewage water entering the lake into an underground drain. They also got a diversion channel built through the Brigade Millenium Avenue Road to ensure inflow of monsoon run off. "After this year's rains, 50 per cent of the lake was filled by the water that flowed down the diversion channel," informs Usha, proudly. Finally in May 2011, PNLIT signed an MoU with the BBMP and became the first citizens' group in the city to officially maintain a lake.

Encroachment

The lake's biggest problem right now is encroachment on the lake bund by slum dwellers. "This is a problem common to most lakes and requires government support and also political will to tackle it," says Usha. In 2008, the district commissioner and the tahsildar were alerted to the problem. By mid 2009, two and a half acres in Bettadasanapura, Electronics City was allocated for resettlement of these slum dwellers. However, the revenue department has taken no step since to move forward , despite continued requests from the Trust, as well as the BBMP.

BBMP involvement

"We want to involve the citizens in a big way, when it comes to restoring lakes. What we've noticed is that wherever lakes have been entrusted to the people, those lakes are seeing huge levels of improvement, like the Puttenahalli lake. While they look after the cleanliness, gardening and other activities, we take care of any major repairs that need to be done and also provide for security", says B V Satish, chief engineer (Lakes), BBMP.

He also maintains that the BBMP has written several letters to the tahsildar regarding encroachment, but the response has been slow.

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