New lease of life for city lakes

- M.A. Siraj

A single window arrangement for their conservation raises hopes. By M.A. Siraj

Hopes of seeing lakes brimming with fresh water and abundant aquatic life in Bengaluru and elsewhere in the State have received a new lease of life. The authorities have initiated measures to rid the lakes of sewage, erect fences around them, remove encroachments, demolish structures in the buffer zone and endow their surroundings with parks, gardens, glades and orchards and all that could offer a visual feast.

Saying no to privatisation, the Karnataka government has unveiled a new policy of partnership with corporate, NGOs and other interested groups, for development and conservation of lakes. Armed with the new Act, the Karnataka Lake Conservation and Development Authority (KLCDA) has begun signing MoU with corporates to rejuvenate these bodies. As a first step, six Bengaluru-based companies signed MoUs with the KLCDA to adopt six lakes in the city earlier this week (at the “Bring Back the Lakes” workshop on Monday, June 13).

The new measures are a brainchild of Karnataka Knowledge Commission headed by K. Kasturirangan which suggested creation of biodiversity parks along and around water bodies, given the challenges of urban growth all across Karnataka.

Multiplicity of ownership and management authorities had deflected all previous well-meaning initiatives to rejuvenate the nearly 400 lakes in the newly expanded 800 sq. km. area of the city. Several agencies worked at cross purposes and nullified the effort. The authorities woke up from slumber when Bellandur lake spewed toxic foams and fish-kills were reported from Ulsoor and Devarabeesanahalli lakes in recent months. The BBMP has 109 lakes under its custody, BDA 92, Karnataka Forest Department five and Karnataka Lake Development Authority (now KLCDA) four lakes.

Sewage, the major villain

Miller Tank (opposite the Cantonment Railway Station) was the source of drinking water for the Cantonment area till some six decades ago. Today it harbours offices and headquarters of several sport bodies, NGOs and community organisations. The Kempambudhi Tank reflected the lights of the Bangalore City Station during nights till the early 1980s when it began to be turned into the KSRTC bus stand. Hockey ground, Kanteerava Stadium, Sampangiramnagar locality, Koramangala all came up on what were water bodies. Residents around Puttenahalli (near Yelahanka) and Chikkabanavara Lake on the city’s periphery are still having avian guests perennially but rue that
prospects of their visiting are getting dimmer by the years as sewage is ruining the ecosystem around them.

The Tippagondanahalli and Hessarghatta reservoirs that were constructed as sources of drinking water for Bengaluru by Sir M. Visvesvaraya now collect water which is not fit for drinking. The city had a north to south draining pattern and rajakaluves linked lakes and water bodies that dotted the ridge on which the city is perched. But these arteries for carrying water were either encroached or practically turned into gutters with outwash from industries, markets, foundries and abattoirs flowing into them unchecked. They push sewage into the downstream lakes and fish-kills happen.

The water bodies have been facing two major challenges, i.e., encroachment by land mafia and inflow of sewage. The city residents receive 1,470 million litres per day (MLD) of water supplied by the BWSSB. Another 250 MLD is drawn from the borewells. Eighty per cent of this water has to return to nature as wastewater. Of this, only 50 per cent gets treated by the Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs). The BWSSB has only 14 STPs which function at 80% of their capacity and treat only 721 MLD of water. But under the new arrangement, the BWSSB assures that 75 new STPs under construction would enhance the capacity of the Board to treat 1,776 MLD of wastewater by 2022.

While the ownership pattern of lakes would not undergo any substantial change, the KLCDA would act as the single window agency to work out arrangements for conservation and development of these lakes. The MoU with private partners would be a tripartite agreement between the private partners, BBMP (or BDA, or Forest Department or whoever is the current owner) and the KLCDA. The 2014 Act also provides for appointment of Lake Wardens (just as traffic wardens), and ‘statutory officers’, ‘designated officers’ and ‘empowered officers’ for the protection and management of lakes. It empowers them to detect and remove encroachment, erect fences, demolish buildings in buffer zones and report polluters and initiate action against them and diversion of sewage to STPs.

**Water sustainability**

Work has been taken up to develop the 250-acre Madiwala Lake into a biodiversity park. Mr. Kasturirangan says it may take three to four years for noticeable changes to appear in the ecosystem of the Lake. The Forest Department, which owns Hennur Lake, is bringing up a dense forest and three artificial ponds around it. The department is trying to rejuvenate the 32-acre Puttenahalli Lake (near Yelahanka) into a birders’ paradise. It has created two islands in the lake for birds to perch. However, the major challenge is to revive the STP which ceased functioning long ago.

The BBMP is developing 55 of the 109 tanks under its custody. The Revenue Department has marked their boundaries and idol immersion tanks have been constructed. Hariprasad Hegde, Head-Water Task Force of the CII, suggests that the KLCDA should put up a list of opportunities for investment on its website with regard to the city lakes and water bodies. Ravi Raghavan, Chairman, CII, Karnataka, says if the State has to maintain itself as an attractive destination for investment, it has to realise that investment is linked to water sustainability.