Fire in Bellandur Lake

What is the issue?

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- Bellandur Lake in Bengaluru again saw a major fire.
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- The lake exemplifies the larger woes that plague our urban clusters.
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What is the status of Bellandur Lake?

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- Spread over 906 acres in south-eastern Bengaluru, Bellandur Lake is the city’s largest lake with a catchment area of nearly 279 sq km.
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- It is one of the 70 lakes that survived from the 272 lakes that existed in and around Bengaluru four decades ago.
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- Until the Eighties, the lake was a vibrant ecosystem that nurtured a variety of birds, fish and insects, and a popular picnicking, boating and fishing site.
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- The dramatic growth of Bengaluru over the last two decades has led to massive amounts of domestic and industrial waste flowing into the lake.
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- Encroachments of over 90% of its catchment area by settlements, and the dumping of garbage on its shores, have throttled the flow of water into it.
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- All this has rendered the lake highly polluted and killed its biodiversity over time due the insane levels of toxicity.
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- The lake’s water is currently unusable even for irrigation, and the lake’s surface is infamous for gigantic froth clouds that cover its entire surface.
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- Often, froth also spills over into the many busy roads that skirt its shores.
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What caused the current fire?

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- Recently there was a massive fire that ranged over a 5 acre area of the lake for several hours and required over 5000 fire-fighters to extinguish.
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- The “Pollution Control Board (PCB)” suspects mischief in triggering the fire.
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- But some experts have asserted that chemicals and large amounts of methane in the lake may have resulted in an accidental spreading over a vast area.
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- Notably, the Lake has witnessed small occasional fires in the past too.
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- Inflammable higher hydrocarbons and organic polymers from nearby industries is the main culprit in fuelling the fires.
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- Additionally, the large-scale frothing and vegetation (which causes methane formation) is due to phosphorus from detergents used domestically.
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What has caused this pathetic situation?

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- Bellandur Lake’s degradation is merely a pointer to the larger malice, which is the absence of any real accountability for the death of Bengaluru’s lakes.
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- Notably, “Varthur Lake”, which is the second major lake in the city, is in an almost equally bad state.
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- Also, the Vrishabhavati River, which like Bellandur was once a drinking water source for the city is now recognised only as an open sewer.
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- Civic agencies failure to address the unplanned growth of the city has resulted in the unregulated flow of sewage and industrial pollutants into water bodies.

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- The political will to act has been lacking, as the builder-politician nexus has rendered agencies like the state PCB largely ineffectual over the decades.
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- More significantly, of the 200-odd lakes that Bengaluru has lost, the government itself has reclaimed several to create infrastructure.
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- Notably, many bus stands, sports stadiums, housing complexes and even campuses of government undertakings like ISRO lie on erstwhile lakes.
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What is the way forward?

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- Regulation of phosphorus levels in detergents is needed to avoid further frothing and disrupting methane formation (primary cause for fire).
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- Mandating decentralised sewage treatment, and strictly enforcing “polluter pays principle” for industries dumping untreated waste is needed.
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- Protection of the catchment area from further deterioration due to real estate projects, garbage dumping and encroachments also needs to be done.
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Source: The Hindu

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