

## Save the LAKE

Prasad Durga

The Byrasandra Lake in Bengaluru would have been a pile of litter, had it not been for a 19-year crusade by Venkata Subba Rao, 78, a retired RBI official. After 40 years with the Bank, Rao could have opted for a hassle-free life. Instead, he chose to fight for a cause he strongly believes in. After his prolonged battle to save the lake from vested interests, Rao stood vindicated when he finally won the case. The icing on the cake was when he was crowned the 'Namma (Our) Bengalurean of the Year 2013' by the Namma Bengaluru Foundation, a tribute to the spirit of citizens who fight against all odds to reclaim the heritage of the city.

Rao, who lives in the RBI Colony adjoining Byrasandra Lake, recalls that in 1988, the government decided to develop the lake as a tree park retaining some water areas. Trouble began when the Bangalore City Corporation began to dump debris into the lake in 1992. "We visited the corporation office and then filed a PIL in the High Court of Karnataka," he elaborates. "The Court ordered an interim stay to stop the filling up of the lake and it was made conclusive in the final hearing in 1998." It was only the first challenge in a slew of battles to come. In 1996, three writ petitions were filed by some people falsely claiming they owned the lake area. Another battle ensued when Rao and the residents contested the petitions alleging that false documents had been produced and requested police investigation. Though these false claims were later withdrawn, the row did not end.

In 2000, when Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BMP, earlier called Bangalore Corporation) attempted to fence the lake for restoration, miscreants filed a suit claiming they owned the lake. The fencing had to be stopped owing to an in-

terim stay. "We filed a petition against the stay contesting that the claims were false and void," says Rao, adding that the High Court then allowed the fencing of the lake. Then the RBI colony residents discovered that the lake had been offered as collateral security to a public-sector bank by a builder. Rao and his team filed a caveat in May 2011 and, two months later, it was dismissed by the Supreme Court.

It calls for a sigh of relief as Rao explains how the legal complications concluded. "Finally, in 2011, the lake was handed over to the BBMP [erstwhile BMP], which, in turn, handed it over to Bengaluru Development Authority, another civic body for development," says Rao. "Beginning 1992, we encountered one issue after another, but we persevered."

What was the motivation for shouldering such a cause? Rao says matter-of-factly, "I was convinced that a lake cannot belong to individuals! It was government property, but no one had the time or interest to do anything about it. I just wanted to see the lake restored to its past glory so future generations could cherish it." Rao's law background was also crucial in helping him through the battle. "Also, my friend, late G S Vishweshwara, a reputed senior advocate, fought the case without taking any money," he adds. Luckily, he says, he did not receive any threats.

The high point, however, continues to be the rejuvenation of the lake, with ₹ 38 million earmarked for its restoration. "Nearly 60 per cent of the work is done and the rest should be complete in the next five months. A walking park has been created and trees are being planted. I still visit once a week to monitor progress," concludes the Good Samaritan, a symbol of change we all want to see.

—Ramya Srinivasan