

## A MISTAKEN DECISION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

GO 111, issued in the joint State of Andhra Pradesh, prohibited polluting the industries, major hotels, residential colonies and other establishments in the catchment area of the Osman Sagar and Himayat Sagar up to 10 km from the full tank level. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The [Telangana government's decision to scrap the 1996 order](#) for protection of two reservoirs, Osman Sagar and Himayat Sagar, which provided drinking water to the entire city for close to eight decades has drawn flak from environmentalists and lake activists. The government's contention that the order famously known as GO 111 has become redundant now as the city does not draw drinking water from the twin lakes anymore, is being challenged by activists who say the move is intended to benefit real estate at the cost of the city's conservation needs.

The contentious order, issued in the joint State of Andhra Pradesh, prohibited polluting the industries, major hotels, residential colonies and other establishments in the catchment area of the lakes up to 10 km from the full tank level. Sixty per cent of the layouts in the catchment area were to be left as open spaces and roads, and 90% of the total catchment area was classified for agriculture/horticulture/floriculture.

Real estate emerging as a major money spinner changed it all. Starting with the central and western parts of the city, the real estate frenzy spread far and wide, except in the catchment area of twin reservoirs where restrictions were in place. Illegal structures, however, were allowed to flourish if they were backed by money and muscle power. This predicament has resulted in disaffection among farmers and land owners.

The real estate companies, however, saw an opportunity in this. Farmers in distress sold the lands for a pittance, and builders and politicians added them to their land bank with the speculative gumption that the GO 111 would go away some day if intense lobbying with successive governments paid off. Dry spells of the reservoirs under the drought conditions provided certain shrillness to the demand for scrapping the order.

Legitimacy was accorded to the demand when the ruling TRS party made it one of the election promises in 2018, bringing cheer to the land owners in the peripheries of 84 villages.

One aspect deliberately glossed over by the State in claiming redundancy of the reservoirs, is the primary objective for which the dams were built during the rule of the last Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan in 1920 and 1927 respectively.

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Mandating construction of the reservoirs were the 1908 floods in the River Musi, which had caused widespread devastation and destruction, following which the State summoned legendary engineer M. Visvesvaraya to suggest a flood control strategy for the city. In his report, Mr. Visvesvaraya noted that the city had experienced 12 floods during previous 300 years. "Immunity from the floods must come, if it ever comes, from the construction of flood catchment reservoirs in the basin above," he noted in his report, paving way for construction of Osman Sagar on the River Musi and Himayat Sagar on its tributary Esi.

The government's decision to withdraw GO 111 curiously comes less than two years after another bout of destructive floods in October, 2020 when at least three lakes were breached and

50 people died.

There has been consensus since that the floods were caused by blockage of the city's natural rainwater discharge channels by way of heavy construction. Blaming it on the short-sightedness of the previous governments, the present TRS government has also launched 'Strategic Nala Development Plan', a 986 crore initiative to develop and unclog the channels for effective drainage of the surplus rainwater.

As one famous quote goes, 'a mistake repeated more than once is a decision.' And this time, the decision is seemingly to repeat a mistake.

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