

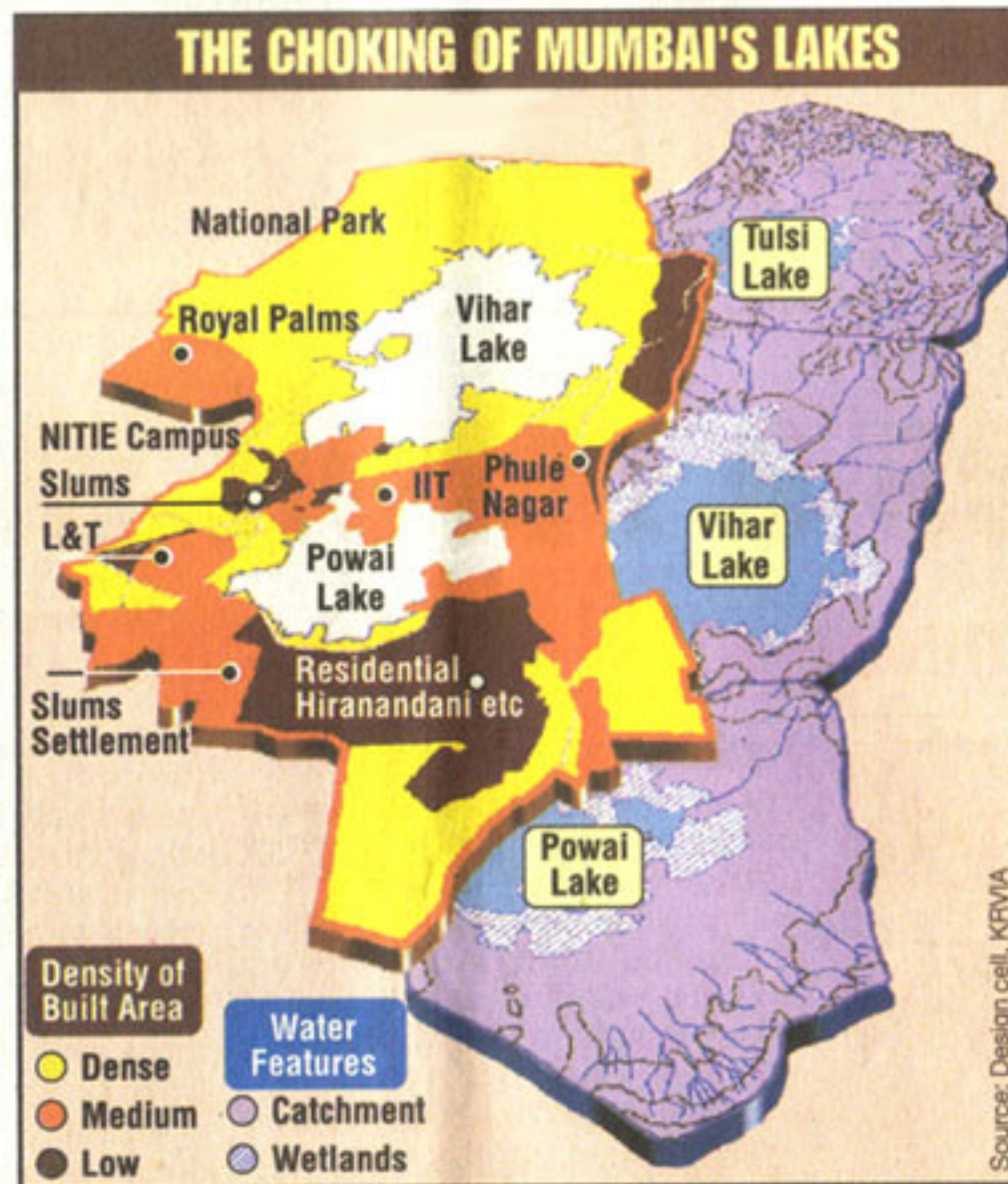
# Unplanned development may put city lakes at risk

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**Mumbai:** It's not just leopards that have been disturbed by the unplanned development around the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Mumbai's big lakes—and our water supply—are also at risk from the invasion of the city into the forest.

A new study shows that haphazard urbanisation in the hills around Powai, Vihar and Tulsi lakes is breaking down the natural ecosystems that attract and conserve water for the city.

The study—commissioned by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) and carried out by the design cell of the Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture (KRVIA) over the span of more than a year—says that intensive high-rise development in Powai, quarrying in Chandivli and the increasing number of slums along the eastern hill ridge are important factors in this process. The three lakes have been affected by the entire suburban hilly region, including the national park and Aarey colony, but architects have zeroed in on the Powai and Vihar lake areas since they are not protected from development. “We wanted to understand the problem not as three segregated lakes but one whole ecosystem which is increasingly under stress,” Pallavi Latkar, head of the design cell, said, adding, “After all, the leopards show us that nature does not recognise artificial boundaries.”



Mumbai's lake catchment area (in blue) is being choked by haphazard urban development (left)

How has the transformation of Powai from a no-development zone to a hot residential property affected the lake? The lake water is no longer potable and the boundaries are shrinking. “The topography maps show that residential developments like Hiranandani Gardens have come up exactly on the catchment ridges,

so the natural water flow is hampered,” says Bhakti Hajare, who along with Stuti Kalandani, assisted Latkar on the project.

Unlike Powai, Vihar lake water is still potable and supplies Mumbai with about 68 million litres a day. However, on one side is Aarey colony, which despite being protected is seeing more slums and clubs, and on the other is Vihar (east), where slums are climbing up the slopes. “Pressure for greater east-west connectivity will also put the lakes at risk,” says Latkar, noting that because different agencies own the land around the lakes, there is no defined role for one regulatory agency.

However, architects don't advocate banning development. The study recommends freezing construction around the lakes temporarily and setting up a lake management authority to guide development. “There needs to be special guidelines for construction in the area,” says Kalandani, adding that the natural pathways for rainwater drainage should be recreated and buildings made more sensitive to the marshy nature of the land.

In the case of Powai, the authorities should focus on restoring the ecology of the lake instead of undertaking a multi-crore beautification project. “What's the point of benches and gardens if the lake is gone?” says Latkar, adding, “Powai can be made potable again if the ecosystem around it, including the network of streams, is revived.”