

Flood of despair: Mumbai's flooding woes

Mumbai is an efficient city in some ways, but this reputation depends on fair weather. It turns into a soggy mess with the arrival of a monsoon. This year the season has begun with the [spectacular collapse of a pedestrian bridge on a crucial railway line in Andheri](#), causing injuries and overall urban paralysis. Not even a year has passed since the [ghastly stampede on a foot overbridge at Elphinstone Road station](#), that took over 20 lives. The recurrent disasters involving infrastructure are proof of the indifference among policymakers to the city's needs, even as they speak of a 'global standard' of living. It is fair to ask whether Mumbai is prepared, after the passage of a dozen years, to meet a disaster such as the July 2005 flooding caused by 99.4 cm of rain in a 24-hour period. The city continues to attract a large number of people looking for opportunity — the population rose from 11.9 million in 2001 to 18.4 million a decade later. But urban managers, led by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, have not invested enough in new infrastructure and have done a shoddy job of maintaining the old. If Maharashtra has to achieve higher rates of economic growth and touch an ambitious 10%, as Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis desires, Mumbai's infrastructure planning should be in the hands of an empowered custodian who can secure the cooperation of all urban agencies.

A return to nature is needed to relieve Mumbai of its flooding woes. According to one estimate, the city's Mithi river, blocked by debris and garbage, has lost about 60% of its catchment to development. The setting up of a Supreme Court monitoring committee has not helped much. It will take resolute measures to stop the release of sewage and industrial chemicals into the Mithi, and retrieve lost mangroves. A cleaner river connected to functional drainage can aid in the speedy removal of flood waters, and improve the environment. Yet, there are other basic challenges which are particularly worrisome to less affluent residents. In a 2015 study, the World Bank found that half of the poor did not consider moving out of flood-prone areas, because of the uncertainty of living in a new place with severe social disruptions and reduced access to education and health facilities. What this underscores is the need to make the best use of all available space, densify development where feasible, and improve conditions *in situ*. It is welcome that a joint safety audit with the IIT will be conducted on public infrastructure, in the wake of the bridge collapse. But such inspections must be regularly carried out and quick remedial steps taken.

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