

CALAMITY-PRONE — URBAN INDIA'S WORRYING STORYLINE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

'There is a need for an environmental protection agency to proactively tackle issues related to climate change' | Photo Credit: AFP

The [recent floods in Bengaluru](#) have [paralysed the city's tech spine](#). The point has been driven home with viral images of some of the city's most influential people being rescued by tractor and lavish villas under water. Unfortunately, pictures of adverse weather phenomena bringing a city to its knees are becoming increasingly common in India, with the urban authorities concerned finding themselves woefully unprepared every time a new disaster hits.

Similar scenes have played out in Delhi ([2013](#), [2021](#)), Mumbai ([2005](#), [2017](#)), Chennai ([2015](#), [2021](#)), and Hyderabad ([2020](#)), leaving behind extensive losses to property and life. In terms of damages, Mumbai reportedly lost 14,000 crore between 2005 and 2015 while the figure for Chennai was an estimated 15,000 crore in 2015 alone. Added to this are the social and human costs, which almost always disproportionately affect the poorer sections of society as they tend to live in the more environmentally vulnerable areas. Even in the case of Bengaluru, while the media primarily focused on the disruption caused to the Information Technology industry, several informal settlements were also destroyed.

These events are usually met with a slew of knee-jerk reactions and politically motivated accusations. More often than not, river/drain cleanup measures, anti-encroachment drives, and stormwater network projects are proposed by the administrators concerned to appease the public and the media.

A 900 crore project was announced in November 2021 by the Karnataka government after flooding in Bengaluru last year. Now, after the recent floods, the municipality has ordered an anti-encroachment drive. While these measures are not unhelpful, they are at best piecemeal solutions to systemic problems stemming from a lack of climate consciousness in the planning process. Unfortunately, the dearth of climate mitigation measures in urban planning and the uncontrolled urban sprawl only make the next calamity more likely.

Bengaluru has not had a master plan to control its development since 2015 and is unlikely to get a new one before 2025. Across India, 65% of urban settlements do not have a master plan. Where these exist, they usually do not address issues of environmental protection or talk of climate change mitigation. Despite the lack of capacity and bandwidth in State governments to undertake this exercise (report by NITI Aayog in 2021), powers to prepare master plans remain with State governments, with city governments reduced to 'stakeholders' without much authority. While some city administrations have developed drainage/flood mitigation plans, these do not have the statutory backing such as a master plan.

The Drainage Master Plan for Delhi was drafted 46 years ago, in 1976, and a new plan is only just being implemented. In the case of Bengaluru, the drainage lines, as per the 2015 Master Plan, vary significantly from the drains mapped by the municipality. The responsibility of maintaining these and the lakes are split among at least 12 agencies/departments at the State and city level. It is no wonder then that city planning and administration have become a nightmare.

Over the last few years, city administrations such as Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and Nagpur (among others) have begun adopting climate action plans. The Mumbai plan is particularly ambitious, covering all aspects of the city's environment — from flooding to air pollution — and aligns itself with the larger national goal of net-zero emissions. However, as the plan lacks any statutory backing, it does not prescribe any regulatory controls and comes across as a series of recommended measures that can be adopted by the authorities/citizens. This crucial flaw is likely to render it toothless. Finally, these plans are usually an expert-driven endeavour, without the critical element of public participation. This further reduces the plan's credibility. The lack of civic consultations also results in a greater focus on proposals such as the removal of encroachments — which disproportionately affect the poor — instead of a focus on other mitigation measures that can be adopted.

What is needed is the creation of a comprehensive climate action plan for all key Indian cities and to give these plans statutory backing by bringing them within the ambit of the city's master plan. This would also institutionalise processes such as public consultations within the plan preparation process. Beyond giving it the credibility to withstand administrative and political opposition, consultations will be effective in highlighting issues of underserved neighbourhoods — which are often overlooked in media narratives and by decision-making bodies.

Further, there is a need for an environmental protection agency to proactively tackle issues related to climate change. To make coordinated action possible, this agency would need to be devised as an overarching body along the lines of the unified transportation authority formed by different cities. Unless we address India's urban planning issues on a priority, the country's uncontrolled urban sprawl will only make the next calamity more likely. And more catastrophic.

Venkat Jayagopi is with Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC). Venika Menon is with Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC)

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