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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Bengalureans gear up for monsoon misery

TNN | May 30, 2018, 08.01 AM IST



Pre-monsoon showers, which saw houses flooded, traffic disrupted, trees and electric poles crashing and roads developing potholes, has given Bengalureans a taste of things to come this monsoon season. To make matters worse, the assembly elections have hit preparations to tackle the rain.

Work on building walls for storm water drains was halted when the election code of conduct came into force, and efforts to conduct survey to identify old and vulnerable trees did not take off in the city. Despite this, the BBMP insists that it is well-prepared to handle the rains. Bescom, the electricity utility, says it has recruited an additional 500 people to work during the monsoon, while the mayor has warned contractors to fill

potholes and relay roads or they will not be paid by the Palike.

DRAINS THAT LACK WALLS AND OVERFLOWING LAKES

The city has an 842km storm water drain (SWD) network built specifically to avert flooding. But only 300km of this network has permanent walls which are necessary to prevent rainwater from overflowing on to streets.

The state government allotted Rs 1,300 crore for SWD-related work during the last financial year and although the BBMP began building walls for about

200km of drains last year, work was halted once assembly election fever kicked. Only about 120km of walls were built by then. HT Bettgowda, BBMP chief engineer (SWD), says work on constructing walls has resumed and he is hopeful of completing work of the previous year soon.

While walls are one problem, accumulation of silt is another. This has reduced the carrying capacity of drains. Of an estimated 20 lakh cubic metres of silt accumulated in city drains, only about 3 lakh cubic metres has been removed till early this year. This means that even a short spell of rain can result in overflowing drains. According to one estimate, the city's drains cannot take more than 90mm of rain.

The few remaining lakes, all badly neglected, are another bugbear. About 35 of the city's 85 lakes overflowed during the rainy season last October. A study by IISc experts found that lakes in the city have a capacity to store at least 5tmc ft of rainwater, but accumulation of silt has reduced it to 1.2tmc ft.

FALLING TREES

he city's most prized pos- T session, its green cover, is its most vulnerable and dangerous commodity when it rains. While falling trees have the potential to cause massive damage, they also could cut out powerlines and block roads.

The BBMP had tasked its forest cell to identify and secure old and vulnerable trees. However, as senior forest department officials point out, conducting a tree survey is a laborious and timeconsuming exercise and requires coordination between multiple organizations.

Saswati Mishra, chief conservator of forests and head of the Tree Authority Committee said: "We will have to identify and prune trees deemed dangerous and fell ones that are too old to withstand the rain." But officials say it would not be possible to

conduct a survey before the monsoon this year.

Chola Raj, BBMP deputy forest conservator, revealed that while talks are still on to gather a team to undertake the survey, certain measures have been put in place to ensure citizens don't suffer.

"We have 21 teams of eight people each to deal with uprooted trees and pruning," Raj said. "But that's not adequate and we don't have the provision to hire more people. It has been decided that the teams would be under the control of the zonal chief engineer who will also be in the control room."

Raj said instructions have been sent out to have fallen trees removed within three hours of it being reported. The last tree survey — only a ward wise numeration of trees and a people to tree ratio — was conducted in 2014 by IISc.

POTHOLED ROADS AND TRAFFIC JAMS

Potholes, which resulted in several deaths last year, have returned to haunt the city. This month's pre-monsoon showers have already caused hundreds of shoddily-filled potholes to open up again on Tumakuru Road, Mysuru Road and in Jayanagar, Indiranagar, Koramangala and Seshadripuram.

Last year, after coming under intense pressure from citizens, then chief minister Siddaramaiah and the Lokayukta, the Palike undertook a large-scale pothole filling drive. In November, it claimed that there were only 25 potholes left on its 14,000km road network. Potholes, though, are now back and are leading to huge traffic jams when it rains.

"The road through Doddathogur to Electronics City is covered with potholes,"

said Aswathy Krishnan, a resident. "This is making life very difficult for people living in the area. It becomes a nightmare when it rains as it makes even walking on the road a dangerous exercise."

As of May 21, the Palike said it had identified 3,629 potholes, 950 of which were on 'major' roads, while the others dotted 'ward' roads.

"On May 21, after meeting with all the chief engineers, I gave them a one-week deadline to fill all potholes," said BM Vijay Shankar, special commissioner (projects), BBMP. "We will use a python machine to fill potholes on 1,400km of major roads. On the remaining network, depending on weather conditions, we will use either a hot or a cold mix."

CRASHING ELECTRIC POLES BRING DESTRUCTION AND DARKNESS

In the IT capital, the monsoon brings with it long hours of darkness. Figures released by Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (Bescom) show that from April 30 to May 25 this year, 168 electric poles fell in 22 hours of rainfall. Add to this transformer repairs and the Bescom helpline has been buzzing.

Rajendra Cholan, Bescom MD, claimed the utility is well-prepared for any contingency that might arise due to heavy and sustained downpours.

"We have employed an additional 500 people to work during the monsoon and we have also arranged for extra vehicles," Cholan said. "There is also a provision of Rs 1 lakh revolving emergency fund for each subdivision for restoration of power. There is also the Rs 5 lakh to urban sub divisions with Rs 2 lakh to rural sub divisions that are allocated during natural calamities."

As many as 100 distribution transformer centres (DTC) will be set up at each sub-division as buffer stock. Vehicles like cranes and trucks will also be hired on a need basis. "All sub-divisions have been informed to maintain buffer stock of other required line materials," Cholan said. "We will also set up and inform public of phone numbers to call at the sub-division level apart from the 1912 helpline."

FREQUENT FLOODING IN LOW-LYING AREAS

Last year, several houses in low-lying areas like some parts of Koramangala, ST Bed Layout and HSR Layout, were inundated, vehicles ruined and property destroyed. Residents in these areas are again bracing for another ordeal.

Studies conducted by the likes of T V Ramachandra of IISc show that the reason behind flooding in these areas is concretisation, narrowing and encroachment of the storm water drains, dumping of garbage and construction debris into them, and the encroachment of wetlands.

Prakash Singhvi, a resident of Koramangala 4th Block, whose house was flooded half-a-dozen times last year, said his neighbours had already begun taking precautions to ensure that their houses were spared this year. "Almost everybody living on 4th and 5th Cross in 4th Block Koramangala has increased the height of their front gates so that rainwater doesn't enter their homes."

The BBMP says it has launched a SWD desilting drive. "In areas where the retaining walls were breached, we have asked engineers to rebuild and strengthen them, and keep sandbags handy," said Vijay Shankar. "Inlets of the SWDs have also been widened."