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Despite reassurances, Bengaluru is nowhere close to embracing digital transparency

By [Bharath Joshi](#) & [Nirupama V](#), ET Bureau | Aug 19, 2016, 10.37 AM IST[Post a Comment](#)

Murali Jagannath, a senior executive at an infrastructure firm, waited nearly five years to build his dream house. It was a villa at Shubh Enclave, off Sarjapur Road. Two months after his family moved in, on August 8, a roaring bulldozer stood at his gates. His villa - duly ratified with legal documents - had encroached a storm-water-drain, something he learnt only when municipal authorities came knocking that morning. In a matter of hours, the villa was reduced to rubble.

Scores of families - some of which have lived in those houses for decades - have turned urban refugees overnight as municipal commissioner N Manjunath Prasad's men went on a demolition spree to reclaim valley drains. The areas, after the bulldozers had had their run, resembled war zones.

"If only I knew that the plot I chose was on a drain, I would have spent my money on another plot," Jagannath said. The definitive point raised by families in Bommanahalli, [Mahadevapura](#) and [Yelahanka](#) whose homes were razed is: "If only we knew..."

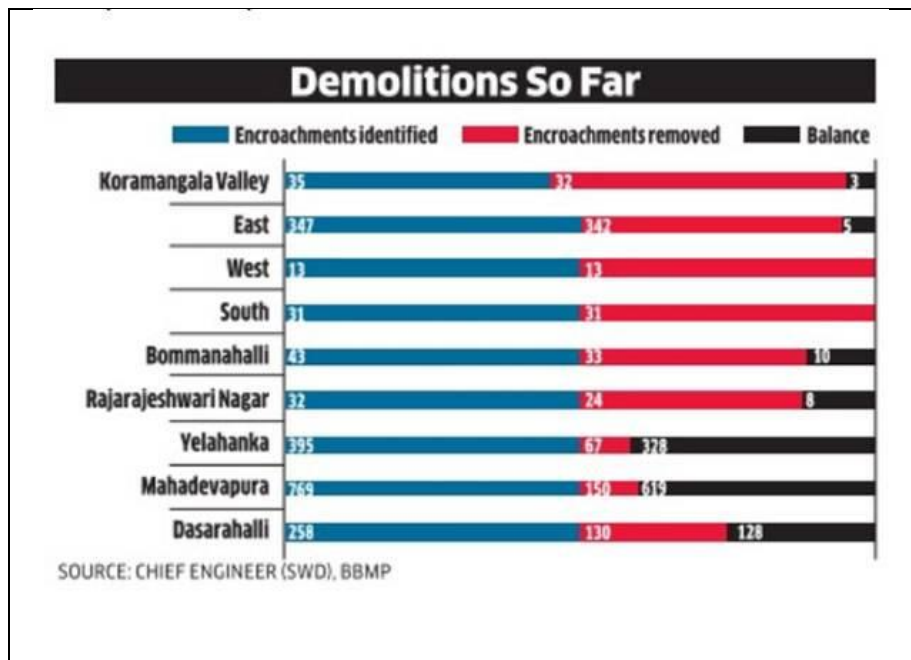
The ongoing drive, which Chief Minister [Siddaramaiah](#) ordered after last month's heavy rain left parts of the city deluged, has made a strong case for the government to take the open data-route to usher in transparency and empower citizens with everything there is to know about public commons, especially storm-water-drains or raja kaluves.

"Data is the easiest way to get transparency into the workings of the government," says software expert Viral Shah, who coined the Julia programme language. "Often you see that the government just scans a pdf and releases it. That isn't transparency. That is opacity, because you are burdening people with a lot of data that cannot be processed."

The municipal commissioner promised to put up data on encroachment of storm-water-drains in the public domain within 10 days. What came out was scanned survey maps of 45 villages on its website. They were not only vague with hand-drawn sketches, the "encroachments" were depicted in jargon no layman could understand.



A user-friendly map showing the city's waterways network based on available data that allows citizens to find out if their property is on encroachment. However, without government's acknowledgement, this map has no legal validity.



The problem goes back a long way .The first survey of the city was done in 1902, and the last one around 1962, said BBMP restructuring committee member V Ravichandar. "Village records were meticulous with a tippani (detailed drawing), pakka (summary), pahani (rights, tenancy and crops) and an atlas giving sub-survey level maps. Cut to urban Bengaluru, into which 342 villages were amalgamated; properties here have a sale deed, khata, property tax receipt and a building plan sanction. These, however, do not give a description of a property vis-a-vis the village map."

Authorities should have superimposed village maps onto BBMP maps when the city expanded, marking water bodies and channels. They did not. And so, the demolition.

Flooding became common in Bengaluru post 2000, due to conversion of wetlands to residential and commercial layouts. The removal of interconnectivities in the city's undulating terrain compounded the problem. Experts point out that government agencies work in silos when it comes to data usage. What else can explain the civic body's unpreparedness despite an inundation alert for 173 flood-prone areas issued by the Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitoring Centre ahead of last month's rain?

Open data is data that can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. A relevant example comes from the UK, where data on 24 million plus property transactions was made public. "Absence of data is the root cause of these problems," said TV Ramachandra, an ecologist at the Indian Institute of Science. "If maps and data on common places like parks, lakes and drains had been made public, it would have stopped sensible citizens from building or buying property there."

When the civic body took baby steps towards digitising data, the bureaucracy came in the way . For instance, BBMP's special commissioner (revenue) Rashmi V put out data on the number of occupancy certificates (OC) issued to properties since 2011. "This was data of OCs issued at the headquarters. We're struggling to get numbers from our zonal officers," she said.



According to Viral Shah, the ideal way to go about digital transparency is when data is provided in machinereadable format that is available by posting queries on a website. The closest that comes to this is Bhoomi, state's landmark project that computerised over 20 million land ownership records.

The ambitious Urban Property Ownership Records (UPOR) project to digitally capture spatial property data has taken off in Shivamogga, Mysuru, Ballari and HubballiDharwad. What about Bengaluru?

The usual blame game. "We're ready , but the BBMP is not. They should follow up and feed data," revenue secretary Ganga Ram Baderiya said.

Over a 100 demolitions later, the inter-agency coordination committee headed by chief secretary Arvind Jadhav, has cleared a project to develop an interactive map with various layers showing storm-water-drain lines. This, sources said, will be ready in about three weeks and

will be hosted by the Karnataka State Remote Sensing and Application Centre. While Bengaluru has a sister-city arrangement with San Francisco, it did not learn from the latter's open data portal where citizens can visualise various data.

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