

Bengaluru demolition drive: A lesson for how to govern land in India

Bengaluru demolition drive has become a messy affair because of the involvement of multiplicity of agencies and how land sales have been recorded, experts say



The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanara Palike, or BBMP, has razed almost 100 buildings, including houses, hotels and shops in the city, since last Saturday. Photo: PTI

Bengaluru: The latest demolition drive in the city is razing even half-a-century-old buildings. And, this might be the result of the way land is governed in India, according to urban experts.

The drive started last Saturday when almost 100 buildings, including houses, hotels and shops, were razed.

The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanara Palike, or BBMP, the city's civic body, attributed the demolition to clear encroachments from what used to be known as Rajakaluve, or more commonly referred to as storm water drains from a neighbourhood lake.

Rajakaluves are more than storm water drains, and their importance dates back to the city's pre-modern era.

The Deccan plateau, where Bengaluru is located, is known to be water-deprived. In the absence of a river running through it, its rulers—starting from the 9th century to the Britishers—depended on man-made water reservoirs (lakes or tanks) for irrigation and domestic uses.

Rajakaluves, said Rohan D'Souza, a researcher formerly with the city's National Institute of Advanced Study, were the canals through which these tanks were interconnected to ensure steady supply.

Bangalore has 800 kilometres of storm water drains and another 1,500km of secondary drains, according to BBMP data. This isn't the first time the civic body has taken action against encroachments on Rajakaluves.

Over the last two years, some 1,923 encroachments were found on land that formerly had Rajakaluves. Some 822 have been cleared so far, and 1,101 still remain, according to the civic body's data.

What's caused the present mess?

Mostly, it is a problem of a multiplicity of agencies and also how land sales are recorded. According to V. Ravichandar, who was part of a government-appointed committee that recommended the trifurcation of the BBMP, the problems started when the villages were subsumed into Bangalore.

The result: old village maps, which showed drains in villages, were disregarded.

"People are confusing *Khata* with certificate of everything being kosher," Ravichandar said. But the *Khata* was merely a sale deed witnessing a transaction. "The plot owners are taking the *Khata* as a security blanket. The problem is the *Katha* is disassociated with the earlier survey and village map information."

A BBMP official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the civic body alone could not be blamed for the mess as there are other authorities such as Bangalore Development Authority, Bangalore Metropolitan Region Development Authority, the state revenue department and survey department are equally responsible.

In many cases, landlords and builders make fake documents and submit it to the registrar. It's impossible to check whether all properties that apply for the *Khata* fall on any storm water drain or any other such violations, he added.

A short-sighted move?

Is demolition the ideal solution to the problem? Some urban planners disagree, at least in the way it is being carried out. "I'm not sure whether large-scale demolition is an ideal solution," said Rejeet Mathews, who works on urban development and planning at World Resource Institute.

"It's only in the recent years that Bengaluru started to make strategies for development by creating a masterplan," she said.

What's the solution?

If the civic body is not too keen to convert the land parcels into its original setting, it could apply some retrofitting techniques like asking people to pay up fines to set the record straight and allow them to live in that area, said Mathews.

But if they are too keen on the restoration of storm water drains as it was, the measures need to be well thought out before execution, she added.

"Someone who owns that land for generations needs to be compensated. But compensation is a huge problem since land is very expensive. There are projects like PRR [Peripheral Ring Road] that are stuck for more than a decade because of this [non-purchase of land]," she said.

Ideally, such restoration should be reserved for the environmentally-sensitive areas in the city's peripheries, said Mathews.

Besides, what's the upshot of such demolition drives?

"Slums are known to proliferate in environmentally-sensitive areas or less-claimed lands ... so in general, the poor population will be the first to get hit," she added.