

# [Sinking Cities] Why our showcase cities are collapsing under their own weight

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First it was Chennai, then Bengaluru, and now Gurgaon as it has come to be called. All three cities are part of the growing knowledge economy and share strikingly similar infrastructure problems. Even a small amount of rain inundates huge swathes of land upon which sit gleaming glass and aluminium edifices and swanky residences — all indicators of a showcase economy.

In November 2015, most parts of unprecedented 500 citizens were killed as was no loss of life in Bengaluru and Gurgaon due to the flooding, the situation in Chennai was a grim reminder as it displaced 1.8 million of its residents and the losses to property, vehicles, goods, and infrastructure were pegged at Rs 15,000 crore by the government.

Chennai were under water for a week and an  
waters reached two storeys high

In Bengaluru this week, lakes and storm water drains overflowed into neighbourhoods. Police had to resort to *lathi charge* as people were busy catching fish writhing on inundated roads and hampering movement of rescue teams in boats.



A flooded road in the Millennium City of Gurgaon. Image credit: PTI

Around the same time, a 24-hour spell of rain, 5 cms in all, waterlogged the city's roads to the extent that Gurgaon Deputy Commissioner T.L. Satyaprakash set a precedent by declaring Section 144 to clear clogged and traffic-jammed junctions. The DC also gave a free hand to his men to remove encroachments that obstructed the free flow of water.

### Race to build

In their hurry to build a new India, urban planners, real estate conglomerates, and governments of every hue have steamrolled any opposition even if it means supporting often illegal, unauthorised deviations and turning a blind eye towards encroachments, especially where water bodies are concerned. The story of India's mega cities is similar once rains cross the tolerance threshold.

Most often it's too late, and all that hapless local governments do is scurry with boats and evacuate people; praying the rain recedes and water gets absorbed into the ground as

By merely changing the name from Madras to Chennai, from Bangalore to Bengaluru, or Gurgaon to Gurugram, the lives of its denizens have not improved. If the politicians and activists behind the name changes had been focusing their attention on stopping illegal construction, unbridled urbanisation, and encroachments on natural water bodies and its pathways, all these cities would not have come to such a sorry state,” said Rahul Jayaram, Assistant Professor at Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Sonipat.

Jayaram, who has been witnessing the growth of Gurgaon, says the city has been designed to become a man-made disaster.

Why are our cities collapsing?

A study led by Prof TV Ramachandra of the Centre for Ecological Sciences Institute of Science, Bengaluru, stirred a hornet’s nest a fortnight ago when he predicted the death of Bengaluru by 2021.

The study based its predictions on several findings that included satellite and on-ground studies. The team found a 525 percent growth in built-up areas, decline in the number of water bodies, and rapid decline in vegetation. The once you add poorly maintained roads, depleting water table that has reached 1,000 feet and below, and lack of drainage.

Importantly, the study shows a 925 percent increase in concretisation since the start of this urbanisation is unplanned. Added to this, last week the State legislature passed the **Karnataka** Parks and Open Spaces Act which reduced the mandatory open



Bengaluru: Karnataka Fire & Emergency service personnel re boat from flood-hit Kodichikkanhalli area following incessant r on Friday. PTI Photo by Shailendra Bhojak

residential areas from 15 to 10 percent.

The city, which had 125 water bodies in the early '80s now has only 25 — the rest have been filled with debris over a period and taken over by the politician-developer nexus. Sewage and industrial wastes are fed into existing lakes with the result that Bengaluru has India's only frothing lake in Bellandur. Prof Ramachandra has predicted that with no outlet for rain water, a Chennai-like disaster is waiting to happen in Bengaluru.

Once admired for being a garden city, Bengaluru has lost 78 percent of its green cover in just the last decade, the report found. The other factors that he included were the population that exploded from 65 to 95 lakh in the last 15 years thanks to the boom, and the city's 65 lakh and growing number of vehicles that is dangerously poised to

Nobody cares

Sitting at the YourStory office after chairing a session on the Save Bengaluru Campaign by this portal, Prof Ramachandra looked as grim as his prediction.

**I am a member of several government committees and I can assure you nobody cares. That is the reason I have predicted the end of the city," he said.**

It was not a mere statement; he really meant it as the city ranks abysmally low on every possible metric that cities are compared on.

It's a similar story in Gurgaon too, which grew from an agrarian district to an international business hub. Beyond the New Delhi airport, the boundary of the Union Territory ends and the state of Haryana begins. This proximity to Delhi made Gurgaon grow from the late nineties into a brand new city with tall residential towers that had large open spaces, state-of-the-art club houses, and sparkling swimming pools. Here's where the who's who of corporate India, business houses, and expats stayed. But just beyond the perimeter, there were hardly any motorable roads, nor pavements, and a dysfunctional public transport system. Then the government stepped in and formed the Haryana Urban Development Authority which started building roads and metro rail years after all these shiny beautiful buildings, office towers, malls, and hotels came up.

Somewhere along the way, when the agricultural activity stopped, farmers who sold land switched from cycles to SUVs but forgot to tell the builders in which direction water flowed when it rained. Rapid urbanisation and encroachments led to this week's misery.

And, the problem with Gurgaon is that the enclaves showcase a shining new India and the other part is where the aspirational city's support staff live under abysmal conditions with foraging pigs, pits for drains, unfinished brick houses with cattle sheds, narrow unpaved

Gurgaon's affluence made none suspect its slow death, but the warning signs were clear more than five years ago when ground water depleted and severe drinking water shortages hit the city which is now part of the National Capital Region.

Reacting to a foreign correspondent's query then on how the underprivileged of the city were surviving Gurgaon's water shortage, one migrant worker had famously remarked that he would rather drink a bottle of beer as it was cheaper than a litre of bottled water!

Still on the learning curve

The Gurgaon administration plans to revive the Chakkarpur bund near DLF Phase I by developing a five-km city forest to replenish the groundwater table.

This part of the city connects two sections of the city — Chakkarpur and Sector 56 and is a natural groundwater recharge area. But, forest officers have been maintaining that gradual urbanisation has led to the encroachment of the city's numerous water sc

Satyaprakash admitted that there were lessons learnt to "re-position ourselves better. We promise this won't happen again." He also said a Twitter account had been opened to address people's concerns directly.

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