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Tree bags full Sir!

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Highlights

axed or translocated, the approach is unscientific, experts say
'Of 1,507 trees, 1,334 to be cut, just 25 retained' in BMRCL proposal

By Garima Prasher

Skim through the Office Memorandums (OMs) of permissions for the removal of trees to make way for urban infrastructure projects and you will see how the city is axing trees mercilessly.

Whether for alignment of metro projects or widening of roads and now for white-topping, green cover is gradually being depleted as we speak.

According to some of the OMs dated between February 2021 and March 2022 maintained by the BBMP, as many as 4,423 trees were proposed to be removed to make way for various development projects. Out of these, only 243 trees were recommended to be retained in their respective locations. The rest of the 4,180 trees were either to be felled or translocated.

All the proposals were filed either by the BBMP or Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL).

The orders were given by the Tree Expert Committee (TEC).

For instance, as per the OM dated March 10, 2022, BMRCL proposed the removal of 1,507 trees which were

standing in the BMRCL Metro project area of Phase 2B, between the Kasturinagar and Kempapura of the ORR line. After carrying out a detailed enumeration of each of the trees in terms of location, physical parameter, health and defects, etc., the TEC ordered retention of just 25 trees. While 160 trees were ordered to be translocated, as many as 1,334 were recommended to be chopped off.

Experts said orders for the removal and translocation of so many trees expose the lack of a scientific approach and poor management of ecosystem services. “The idea behind having a tree committee is to minimise the number of trees that are being cut. But, if the committee recommends cutting or translocating the majority of the trees, it appears to be an unscientific approach. If they would have saved 95% of the trees and managed to get the infrastructure in place, I would have said the tree committee is doing a wonderful job. There are hardly any trees left. As per research, there should be at least seven to eight trees per person on the planet. Currently, we have less than one tree for every seven to eight persons,” said TV Ramachandra at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science.

City-based activists and environmentalists are of the view that the majority of the trees currently being translocated or cut could have been saved, given minor tweaks in the development projects.

“We could have saved up to 40% of trees through the process of canopy manipulation. However, these options are not being considered. I have insisted and requested many officials to visit the spot and consider the option of canopy manipulation before passing the order to cut trees, but it has fallen on deaf ears. The committee is forced to give an opinion in favour of the infrastructure facilities. There have been suggestions to deviate some of the BMRCL lines from current paths. This would have saved many trees from being cut or translocated. But unfortunately, committees keep being formed and they all yield to pressures. They end up cutting healthy trees too,” said environmentalist Dr AN Yellappa Reddy. Notably, recommendations of TEC in the past have been questioned by the high court and some of the orders were revised.

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— Dr AN Yellappa Reddy, environmentalist

Transplantation

According to the OMs, as many as 1,095 trees out of the total 4,423 trees were translocated for development projects. While these trees are being transplanted hoping that they will survive and will continue to provide ecosystem, experts said transplantation of a fully grown tree can be tricky in the absence of data on success rate. “When I was a part of one such inspection committee a few years ago, I was taken to a plot and told that the trees on the plot were all transplanted. It was shocking as I have been seeing the plot and the trees since I was a child. Apart from such issues, while translocation of the trees provides a better chance of survival, there are not many monitoring and success rate reports. We have virtually no information on the fate of translocated trees. So we should not put so much faith in the process without concrete data to back it up,” said Dr Ramachandra.

According to Harini Nagendra, head of the Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability at Azim Premji University, tree translocation should be the last option. While it is much better than destroying the tree, it is best to avoid removal in the first place.

“We should cut as few trees as possible. However, transplantation can be considered only where it is feasible and when it becomes necessary to cut trees. Not all species can be successfully transplanted. Moreover, compensatory planting should be done as the city is losing so many trees,” said Nagendra. As per TCE orders, the trees face the axe only when they are considered not suitable for translocation; either they have defects or the extraction of root balls of adequate size is not practical.

“There is a certain part of the root mass that has to be preserved for the tree to survive. This depends on factors such as age, species and location. If there is a whole lot of construction hemming into the roots, you will not be able to extract the root balls of adequate size. So even if the tree is healthy, it will be cut,” said MD Madhusudan of the National Centre for Biological Sciences. Experts also said the trees that are translocated are stripped off leaves, branches and even the roots are trimmed. It would take them years to grow their roots back and attain the shape and size as before.