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Life as we know it

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Highlights

After 13 years and various processes later, People's Biodiversity Register for Bengaluru is yet to materialise as latest of committees hasn't formally convened
Biodiversity committees must for local self-governing bodies

By Garima Prasher

A committee set up two years ago to monitor and document Bengaluru's biodiversity in a People's Biodiversity Register (PBR) has never met officially till date, BM's found out.

The five-member Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC) was created in January 2020. According to the members, not even a single meeting has been convened by the authorities concerned.

“We have conducted a couple of internal meetings since the BMC's formulation in 2020 but no work on the PBR has happened yet. We have been asking for a formal meeting to be convened soon. Initially, things got delayed due to covid-19; there appears to be a lack of interest too on the part of authorities concerned,” said a member of the BMC.

According to the Biological Diversity Act (BDA), 2002, a BMC must be constituted by every local self-governing institution in rural and urban areas. The committee should then create a PBR, a repository of biodiversity and traditional knowledge of local biological resources. The idea behind a PBR is to ensure conservation and sustainable use of biological resources while securing equitable sharing of benefits that come from these resources.

Notably, the first BMC was formulated in 2009 to investigate and document information for Bengaluru's maiden biodiversity register. Although the committee collated the required data and shared it with the Karnataka Biodiversity Board (KBB), experts said a gap of 13 years to update the register is long drawn. "Information to prepare Bengaluru's first PBR was submitted to KBB in 2009 by the then BMC. But, it was never upgraded. The register should be updated at least once every two to three years for Bengaluru. There are a plethora of developmental activities. We must update the PBR regularly," said Akshay Heblikar, member, BMC and founder of ECO Watch.

Nandini N, professor at the department of environmental science, Bengaluru University, and head of Bengaluru's BMC agreed. "Looking at the current scenario of developmental activities, this is too long a gap to not update the register," said Nandini.

According to committee members, just when some work on documenting biodiversity at Madiwala Lake began in 2020, the deputy conservator of forest, BBMP, who was heading the committee retired, halting the process altogether.

Sole PBR

The data for Bengaluru's maiden PBR was furnished by the then BMC with the help of volunteers from over 20 institutions, in 2009. But the document is not available on KBB's website, rendering the exercise futile.

"In the absence of PBR there is no way of knowing the changes in the city's biodiversity in the last 13 years or so. The PBR should be available on the KBB website for everyone to access. Technically, it should be available for people to understand what a PBR is," said Heblikar.

According to the most recent report submitted by the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) on the status of BMC formation and PBR preparation in Karnataka, while there is ample documentation of traditional knowledge and biodiversity, most of this information is kept under lock and key. The report cites the absence of a clear policy on sharing of information and patenting issues as reasons.

Local participation

Experts said PBRs have become nothing more than an exercise in listing species and information on biodiversity. There is a lack of community participation, defeating the purpose. Not only are we lagging in updating this important document and keeping it accessible, but the task of making the PBR has also been given to a handful of experts and NGOs, restricting the role of resident citizenry to data collection.

With the current developmental activities, this is too long a gap to not update the register

– Nandini N, head, BMC

"We had suggested ward-wise documentation of biodiversity to ensure participation of the local community. While we cannot involve every single person in the process, we should zero in on people with the right background and appoint them as ward coordinators. We should then train these volunteers who in turn would reach out to schools and colleges. The BMC should just play the role of a verifying agency. This model will create awareness in neighbourhood communities. However, we could not take it up further," added Heblikar.

Fund crunch

To prepare PBRs, BMCs require funds. While this document is prepared at gram panchayat, taluk and district level, the fund set aside is meagre. In Karnataka, an amount of Rs 25,000 is reserved for gram panchayat level PBR, Rs 80,000 is allocated for taluks and Rs 2 lakh is set apart for districts. Experts said the aforementioned allocations are inadequate to prepare good quality PBRs.

“A meagre Rs 25,000 is sanctioned for preparing the PBR in a gram panchayat — the amount is not released on time too. This process should be centralised whereby the KBB should collect the money from the gram panchayats and hand it over to the investigators directly,” said TV Ramachandra of the Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc.