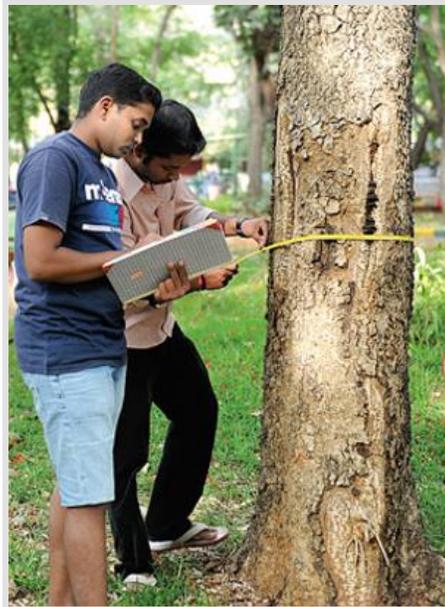


## Citizens volunteer to count trees, debunk BBMP's growth story

By Niranjana Kaggere, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | May 12, 2014, 02.00 AM IST



Volunteers measure the trees' circumference 4.5 feet from the ground

less than 30 per cent.

*Hundreds of citizens went on a tree count across the city and exposed the BBMP's claim that 63.5% of its saplings had survived. Their find revealed the number was a mere 30%*

For about 48 hours, hundreds of citizens branched out through the city, braving the scorching April heat, measure tapes in hand, kickstarting an unprecedented campaign, on a scale that Bangalore had never before seen. At the end of their two-day mission, they had uprooted the tall claims made in court by the civic agency, laying bare fact from fiction.

Civic agencies have long tried to assuage anxiety over the rampant decline of green cover in Bangalore by tom-tomming that they had planted three times what was felled to make way for road-widening. The Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) even touted numbers, declaring the success rate of its saplings to be 63.5 per cent. Last week, though, a band of citizens went around the city, literally counting the trees, and found it to be

Responding to widespread concern over mass tree felling in Bangalore, the Karnataka high court had initiated suo motu proceedings by way of a writ petition. The PIL was later combined with another PIL filed by city-based Environment Support Group challenging the road widening as being illegal, causing

During the hearing of the case on April 21, the BBMP's advocates placed before the HC bench, comprising Chief Justice D H Waghela and Justice M B Nagarathna, a document containing a compilation of tree-planting activities undertaken in Bangalore. The document claimed that between 2007 and 2013, the forest wing of the BBMP had planted more than 10 lakh trees and, on an average, 63.5 per cent of the saplings had survived.

However, finding the figures unconvincing, the petitioners decided to challenge the claim. "While facts and figures issued by agencies are usually accepted unquestioningly, we wanted to verify the details. But it was a tough decision as the next hearing was within two days. We obtained those documents and decided to get into action," explained Leo Saldanha of Environment Support Group.

With less than two days to cross-verify the BBMP's submission, ESG members pressed on the pedal to get as many volunteers possible. "We put up a request on our website, calling on people to volunteer in the effort. We also get steady support from the NGO Hasiru-Usiru, which has a volunteer group of about 800 people. Even though not all turned up, a significant number came forward to verify the data around their localities. Likeminded people shared our request on social networking sites and several volunteers joined through those channels as well. The response was overwhelming," Saldanha recalled.

ESG issued a standard set of guidelines to volunteers and citizens on how to go about the entire exercise. People were required to visit areas cited by the BBMP and count trees that appeared to be

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six years or younger. "The thumb rule was to measure at chest height — 4.5 ft from the ground — the circumference of the tree; it would measure approximately 12 inches or less," explained Saldanha. Volunteers then had to mail these details along with location and their contact numbers. "As the case was adjourned for hearing to April 25, we needed the data at least a day earlier so that we could prepare a detailed document and submit to the high court."

Sharing his experience, Sheshadri Ramaswamy, a field botanist with Hasiru-Usiru, who surveyed more than five places, said he could find only about 20 to 25 per cent of what was stated in the civic agency's documents.

"The BBMP claimed to have planted 1,800 saplings around Leprosy Hospital area on Magadi Road. But when I cross-checked, I could find only 17 trees, the girth of which I measured with tape. On G D Naidu Road in Rajajinagar, 200 trees were reportedly planted, while my count revealed only 62 trees."

K V R Somayaji, another citizen from Dollars Colony, JP Nagar 4th phase, reported, "I took up the area around Ragigudda. BBMP claimed to have planted 250 trees near the Government School and another 226 around the temple and Corporation Park. The first place is full of concrete buildings built by the Slum Board and there are absolutely no trees. At the Corporation Park, there were only old trees, with no trace of any new ones. The park is about 300 ft X 300 ft, and with huge trees already existing, there's no place to accommodate 226 new trees."

Thejesh G N, yet another volunteer, went a step further, "The BBMP claimed to have planted 100 trees on Mallya Road. To ensure the count was precise, I used a software called ODK to identify and verify saplings on both sides of the road and plot them on a map. I was able to identify only 49 saplings."

Som Thomas of Cooke Town said his interactions with long-standing members of RWAs of Bangalore East revealed that people could not recall any such afforestation activity. "Forest officials concerned in the BBMP too confirmed over the phone that no such activity had taken place in my ward, contrary to the claim of 250 trees being planted."

Sheshadri further clarified that between 1982 and 1987, a similar exercise was done under the supervision of then PCCF (Rtd) S G Neginahal. "He planted about 15 lakh trees and the success rate was 97 per cent. Almost all trees standing today date back to that period. But BBMP could not even breach that record with its less-than 25 per cent success rate."

Based on the citizens' verification, the petitioners have submitted a detailed report to the HC which will be taken up for hearing after the vacations, sources said.

The citizens' field verification report has come as a shocker to BBMP authorities. Though there were differences of opinions about the compilation of statistics, BBMP officials from the forest wing defended the documents placed before the HC. When Bangalore Mirror sought BBMP's reaction to the findings of citizens, BBMP replied they may not be true.

"I am yet to see the report filed by the petitioners," Brijesh Kumar, Chief Conservator of Forest, BBMP told BM. He, however, clarified his stance, saying, "BBMP takes up planting on a large scale, and it is economical as well (per seedling cost is cheap). Even if a small fraction of the entire drive survives, it is a major success. I dispute the 25-to-30 per cent finding. In an urban setting like Bangalore, even if 50 per cent of the saplings survive, it can be termed a great success."

Meanwhile, the citizens' drive has kicked up much dust, with questions being raised about the quality of planting and seedlings. While many point fingers at contractors, alleging they plant only defunct or rotten saplings, a few blame it on the improper release of funds. Tracking the problems of funding and procurement of saplings, BM discovered the ugly side of planting programmes.

Documents accessed by BM reveal that between 2010 and 2014, BBMP allocated a whopping Rs 140.12 crore for greening activities. Of this, BBMP actually released only Rs 38.2 crore. Requesting anonymity, a senior BBMP official explained, "In 2010-11, while the work done was worth Rs 39.23 crore, the sanctioned amount was just Rs 9.83 crore, indicating 25 per cent release of funds. Between 2012 and 2014, the percentage has gone down considerably. How can one expect quality work from contractors if they are not paid?"

Adding a new dimension to the entire conundrum, a contractor with BBMP revealed that there was no problem with the seedlings as they were the best and capable of adapting to local conditions. "What is wrong is the pattern of planting. Sometimes, we are asked to plant in a rocky terrain and in areas

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where there is no access to water. If there is a huge tree, we plant about 10 to 15 saplings around it. It is sheer luck even if one or two survive in such places. Sometimes we plant on the median where there is no scope for any seedling to grow. Such being the ground reality, how can one ensure the success of seedlings?"

As if all of this wasn't enough, the ongoing war between BBMP and contractors brought planting activity to a complete standstill in 2013-14. "As there was no sign of funds being released, we could not take up any planting work during the last financial year," explained a BBMP engineer.

The BBMP has now approved Rs 10 crore to plant an eye-popping 1,60,000 saplings. The forest wing aims to hit the ground following the first monsoon rain in June. One just hopes, another citizens' campaign will not be needed to dig out ugly truths.