

By Invitation: Whither our city?

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The past week has been bleak in Bengaluru. What initially brought relief to the hot summers quickly turned into a nightmare. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the city has already breached the 100 mm rainfall/day mark this month, classifying the event as 'heavy rainfall'. The high-intensity rains over the past few days have disrupted lives, resulting in waterlogged roads, submerged underpasses, overflowing drains, fallen trees, and widespread power outages.

This deluge, however, is not an isolated incident. Our analysis has shown that between 1990 and 2025, rainfall in May has seen a 130% increase, reflecting that May is gradually getting wetter with each passing year. IMD data also indicate that the city has experienced above-average rainfall in May over the past three years. Furthermore, the IMD has predicted moderate-to-heavy rainfall over the next few days as a result of the advancing southwest monsoon, underlining the urgent need for advance planning.

Historically sustained by its extensive network of interconnected tanks, Bengaluru has witnessed encroachment, real estate booms, and sordid urban planning over the years.

All these factors have led to a decline in the number of lakes and the natural interconnections between them. In its place are buildings, roads, malls and offices. Just as many Indigenous people teach, 'water never forgets', the tanks and their interconnections also have never forgotten. Water continues to flow through the interconnections, often inundating areas that were previously lakebeds and contributing to localised flooding.

Moreover, stormwater drains (SWDs) in the city are not equipped to handle the type of rainfall intensities we are seeing today. Improper de-silting of drains and mixing of sewage with run-off drains also cause many SWDs to overflow. The removed silt, often placed right outside the drain, is washed back into the drain with the subsequent rainfall. The contamination of solid waste in drains further exacerbates blockage, choking entry and exit points and causing a backflow of sewage and run-off into the roads during heavy rainfall episodes.

Given the current season, we must anticipate instances of flooding well into the monsoon period as well unless immediate action is taken. In the short term, i.e. the next 2-3 months, de-clogging of the drainage network must be prioritised so that the run-off is able to drain smoothly. Since the Bengaluru Traffic Police act as the first responders during flood events, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) must collaborate with the traffic police to determine site-specific problems and implement sensible, contextual solutions. Moreover, offices located in flood-prone areas must implement a pre-emptive work-from-home policy (WFH) during heavy rainfall days. This will support emergency response efforts undertaken by BBMP and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). This would not only reduce commuter stress and road congestion but also help the respective city departments focus on flood mitigation rather than being limited to traffic management alone.

At present, SWDs receive limited attention under the Revised Master Plan for Bengaluru (2031) and BBMP's existing master plan for drainage. Over the coming year, the state must focus on building a comprehensive SWD policy while ensuring coordinated efforts by all relevant line departments. Comprehensive SWD drain audits, especially of tertiary drains, will allow for a more granular understanding of flooding in the city. Considering the impacts of accelerating climate change and the rate of urbanisation, it is important to redesign the SWDs to adapt to higher-intensity rainfall events. More importantly, there is a dire need to ensure that sewage and run-off are separated. If strictly implemented, the city can explore constructing recharge wells within the SWDs to help refill its parched aquifers, especially given that almost 50% of the city relies on groundwater for its domestic demands.

Without swift and coordinated action, the risk of recurrent and severe urban flooding will only accelerate. It is essential that all stakeholders commit to building a cleaner, more resilient, and liveable city that we can truly call Namma Bengaluru.

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