

# Opinion: Can BBMP Bill be an opportunity to usher in 'swaraj' in Bengaluru?

October 14, 2020 Sandeep Anirudhan

## RESPONSE TO BBMP BILL

Indian cities have, in administrative terms, remained colonies of their respective state governments, giving residents little to no say in the way they are governed. The 74th Constitutional Amendment, enacted in 1992 as an afterthought to broadbase local governance in urban areas, has been ignored by almost all state governments.

The resulting disconnect between cities and their residents have reduced the latter's relationship with the city to that of consumers instead of responsible citizens who feel a sense of ownership or pride in their city.

## Why a BBMP Bill?

Karnataka government has introduced the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) Bill in the state legislature as fresh legislation for Bengaluru's governance. The Bill has been referred to a joint select committee, but all we hear are noises concerning the Mayor's term and the number of wards. Are these really the key issues, or are there more fundamental questions that need to be asked?

The BBMP presently is just a nominal body with no serious legislative, planning, or administrative powers. The demand for a new law is based on the premise that the present governance paradigm fails on many levels, leading to problems such as:

- Pollution and degeneration of our natural habitat
- Reduction of our green cover from a healthy 70% to just 3% in five decades
- A complete lack of holistic and sustainable urban planning, resulting in faulty public infrastructure, overpopulation and congestion
- Lack of environmental responsibility that has reduced what was once a city of thousand lakes to one with a few large septic tanks that are best avoided. The city is expected to run out of water soon.

## Some historical shortcomings

1) **Lack of an aspirational vision:** Our Constitution and its directive principles spell out a

vision for the kind of nation we need to build. But, do we ever hear what our city is envisioned to be? Do we build a healthy city? A sustainable city? A green city? An inclusive city?

Luckily for Kempe Gowda, the founder of Bengaluru, his mother gave him that vision in just one line: “Keregalam kattu, marangalam nedu”, ie., “Build lakes, plant trees”. But in modern times, our lack of vision has destroyed the city.

**2) Lack of understanding of ecology:** Governance is the art of the practical. But our city administration lacks an understanding of ecology and planning needed to keep the city habitable and healthy. Today’s top-down approach to development has ensured that the processes and knowledge that led to the city’s evolution, be they economic, social, geographical or cultural, are totally ignored. For example, sustainable watershed management of lakes has given way to importing water from far away sources such as rivers.



**There have been proposals to supply Sharavathi river water to Bengaluru. Instead of conserving its own water resources, Bengaluru has been importing water from faraway sources. Pic: Wikimedia**

**3) Jurisdiction and manageability:** As a city grows, it impacts the entire district. However, we have followed a short-sighted practice of setting limits for the city's administration, with the surrounding areas governed by different authorities. These differences lead to speculative investments just across the city limits in adjoining villages and taluks, leading to urban sprawl and unplanned development. This puts pressure on those areas and creates congestion in the city. Even wards are so badly delimited, based on population as the only parameter, without

considering other aspects such as geography, manageability of the ward, watershed, etc.

**4) Lack of planning:** The 74th constitutional amendment prescribes that a Metropolitan Planning Committee be constituted with people's representation, which facilitates ground-up planning by area sabhas and ward planning committees to generate the Masterplan for the city. But the state government has been appointing parastatal agencies (agencies that are separate from the government, but whose activities serve the State) like the BDA to create the Masterplan, which is illegal.

The bigger challenge, however, is resolving the disconnect between the planning authority and the executive. Even worse, there is no capacity building, there are no urban planners or transport planners employed by the city or any agency that plans for the city. As a result, every intervention in the city is on a project-oriented approach. This leads, at one level, to mindless projects, and at another, to the collapse of entire ecosystems, such as the rajakaluve-lake system which provided water security for the city for centuries.

The lack of an integrated, holistic masterplan, which includes a transport plan, sees the city administration and state government resort to ad-hoc projects that do not solve any problem systemically. This leaves the field open to vested interests to interfere and influence the city through dubious consultants, lobbies and infrastructure peddlers, in the garb of NGOs. This also leaves the city at the mercy of the infamous consultant-contractor-politician-manufacturer nexus.



**Despite public protests, tree felling continues without public consultations, often for projects that are unnecessary and have severe environmental costs. File Pic**

Solutions are imposed on the city to benefit some business, and then later authorities try to patch-up problems that arise from it. Examples are the expensive Metro project, which is ill-planned, and imitates the existing rail network. Other examples of hare-brained projects are the Steel Bridge, elevated corridors and Taxi Pods projects, which citizens protested against and stopped.

**5) Lack of legislative and executive powers:** The BBMP at present is only an executor of laws created by the state legislature and in a very limited way. It has absolutely no powers to legislate on the myriad issues that play out in its jurisdiction. Hence, the political class also does not take it seriously.

**6) Lack of citizen engagement:** Citizens are neither engaged nor consulted on any decision that affects their lives directly, be it land use planning, control over commons, or decisions that affect the ecology. The non-involvement of the public in decision-making reduces oversight, resulting in rampant corruption and poor decision-making.

**7) Bengaluru is a parastatal jungle:** Let's face it, Bengaluru's governance is a total mess due to the multiplicity of agencies that do not even talk to each other. The state government keeps intervening in the city by creating new parastatal agencies to carry out projects, overlapping and undermining the city administration.

Agencies like the BDA, BMRDA, BWSSB, KRDCL, BESCO, BMRCL and various departments of Karnataka government have control over several aspects of the city. Effectively, this has led to multiple governments in this city; the local government has no primacy or no control over how the city is managed. Information exists in islands, often replicated or conflicting.

**8) Outdated methods:** As one of the world's IT capitals, it is shameful that the power of GIS mapping and modelling are not utilised for planning this city's growth. While there is a huge wealth of knowledge among citizens, the government does not leverage this to improve governance.

**So, the big question: Will the new BBMP Bill attempt to solve these issues? If not, it's just another wasteful exercise!**

**A few recommendations:**

Time is running out, the city is crumbling. This is what the state government urgently needs to do:

**1) Any legislation has to respond to the challenges of its times:** We are going through a critical time, facing both global and local challenges such as climate emergency, pandemics, deforestation, pollution, water shortage, etc. **The BBMP bill has to re-imagine the idea of a city government and reposition the BBMP as the steward of the city, one that is tasked with the sustainability and regeneration of the city.** Nothing less is acceptable.

**2) A green agenda** should not just be part of, but should form the core of any urban governance bill. An 'Ecology plan' should form the basis of the 'Masterplan' for the city, with a strong emphasis on 'localisation' and 'community engagement', especially for water and waste management, food security, energy, mobility, land use, etc. It should include a directive for capacity-building by employing ecologists, urban planners and transport planners in every department, to ensure sustainable planning and development.

**3) Define the city's limits:** A clear outer limit needs to be set on the growth of the city. Establish laws that do not allow growth beyond the 'bio-limit' of the city's geography. Establish a framework of development that is within sustainable parameters, based on local resource and ecology.

**4) Taking responsibility for resource use:** A metropolis has impact way beyond the city itself. It affects life and environment for hundreds of kilometres beyond its boundaries, due to its hunger for energy and resources.

*Laws must be instituted to penalise the import of resources and to incentivise the use of local renewable resources, so as to encourage sustainable living and limit the city's carbon footprint.*

**5) An agenda for swaraj and decolonisation:** Devolution of powers to local government needs to be complete. In all matters related to planning, legislation and administration of the city, the sole authority should be BBMP, which should manage vital functions such as law and order, mobility/transport, essential public services, social development, community building,

education, health, power, water, food security, environment, etc. **The state government must be taken out of the equation.**

Nomenclature, positions and power structures that were inherited from a centralised colonial administration need to be dismantled and the commons (the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society) have to be returned to the communities.

Decentralisation needs to percolate to the lowest levels, empowering area sabhas, ward committees, etc., with elected members in each of these, and the BBMP Council should transform into a city republic. Ward committees and area sabhas should have responsibility for managing local ecological services and resources.

*Citizen engagement should be an essential part of decision-making. Public consultation should be mandatory for all legislations and projects.*

**6) Remove conflicts:** Merge all parastatal agencies with the BBMP so as to streamline administration.

**7) Public information and data access:** Unify all databases and geographical and spatial information maps. Have them in the public domain to ensure transparency and to inculcate public ownership. Use latest tools for GIS mapping, solution modelling and planning.

**8) Holistic jurisdiction for Bengaluru district:** It would be wise for the Bill to address the entire Bengaluru Urban and Rural districts under one law, to avoid the tangled mess of multiple jurisdictions and to allow for holistic planning of the district, applying ecological principles, and establishing distinct urban zones, green zones, rural zones, etc., with specific restraints, to prevent urban sprawls and unplanned growth.

**9) The Planning Imperative:** Planning should follow life and processes of the community, instead of imposing on it. Each ward needs its own planning zones, defined by its own planning committees. Capacity building to undertake this in terms of education and awareness generation should be the BBMP's priority.

**9) Democratic ward committees and area sabhas:** Where do citizens learn governance and public leadership? Democracy is learnt by immersion in real activities, by participating in the community and governance processes, dealing with people, lobbying with representatives and government mechanisms to shape policies, ie., by taking ownership of the community's destiny!

Area sabhas and ward committees are the nearest arm of real governance for a citizen, to both engage and shape a community's future. This is where citizens can cut their teeth in democratic participation, and those publicly inclined can progress further in politics with a sound foundation. Hence ward committees and area sabhas need to be democratic exercises, the members of these committees need to be elected instead of being nominated.

*If we lack quality politicians at the state and national level today, is the price we have paid for not empowering the foundation of local democracy – 'local government'.*

**10) And finally... The mayor's term and the number of wards:** By now it is obvious that these are the least difficult of all questions; and the answers are really simple:

- Yes, we require a full-term mayor.
- Wards have to be of a manageable size, smaller the better. Converting the de-facto old village boundary to ward boundary might be the simplest and most effective solution.
- There should be no limit to the total number of wards.

## **But wait...where is democracy in this Bill for democracy?**

Do we need to stress that the legislation should itself be framed democratically **through a comprehensive and transparent public consultation** process. Lest we lose sight of the objective of the Bill, which is to create an inclusive governance paradigm that allows every resident to take ownership of the city.

*[Disclaimer: This article is a citizen contribution. The views expressed here are those of the*

*individual writer(s) and do not reflect the position of Citizen Matters. A brief version of this article was **published** in the Times of India on October 4.]*

#### **About Sandeep Anirudhan** > 4 Articles

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