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## Where has the 'green' gone?

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Realty development along the Ambattur lake. Photo: M. Vedhan



A view of the dry Adyar riverbed, December 20, 2015. Photo: M. Moorthy

*The author writes on unchecked, illegal realty growth along the city's eco-sensitive zones and how the city's ecology has been destroyed in the name of development*

As Chennai grapples with a space crunch, the realty sector is forced to address the shortage of housing. This, over a period of time, has led to an exponential growth of the city's limits. Unfortunately, in the name of development, we have eaten into our natural reserves and ecologically sensitive zones, such as the Pallikaranai marshland, Adyar River, OMR corridor –Perugundi, Pallikaranai, Muttukaddu region, Tambaram's many lakes, the Vandalur forest, Nungambakkam's lake area, and the Chetpet Lake, to name a few.

Land prices shoot up once an area is declared a natural reserve and in the last few years, these prime areas have seen maximum realty 'development' despite stringent coastal regulation norms. These rules prohibit development in areas within these Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs) and/or within 500mts of the high tide line from the Bay of Bengal.

In February 2015, the National Green Tribunal had restricted the Ministry of Environment & Forests from granting environmental clearance or permitting activities in these areas, directing it to demarcate ESAs in Gujarat, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Kerala. This restriction means that projects in five categories – mining, quarrying, sand mining, thermal power plants, projects with an area size of over 20,000 sq.m., township and area development projects with an area of 50 hectares and above or red category industries, will not be granted environmental clearance.

Any violation of the prescribed regulations not only impacts the eco-system but also puts residents at risk. A. Shankar, National Director, JLL, says the environmental impact of constructing along eco-sensitive areas is immense. "Our natural reserves are depleting due to unauthorised

construction and activities such as mining. Illegal constructions often go unnoticed as they start off on a small scale. It is only when they turn into huge settlements, we realise the impact.”

Several lakes in Chennai have disappeared gradually, as buildings have been built over them. Areas such as Adyar, T. Nagar, and Nungambakkam were once verdant agricultural fields. Large scale deforestation causes irreversible soil degradation, disruption of natural carbon sequestration, erratic climate, and has a disastrous impact on life, says Pavitra Sriprakash, Architect and Chief Designer at Shilpa Architects. Relentless realty development along the coast has caused sea water to ingress into the water table and those living along our waterways and remaining lakes have been hit during the tsunami and monsoon.

While government officials and statutory bodies are to blame for granting approvals, developers are equally responsible for constructing in sensitive zones. Rising land prices and development opportunities close to established locations of the city have given rise to small-time developers and fly-by-night operators. “Projects take off as unauthorised developments and are later regularised,” says Shankar. Violations and deviations of development regulations are the root cause for the degradation of our natural reserves and stringent measures need to be taken by relevant authorities.

Details regarding land use must be uploaded on the official website to help increase transparency, says Suresh Jain of Vijay Shanthi Builders. “Areas need to be certified by the government and once these details are furnished online, it will benefit both, the buyer and the developer. Economic development cannot be considered in isolation. The four ‘E’s - Ecology, Energy, Economics and Equity are intertwined.”

We have stringent laws in place but it is their implementation and enforcement that is lacking, says Xavier Benedict, a city-based urban planner and architect. Our wetlands, lakes, and rivers function as recharging zones, and as we encroach these green spaces, we are simultaneously creating heat islands and reducing their water recharging capacity. Buildings overlooking natural water bodies have always been a USP across the world. , but that is not the case in India. “Although Chennai is home to many water bodies — prominent ones being the Adyar and Cooum rivers — instead of using them to our advantage, we have exploited them and they continue to be polluted and unusable. It’s a shame none of our developments face water bodies,” he says.

Often, developers don’t provide buyers adequate information regarding the land the project has been developed on; whether it has been built on reclaimed land, or if it is within an eco-sensitive zone. Transparency from developers is the need of the hour, says Shankar. The Real Estate Bill will make realty development regularised and transparent, accountable transactions will enhance sales. He suggests that the marketing and/or sale of a project should commence only after receipt of all requisite approvals from the issuing authority, along with a planning permit structural report and title report. Any deviation or violation of the above by the developer should be severely dealt by concerned authorities.

While developers need to be made more accountable, awareness among buyers is crucial too. Systems such as the Land Information System (LIS) and Geographical Information System (GIS) will increase awareness among buyers. GIS and smart solutions in LIS integrate basic property data, land use, land ownership information, and development regulations applicable on the property, on a GIS platform. Until these systems develop, clearly marked Google or Bing Maps, indicating all water bodies, CRZ lines, eco-sensitive zones or sanctuaries, can help. “If such data is made public, it is easier to hold developers and officials accountable when violations occur,” says Benedict.

The way forward lies in the stringent enforcement of laws governing land development and introduction of laws that encourage vertical growth of cities. This will not only ease the demand for land but also control the haphazard and uncontrollable growth of our cities, adds Sriprakash.

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