

MONKEY CAGE

Urban flooding has everything to do with real estate corruption

In Bengaluru and elsewhere, shady land deals and the effects of climate change are a disastrous mix

Analysis by Malini Ranganathan

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Last week, one-third of Pakistan was submerged due to catastrophic monsoons, and the city of Jackson, Miss., announced a health emergency after heavy rains damaged a water treatment plant.

In India, the city of Bengaluru was also reeling from flooding. Lifeboats rescued residents from inundated apartments in this metropolis of 13 million in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. And fish appeared on highways as rain continued to batter the city.

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres called the extreme rains this summer “a monsoon on steroids.” News stories spotlighted the fact that vulnerable countries are not major drivers of global warming. Pakistan, for instance, accounts for no more than 0.5 percent of global carbon emissions, yet 33 million people have been impacted by this year’s heat waves and heavy rains, with authorities predicting secondary disasters like disease outbreaks and food shortages.

But this narrative tends to focus primarily on torrential monsoons and droughts, and excludes how rainfall events interact with local political and economic factors — especially those to do with real estate capitalism and corruption. My research suggests this mix can also have disastrous effects.

Rapid economic gains encouraged risky real estate moves

Bengaluru, formerly known as Bangalore, is “India’s Silicon Valley.” English-speaking engineers drive India’s tech industry, and a call center workforce drawn from across the country provides cheap services for hundreds of multinational companies headquartered in Europe and America. Indian policymakers actively promote the city’s “IT/BT” (information technology/biotechnology) economy — and that’s had an outsize effect on the local housing market. White-collar workers helped make Bengaluru’s real estate sector one of the most profitable in the country, but also largely unaffordable for the city’s majority working-class residents.

The city’s residential and commercial development has a longer history of agrarian caste and class power relations — which means feudal landowners were able to cash in on rapid urbanization by converting farmland and wetland into urban real estate. The undulating and rain-fed Deccan region is traversed by centuries-old lakes and wetlands

(*keres*) connected by a gravity-fed latticework of rivulets and canals (*raja kaluves*). Technically, the government owns the area in and around these canals, known as *kharab-B* land (literally, wasteland). For all practical purposes, however, anyone with the right connections and muscle power can claim and build on this land.

Developers and land brokers were thus able to grab “free” parcels of watery land, aiming to cover the waterways and storm drains and sell off the land, often informally and without the requisite permissions.

City engineers that I spoke to explained that often residents are not aware that their houses are sitting on or blocking a storm water drain. Developers leveled the land and covered drains with mud, increasing the area to be sold off. This is how an area becomes flood prone.

Through this process, developers constructed both higher-end apartment buildings and IT parks, as well as substandard subdivisions without municipal infrastructure largely for the city’s lower-class buyers and renters. The Karnataka government itself legally drained and concretized dozens of wetlands and canals throughout the 20th century for sports stadiums and other public projects. This encouraged private developers to follow suit, despite efforts since the early 2000s to ban lake conversion and conserve wetlands.

‘Land mafias’ profited from these deals

For the past decade, I have been researching informal urbanization and the real estate “mafias” that deal in Bengaluru’s (wet)land and water markets. This isn’t about gun-toting gangsters, necessarily — instead, the term describes the close collaboration, colloquially referred to as a corrupt “nexus,” between bureaucrats, builders, landowners and other intermediaries involved in urban real estate deals in flood-prone areas.

It’s an approach to land development that has become common throughout much of the world: developers literally conjure property from water. In Bengaluru, even moderate rainfall can cause overflowing lakes that overwhelm the city’s storm water drainage and flood the streets. Residents of these areas are particularly vulnerable to flooding — and to the subsequent government efforts to address the flooding.

Watchdog groups claim that government development boards actively sanction development on sensitive lake land by bypassing environmental and infrastructural clearances. When activists and lawyers bring infractions to light, officials legalize the projects after the fact. Other critics claim the “land mafia” is working at the highest levels to thwart fines for bending the rules and to pay off politicians and judges to rule in developers’ favor.

The urban poor pay the price

The city government quickly announced an encroachment removal drive after Bengaluru’s latest round of flooding, which typically results in the demolition of the homes of poorer and less politically connected groups. With its roots in colonial law, the term “encroachment” in India describes an illicit advance on government land, including lakes and wetlands. In the aftermath of the economic development wave since the early 1990s, when the Indian government pursued increasingly liberal policies to boost economic growth, officials strategically avoid encroachment removal efforts aimed at the wealthy, and instead direct them at less politically connected groups. This results in the demolition of slums and housing inhabited by Dalit (oppressed caste) workers, slum dwellers and migrant laborers. It effectively calls out these groups, their actions and, indeed, their personhood, as illegal “encroachers.”

But land grabs and land development are very much an organized process involving powerful private and government organizations — not India’s urban poor. Analysts point out that global corporations and developers created the Orion Mall, Bagmane Tech Park and Mantri Special Economic Zone — all located in areas with heightened flood risk. These types of projects could not have happened without the involvement of government officlas, and their luxury developers are seldom punished for any encroachments.

There is a parallel here in terms of this week's disaster response: Much of the media attention in India has focused on flood-related losses within the city's tech corridor, with less coverage of the plight of some 1,500 slum dwellers nearby in need of shelter and assistance after their homes flooded in a second round of heavy rains.

The disasters of summer 2022 point out the inequalities of global climate change at the national level. The Bengaluru story sheds light on the uneven nature of climate-related culpability and vulnerability at the local level. It also tells us that efforts at the local and national level to address flood risk will benefit from a better understanding of how climate factors intersect with the history and political economy of real estate capitalism.

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