

26/7
FLOODS

20 YEARS AFTER
THE DELUGE

As Mumbai marks two decades since the 2005 disaster—and countless reports, committees and promises—TOI travels along the Mithi River to find a patchwork of half-finished projects, some unchecked pollution, and memories of a flood

A Clean-Up But No Cruise

By Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar
& Richa Pinto

Two decades after the great flood of 2005 revealed the importance of the Mithi, a journey down the river shows that the restoration of this vital waterway remains incomplete. And along the banks, concrete is rising—a sign that the lessons of 26/7 have not been fully absorbed.

Near the start of this 18-km river, at Filterpada, improvements are visible. Slums have been cleared for a retaining wall and service road that lets cleaning machines access the river. A sewer line has been laid to run sewage water to a new treatment plant at Powai, where the water is cleaned and discharged back upstream.

Farther down, a tunnel under LBS Road is almost complete, and is intended to divert 168 million litres of dirty water a day from two major drains to the Dharavi treatment facility. Here, as elsewhere, the river has been widened.

Near the airport, especially, that widening has made a difference. The pinched stretch under the runway—the cause of havoc 20 years ago—has acquired another culvert. This addition means that “even if it rains 360 mm in 3 hours, the airport will not flood from the overflow of the river,” said Kapil Gupta, an urban drainage expert with IIT Bombay.

But other gaps persist. Slums still sit close to the river banks at Marol and Kurla, though now shielded by walls. Almost 750 shanties await removal, says additional municipal commissioner (projects) Abhijit Bangar, noting that a dearth of alternative housing makes the process slow. The municipality will prioritise settlements at Saki Naka, which is a choke point, he adds. And in many areas, including at JVL Road where metro work has been on, sewer lines are not complete.

The river reflects the gaps. The waters darken and slow as they accumulate sewage on the way to the sea, feeding the odd patch of vegetation. At CST Bridge, Kurla, scrap-metal yards leak metals and paint into the watercourse. (You can’t dip a toe in this water; let alone swim in it like Parisians did in the newly cleaned-up River Seine.) The black waters widen at Bandra Kurla Complex, then start to narrow again near the sea.

The work for this tidal stretch is still pending. The plan includes waste interceptors and tidal gate pumps. The latter may be critical: it was the combination of high tide with downpour that caused

the Mithi to swamp the city on 26/7.

But even as the work inches forward, experts question some of the interventions. In 2018, a Supreme Court-appointed expert committee recommended a string of small STPs to treat the water locally as well as flood risk zoning of the catchment area. Neither was implemented.

The panel also criticised the widespread use of retaining walls. While vertical concrete slabs may be needed at the airport and other dense pockets, they said, other areas would have been better off with sloping embankments of stone or other permeable materials. “Natural slope stabilisation could have been adopted,” in some places, says Rakesh Kumar, former NEERI director who led the court committee. “Rivers need to interface with the soil around them.”

Stalin Dayanand of Vanashakti, who has fought to remove some walls, suggests they defy river hydrology. “Rivers have to swell horizontally not vertically,” he says, adding, “If you concretise everything, how will rain-water percolate into land?”

Bangar argues that RCC walls are good barriers against encroachment. “They are hard to break, and those areas remain encroachment free,” he says.

Another type of concrete has been rising near the river—high-rises, some of them luxury. While the committee had suggested a 50-metre no development zone of parks and retention ponds, city rules mandate only six metres. With much land privately owned, a 50-metre buffer zone, says Bangar, “is a big task to maintain, both financially and practically, given the nature of development around the Mithi.”

Without such zoning, however, the service road simply clears the way for construction, says Stalin. “The river is another cash cow,” he adds, referring to the ongoing allegations about desilting contracts.

The BMC plans to make holding ponds on public land. Can’t developers be asked to incorporate permeable surfaces or ponds too? “The [development control] rules have to change for that,” says Bangar. “We can put conditions but they need to be part of a city-wide plan.”

Such a plan is needed, he says. “Right now, we are just firefighting. But with changing rainfall patterns and climate change, we need a long-term vision.”

Back at the river’s end, no larger vision is visible. At Mahim, the smell of sewage begins to fade as the salty sea air sweeps in. The river narrows again—pinched by bridges, hampered by silt, waiting to be set free.

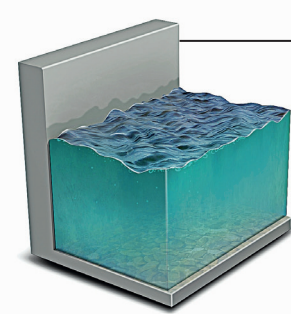
PIPE DREAMS: After homes at Filterpada, Powai were flooded in 2005, many were shifted to let the river be widened and walled. Treated sewage water is discharged here, as part of rejuvenation efforts



Pics: S L Shanthi Kumar

JOURNEY OF A RIVER

The Mithi is a seasonal watercourse that springs from the overflow of Vihar Lake, then runs down 17.8-km through the city, past Aarey, through industrial Marol and Saki Naka, under the airport runway, around the Bandra Kurla Complex, and out into Mahim Bay

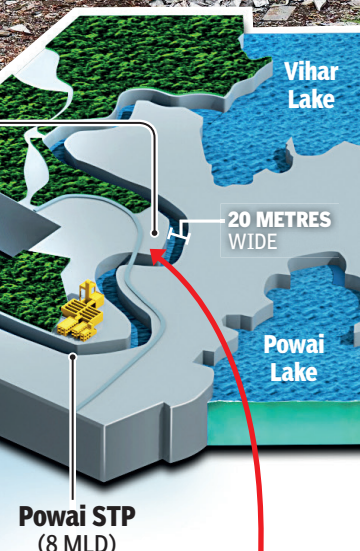


25-km-long mostly concrete wall built along the river for flood protection

8.6 km of new service road complete

7.7 km of 10.2 km sewer line laid until Powai

13 major nullahs flow into river



FILTERPADA | POWAI

The space you stand on was filled with homes

At Filterpada, a new service road allows vehicles and pedestrians to access the Mithi. With his granddaughter Zohra in his arms, Hafeez Khara points to the road beneath our feet. “This very space that you stand on was filled with homes,” he says.

When the 2005 flood hit, residents climbed to the top floors or fled up the hill to the temple and mosque. “We had to watch helplessly as everything—TVs, phones—was destroyed,” says Khara.

The river hasn’t flowed into the dense settlement since, thanks in part to the buffer of the new road. Sewers take the area’s wastewater to a treatment plant, which filters the water and discharges it back into the river. Some young residents like 23-year-old Sohah Khan also try to keep the area free of plastic. “We explain to people how the garbage goes into the ocean and spoils nature,” he says.

But the area is not entirely flood free. When it rains heavily and the river rises, the gutter water can’t drain and swamps the low-lying ground floor shops and homes. Pumps would help, says Supriya, a long-time resident. “When we call the [authorities], they come but often after the water goes down.”

JARIMARI | SAKINAKA

Drains still get clogged in the monsoon

On a soaking Sunday afternoon, children whoop with joy as they lather their heads with shampoo in one of Jari Mari’s labyrinthine lanes. Mohammed Ashraqui, the 70-year-old shopkeeper who handed them the product, looks on grimly. “I lost everything that day—my entire inventory, my fridge,” he says, indicating the water had risen 15 feet high.

Jari Mari was one of the worst affected by the 2005 flood. A wall lines the slum today but back then, there was no barrier. “Water from the Mithi would flood into the colony every time the river was in spate,” says Mohammed Yasin, a social activist. Yasin and other young men here lifted families out through roofs to safe ground in the area’s madrasas, mosques, and schools. When people returned home days later, they had to clean out half-foot-high muck. Altruistic citizens, not government, pieced life back together. “A businessman friend from Dongri supplied over 1,000 families with meals for two weeks,” says Yasin. While affected households were to receive Rs 5,000 compensation, middlemen siphoned off part of it, he says. Some received just Rs 2,000.

Twenty years later, conditions haven’t changed much, residents say. In narrow passageways, 20 minutes of rain raises four inches of water. While some drains are protected by wire mesh to sieve out solid waste, most are not. “The BMC should clean the drains,” says Mohammed Yakub Khan, who was in third grade in 2005. Many families have raised their homes’ plinth by 1.5-2 feet. In 2006, the BMC formed rescue teams in partnership with Home Guard, nonprofits, and others to help evacuate people during emergencies. They still patrol the area, says volunteer Lavu Mayekar.

Back at the shop, Ashraqui says he sometimes recalls the terrible things he saw that flood day, like the buffaloes from the local tabela being swept away. “But then the memory passes, and it’s back to life as usual.”

— Joanna Fernandes



Pics: Sanjay Hadkar



This sewage treatment plant opened in 2023 at Powai and treats 4-5 MLD every day

MITHI PROJECT COSTS

Spent ₹2199 cr since 2005

Additional ₹2000 cr Planned

“Flooding is not just about desilting or retaining walls—it needs a fundamental shift in how we plan for future urban climate realities”

—ABHIJIT BANGAR, ADDITIONAL MUNICIPAL COMMISSIONER-PROJECTS

“A more water-sensitive, people-oriented development is needed”

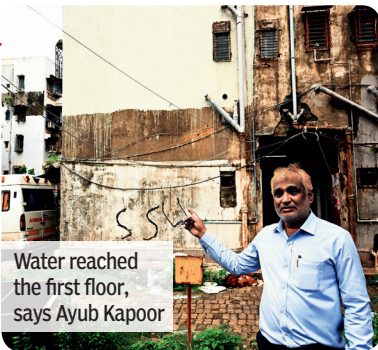
—RAKESH KUMAR, FORMER DIRECTOR OF NEERI

CATCHMENT

7295 hectares area of land draining into river

We don’t know where the body came from

The rains didn’t intensify until the afternoon. But by early evening, it had rained so much that water began gushing up the ground floor toilets in this 1970s-era complex of almost 700 apartments. Soon after, the river invaded the colony. The residents fled to the upper floors, recalls Shahzad Khan, a chartered accountant who was just 12 years old in 2005.



Water reached the first floor, says Ayub Kapoor

Outside the compound, on LBS Road, people were standing on the roofs of stranded BEST double-decker buses, waiting

for the authorities to rescue them, he says. What Khan remembers most is the stunned silence of the commuters. The only noise was the “incessant sound of pouring rain.”

Today, an unfinished retaining wall lines the river. Two heavy-duty pumps bought with the aid of the state government help drain the knee-high water during heavy rains. But the memory of the flood lives on in the stories of elders, says 18-year-old Japjot Singh, adding, “No one can forget what happened.”

For older residents, many questions about that day remain. 54-year-old Shaikh

TAXIMEN’S COLONY | KURLA

G Jilani, ex-chair of the colony, blames the flooding on the development of Bandra-Kurla Complex over low-lying land. “The complex was built over the flood-control mechanism of the Mithi,” he says. Current chair Anwar Qureshi doesn’t know if all the ground floor residents were compensated. The biggest mystery: the identity of a toddler whose body floated into the compound as the water receded. “We still don’t know where he came from,” says Jilani, adding, “We pray that such a scenario never occurs again.”

— Vijay Singh