

'Pete' area testimony to narrow planning

Bangalore's oldest commercial hub, the Pete area, has over a thousand silk shops, making it the most fire-prone place in the City. One of the highest revenue-generating localities, it does not have a solid road structure and an organised plan to prevent a potential fire accident. Business is burgeoning in the Balepet textile zone. The existing shops are adding floors to their buildings, but the labyrinth of passages and staircases will prove fatal for people in case of a fire accident.

"There is no law prescribing safety measures for expansion of roads and streets. Soon, there will be many more tall buildings. When a fire accident occurs, the situation will be really dangerous," says a local shopkeeper.

Tharagupet houses a variety of traders who constantly need supplies of raw materials. The police have given permission for trucks and autorickshaws to enter the area for frequent transportation of goods, leaving only half the road space free for a fire tender to pass through in an emergency situation. The constant movement of vehicles will be an obstacle for a fire tender.

A trader says, "I pay Rs 1.2 lakh a month as rent. But my customers are not allowed to park their vehicles outside my shop. They are in constant fear of their vehicles being towed away. Sometimes, trucks are parked along the roads the whole day for no reason. This road is thoroughly misused and will pose hurdles for people escaping a fire."

Avenue Road was dug up a month ago to replace the 40-year-old drainage system. Though the shopkeepers are happy with the project, they are apprehensive about the time taken to clean up the mess it has created. The road is uneven and unkempt. The Avenue Road Association, armed with a petition signed by 50 shopkeepers, approached local corporator Shiva Kumar over the narrow roads and gullies. But the corporator did not respond. A jeweller says, "The uneven path will create hurdles for a fire engine and prevent it from reaching the troubled spot in time."

Ashok Kumar, owner of a hardware shop in one of the inconspicuous lanes, complains of shrinking space. "Ten years ago, an autorickshaw could park outside my shop. Today, it is impossible. None of the buildings coming up has any back-up plan in a fire situation. There is no facility provided by the government to ensure organised parking to let a fire engine through in an emergency. The shops are small and there are no gaps between them. If there is a fire, it can easily spread to the neighbouring shops." Being a commercial hub, firecrackers

are sold in abundance by hawkers and shops here during Deepavali. The area becomes overcrowded during the festival and entry is blocked for vehicles. Crackers are burst on footpaths, in the middle of the road and in unlikely corners.

Krishnamurthy, vice president of the Avenue Road Association, is cut up with the government's apathy. "There was a fire at Unix Plaza on Avenue Road during Deepavali last year. The damage was minimal, but it failed to serve as a wake-up call to the police who are indifferent to the consequences of bursting crackers," he says.

Congested Goripalya

"The thought of a fire accident in Goripalya is worrying. But we have equipped ourselves with mist bikes and small four-wheelers by which our fire personnel can quickly reach the spot and put out minor fires," says Chengappa of the Karnataka State Fire and Emergency Service.

There has been no progress on BBMP's one year-old plan on road-widening at Goripalya. Traffic congestion on narrow roads continues to be a big problem for the residents.

According to officials at the North Fire Station, Mysore Road, there are frequent calls from the area about LPG cylinder leaks, electric short circuits and people getting trapped inside their houses after a fire accident. However, given the congested roads in the area, the fire department initially dispatches a bullet mist bike 'Agni' with two firemen, to douse minor fires. In case of a major fire, the Agni team will assess the situation and communicate it to its parent station about the machinery and manpower required to contain it.

Mohammed Hameed, a local resident, says, "Many times, emergency services are required in the area. Unfortunately, they are not able to reach the spot. But we co-ordinate with the officials to make things easier for them. We either rescue the fire accident victims or carry fire extinguishing equipment ourselves to the accident spots. We feel the fire department's work will be easier if the road expansion work is undertaken."

There are no inflammable industries in the area, but due to a large number of people thronging religious places in Goripalya, evacuation of victims during emergencies is a major cause for concern, says a fire department official.

Since certain areas in Goripalya are completely inaccessible to heavy fire tenders, the fire department deploys hoses that are approximately 2,000-5,000 metres long. The exercise is not only time-consuming, but large quantity of water is wasted in the process, he said.

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