

RANJANI MADHAVAN

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Work Experience

Location / Duration

Deccan Chronicle, Reporter

- Wrote stories primarily about Transport and Metro. Also, worked on Horticulture, Tourism and Education as secondary beats.
- Wrote features for special columns like Urban Legend, Chat Room and others.
- 150 bylines and a growing network of sources among the Public, Government, Experts, Activists and NGOs.

Bangalore
July 2016-
ongoing

Press Trust of India, Intern

- Reported, edited and translated crime and entertainment reports in the news agency format
- Wrote a report on a Bollywood choreographer, that was reprinted in several newspapers - Indian Express, Times of India, Business Standard and 12 digital sites.
- Assessed impact of PTI reports in English dailies

New Delhi
Oct-Nov'15

The New Indian Express, Intern

- Reported for the main paper.
- Wrote features for City Express and Edex, the education supplement

Bangalore
May- Jun'15

Action Aid, Intern

- Worked for the campaign against "Elite Capture of Urban Governance issues"
- Researched through RTIs, collaborated with members of the local government
- Promoted awareness of campaign through the media

Bangalore,
Nov-Dec '14

Environment Support Group, Intern

- Wrote reports on workshops conducted
- Redesigned company brochure
- Interviewed villagers as a part of field work
- Shot and edited videos.

Bangalore,
May- Jul '14

Teach for India, Teaching and Admin Volunteer

- Taught a class of 4th grade students from economically backward background.
- Evaluating answer scripts of tests, preparing question papers and conducting classes in the absence of mentor

Chennai,
Nov-Dec '13

Computer Skills

- Quark Express · Adobe Premier Pro · Microsoft Word and Power Point
- In Design · Final Cut

Languages
English,
Kannada and

Education

Bachelor of Journalism, Symbiosis Institute for Media and Communication GPA: **3.05**

Secondary Education (2nd P.U.C), Christ College Percentage: **88**

High School Degree, Venkat International Public School GPA/Percentage: **10 CGPA/ 95 %**

Pune, May '16

Blr, May '13

Blr, May '11

Co-Curricular Activities

Media

· Used UNI agency reports, to select top 10 front page worthy news for college website, editing headlines and making a dropdown list.

Literary

- Publication team of Christ Junior College magazine "We Care"
- Wrote book reviews for Christ Junior College magazine "Perspectives"

Communication

- Model United Nations, Delegate of Chile in the Economic and Social Council
- Participated in a Communication Skills Workshop organized by "Toastmasters Organization"

6 WORK SAMPLES

1) Bengaluru suburban rail: No funds in budget

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | **RANJANI MADHAVAN**

Published Feb 4, 2017, 3:49 am IST

Track doubling projects have received 20% lesser funds as compared to last year.



Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu has not allocated a single rupee for the suburban rail as promised earlier.
(representational Image)

Bengaluru: In a shocker to Bengaluru, Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu has not allocated a single rupee for the suburban rail as promised earlier, reveals the 'pink book', which contains the detailed budget of the Indian Railways, that was released on Friday.

"The Centre had promised to take up the projects with the state government sharing 80 per cent of the cost. But the state had requested for a 50:50 formula. Suburban rail needs Rs 100 crore, but nothing has been allotted for it," said Mr Sanjeev V. Dyamannavar, an expert from Praaja RAAG.

Many others also felt disappointed by the Railway Budget. "The Baiyappanahall coaching terminal got only Rs 32 crore of the needed Rs 116 crore. DRM Sanjiv Agarwal said it will be completed by 2018, but how can that happen if they are not given sufficient funds," asked Mr T.P. Lokesh, a member of the Karnataka Railway Vedike. Karnataka has been ignored as compared to Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, he pointed out.

"Only one Rail Under Bridge (RUB) has been sanctioned, while we need 50. Electrification of trunk routes, Bengaluru to Hosur and Yeshwanthpur to Tumakuru line, has been sanctioned without funds. They will have to completely rely on institutional funding, that is, loans from private groups," said Mr Dyamannavar, adding that a meagre Rs 40 crore has been allotted for passenger amenities for the entire state, while Tamil Nadu has got Rs 80 crore, and Andhra Pradesh Rs 100 crore.

The earlier plan was to decongest the Krantiveera Sangolli Rayanna station by acquiring 3 acres of land in Binny Mill. But no funds have been allocated, Mr Dyamannavar said.

While there are some positives with the Baiyyappanahalli terminal, MEMU shed and new lines getting sanctioned, the biggest blow is the complete neglect of suburban rail, he said.

Negatives "For construction work in the Gulbarga Division, Rs 80 crore is needed, but only Rs 1 lakh has been sanctioned. How can they build anything with this amount," said Mr Lokesh, member, Karnataka Railway Vedike

"Track doubling projects have received 20% lesser funds as compared to last year. Only one out of the required 50 rail under bridges has been sanctioned," said Sanjeev, member, Praja RAAG.

Positives

MEMU shed gets Rs 2 crore.

Electrification of trunk routes Bengaluru-Hubli-Londa and Chikjaju-Bellary sanctioned.

Track Renewal has been allocated Rs 386 crore as against last year's Rs 121 crore.

2) Urban Legend: Parsi pangs of change – when the sun delivers the soul

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | RANJANI MADHAVAN

Published Aug 14, 2016, 4:45 am IST

It's a ceremony that few get to see, men and women dressed in long white robes singing the song of silence in a temple.



The Parsi Tower of Silence near Hebbal Flyover where the community conducts the last rites of its dead

Few outside the Parsi community in the city would have noticed it. But just as a 950-year-old Tower of Silence looms over Mumbai's busy Kemp's Corner, a Parsi Bawdi towers over a sprawling 14-acre orchard just off Hebbal flyover. The 'Towers of Silence' is where the community conducts the last rites of its dead. The vultures, the carrion that feed off the dead - the Parsi ritual of excarnation - no longer circle above the sacred spot where the Parsis laid out their dead. It's the fire from the sun and the heat of the earth that reclaim the dead.

It's a ceremony that few get to see men and women dressed in long white robes singing the song of silence in a temple. Around their waist is a silken thread and in the white sanctorum is a flame that burns 365 days of the year.

Allowed into this holy place are members of a small community of 800 or so in the city. Though few in number, the 280 Parsi families in Bengaluru preserve the world's oldest religion, the religion of fire, Zoroastrianism.

Parsis have always been regarded with interest in the country owing to their rituals, that remain a mystery to most who can almost never hope to see them.

Closely guarded is the most unique ritual of all, the last rites for their dead performed at the Parsi Tower of Silence or "Dakhmeh."

Here lifeless bodies are surrendered to nature and vultures in particular by the community that does not believe in either burial or cremation, seeing them as means of polluting the environment.

In Bengaluru, the tower is located in a massive 14-acre campus filled with mango, coconut and other trees overlooking the Hebbal flyover. Despite its massive size it remains inconspicuous and is rarely noticed by the speeding vehicles heading to the Bengaluru airport.

While its exact design is a mystery, the tower is believed to be a huge circular well-like structure with a flat roof. Its concentric circles, open to the sun and wind, are where the dead are left to decompose gradually as

With vultures no longer descending on the Tower of Silence to feed on the dead, as there are not many left in the city now, the community is forced to depend on the sun alone to decompose bodies and allow the dead to attain salvation.

“By custom the dead bodies must be exposed to the sun and vultures, which are allowed to scavenge. But this has changed over the years as there are hardly any vultures around anymore and they don't come to the Tower of Silence,” said Mr Shreyar D Vakil, secretary of The Bangalore Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman.

The dwindling number of vultures, be it on the Malabar hill in Mumbai or near the Hebbal flyover in Bengaluru where the tower is located, may have robbed the community of a big part of its ritual for the dead, but it has innovated to fill the vacuum.

“As the community in Mumbai is much larger and sees more deaths, its Tower of Silence uses solar panels to hasten the decomposition process in the absence of vultures. However, we are a small group in Bengaluru and as there are not as many deaths here, the Tower of Silence is hardly used, the last time being five months ago. So we don't need to install solar panels. The bodies are just exposed to the sun,” said Dastur (priest) Fardoon. With the vultures gone, it's the rays of the sun that help the dead find redemption, he explains.

“When we die, we give our body to nature as charity. We do not believe in burial as it pollutes the earth,” said Mr Vakil.

The departed souls are later remembered in a ceremony called Muktdad conducted by a priest. A group of fire worshippers assemble at the Parsi Fire Temple, oblivious to the traffic on Queens Road, to conduct the 10-day ceremony. The priest takes the names of those who have passed away and those assembled observe silence and pray.

Despite its roots in Iran, the community has Indianised in many ways since migrating to Sanjan in Gujarat. But it has never forgotten what gives it its unique identity: its culture, which has much to offer and its distinctive funeral rituals involving homage to the sun and vultures that have intrigued the world for hundreds of years.

3) Bengaluru: Bats, pigeons dropping dead at Cubbon Park

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | RANJANI MADHAVAN

Published Apr 6, 2017, 4:06 am IST

To help the distressed winged friends, Cubbon Park Walkers Association members have taken the matter into their own hands.



A flock of pigeons at Cubbon Park in Bengaluru

Bengaluru: Every Bengalurean, who walks, jogs, runs marathons, is a nature lover, attends weekend events and goes to the Library, cherishes Cubbon Park, one of the last few remaining lung spaces in an urbanised Bengaluru. A park for us, but a home for many bird species.

From March 1, the roads inside Cubbon Park were opened 24/7 to vehicles, because of upgradation work on Nrupatanaga Road. Till then, all the roads in the park were closed between 5 pm and 8 am, to help the birds and trees within the park. The decision to allow traffic has had disastrous effect on the flora and fauna of the park.

"Many bats have died because of noise pollution. You can see heavy traffic inside the park even during nights, which is when the bats hunt for food. As they are blind, they use ultrasonic to see, fly and find prey. The vehicle noise decreases their sonar ability and destroys their environment, leading to their death," explained Kavitha, Secretary, Cubbon Park Walkers' Association. Bats can tolerate only up to 12 decibels of sound, while heavy traffic can increase noise levels to 50-55 decibels.

Near the State Central Library is where the association members spotted dead bats. There are 10,000 to 15,000 bats in Cubbon Park and their ecosystem is in grave danger, said an alarmed Kavitha.

"Noise and air pollution has killed birds and so has water scarcity. Due to lack of water during summer, many pigeons and parrots have perished. There are hardly any bird ponds/bird baths within the park. The horticulture department also does not fill the existing 2-3 baths with water," said Mr Umesh Kumar, President, Cubbon Park Walkers' Association.

"During my morning walks, I see dead pigeons near Bandstand. It is very upsetting and distressing to look at that. Temperatures are high and the birds need at least 50 baths," he said, adding that one can also see migratory birds near Bal Bhavan.

The association members had earlier filed a complaint with the Lokayukta against the police commissioner, BBMP commissioner, deputy commissioner, traffic deputy director and commissioner of horticulture

To help the distressed winged friends, Cubbon Park Walkers Association members have taken the matter into their own hands. They are raising funds and collaborating with NGOs to install stone bird baths. Around 5-10 stone baths will be installed this Saturday, Umesh said. "We all use Cubbon Park. What is our contribution to it," he asked.

4) Ride Namma Metro or die trying!

DECCAN CHRONICLE | RANJANI MADHAVAN

Published May 10, 2017, 3:30 am IST

The risk remains high for pedestrians both on the existing Purple and Green lines, note experts.



Nayandahalli Station

In April, a student crossing the road from Nagasandra Metro Station was killed by a speeding vehicle. Although the Namma Metro is very convenient, accessing the stations shouldn't be a matter of life and death. Skywalks are too small to be of much use and roads lack pedestrian crossings. Authorities say TenderSURE pavements will be built, but accessibility should have been planned first, reports Ranjani Madhavan.

The good news is that after missing several deadlines, Metro Phase 1 could soon be fully operational. But the bad news is passengers hurrying to board the trains don't have safe pedestrian access to the stations. The result was fatal for at least one passenger. A college girl crossing the road from the Nagasandra Metro station was killed by a speeding vehicle in April. What's troubling, however, is that nothing has changed since then and pedestrians remain as vulnerable to the oncoming traffic near most Metro stations.

Mr Rajashekar, father of the young girl run over by the vehicle in Nagasandra, recalls that she was returning from college and was crossing the road after alighting from the Metro, when she was hit. Sadly, the authorities have taken no precautions since to prevent accidents at the spot, he laments. "It's difficult for anyone to cross

The risk remains high for pedestrians both on the existing Purple and Green lines, note experts. They believe the solution could lie in broad footpaths on roads leading to the stations, as well as in subways or skywalks for use of passengers.

Although the plan was to improve accessibility to Metro stations by building TenderSURE footpaths around them, you don't find any matching this description in their vicinity. Ask BBMP Chief Engineer, Prahalad and he has a new term for what the public can expect. "We are building Light TenderSURE footpaths around Metro stations on the elevated corridors. No utilities or pipelines will be shifted and no cycle lane provided like on the usual TenderSure roads. Only broad footpaths will be built around the elevated corridors, but not near the underground Metro stations," he explains. What this means is that passengers hurrying to major underground stations like the Kempegowda , Vidhana Soudha, M Visveshwaraya, Cubbon Park, and City Railway will have to make do with the current narrow footpaths. And those heading for the still to be opened Green Line underground stations on the North-South Corridor too will remain at similar risk.

Peenya: Three underpasses promised, but none are ready

Peenya - Nagasandra

BMRCCL promised subway access to all Metro stations from Peenya to Nagasandra, but there is no sign yet of the three planned underpasses near the Peenya, Dasarahalli and Nagasandra Metro stations.

"Around 2000 people living in Vinayak Nagar cross the roads on these stretches to use the Nagasandra and Peenya Metro stations to either make their way to college, school or work. There are no signals or speedbreakers and people will not walk one kilometer to use the skywalk," points out Mr Rajashekar, who lost his daughter to an accident at the spot last month.



Sandal Soap station

Sandal Soap Factory

The pavements on the road leading to the Sandal Soap Factory Metro station in Yeshwanthpur are in a pathetic condition. The footpaths disappear at certain points with local hotels encroaching on them for

Pillars, heavy vehicles mar access to Trinity Circle, Mysuru Rd stations

Mysore Road Metro Station

"The Mysore Road Station is like an island surrounded by fast moving heavy vehicles on the highway and Outer Ring Road. People find it difficult to reach the station by foot and so are ready to pay and park but not walk the one kilometer distance," observes Mr. Srinidhi, member of advocacy group, Praaja RAAG.



Entrance to Indiranagar Metro Station

Noting the absence of a footpath all around the Mysore Road Metro Station, he believes either a subway or skywalk is essential at the spot for the convenience of commuters. "When such elevated stations have viaducts in the middle of the road with vehicles speeding in both directions, how can a commuter walk safely across to them?" he asks pertinently.

Trinity Road Metro Station

Commuters have no safe access to the Trinity Road Metro station in the Central Business District either. Although it too has viaducts (pillars) running through the middle of the road, there is neither a subway nor skywalk to help passengers get across.

"People are reluctant to walk half a kilometer to the zebra crossing at the traffic signal and then make a U-turn to reach the station. They would rather run across the busy road, risking their lives," Mr Srinidhi observes.

MG Road Metro Station

Anyone who has visited the MG Road station finds only narrow pavements encroached on by vendors and petty shops near it." MG Road has only a normal footpath. The work happening right now is merely to upgrade the footpath with blocks and cement. TenderSURE, on the other hand, requires the right kerb height,

adding, " It is in the BMRCL's business interests to provide good accessibility to its stations as it will boost both ridership and revenue."



M.G. Road

BBMP Chief Engineer, Prahalad admits that the footpaths near the MG Road and Vijayanagar Metro stations are not being re-done to TenderSURE standards. "What we are aiming at are Light TenderSURE footpaths. We are not shifting the utilities and pipelines or providing a cycle lane," he explains.

Access to Trinity Circle a challenge: BMRCL

The only station where pedestrian access has been given its due is the KR Market Metro station where the Directorate of Urban Land Transport in collaboration with the Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Ltd(BMRCL) is developing all five entrances as gateways to the streets of old Bengaluru. The plan involves pedestrian - centric footpaths and safe access to all roads, public utilities, hospitals and tourist spots in its vicinity.

While applauding the design, Mr. Srinidhi, a member of advocacy group, Praaja RAAG, says having safe access to KR Market station alone is not good enough. "The BMRCL must provide safe access to all other stations with cross-over bridges and good footpaths. This should be the focus of Phase 2," he stresses.

Agreeing that pedestrian accessibility is critical for the Metro, Chief Public Relations Officer of the BMRCL, Vasanth Rao says the BBMP is splitting costs with it to build TenderSURE footpaths around the stations to provide last mile connectivity.

But point out to him that the footpaths around the underground stations will not get a TenderSure makeover and he argues those around the Cubbon Park, Vidhana Soudha, and other underground stations are in good shape and don't need to be redone.

As for the delay in building the subways near the Peenya, Nagasandra and Dasarahalli metro stations, he says the NHA has not yet approved the BMRCL's design for them and work will begin once the clearance is received.

But ask him about the access to the Trinity Metro station and he agrees that this is a bit of a challenge. "There

will have to go through the frisking. But they can make use of this option instead of running across the road in the face of traffic," he says.

Connect skywalks to major destinations: Dr. Ashish Verma, Mobility expert and IISc Professor

While access to the Metro Rail is really bad at present, it doesn't mean it cannot be improved. The first thing we have to look into is the distance people are willing to walk to reach the stations. Research reveals that this 'Acceptable Trip Distance' is 0.5 to 1 km. BMRCL has to take this into consideration and focus on how people can reach the stations by foot. In Phase 1 all Metro stations are around 1 km apart from each other. This provides a catchment area of 0.5 kms on either side for the Metro to tap into.

Presently, with the Metro located in the middle of the road in most areas, people keep running from one side to the other when crossing to reach it. They must be given an incentive to use the elevated or underground path as you cannot make people climb stairs just for a distance of 7 to 10 meters. One solution is to connect the skywalks to other major destinations in the area. If there are colleges, schools, malls or offices adjoining the Metro station, they can be connected directly with the skywalk. Unless we create the above incentives, Metro's ridership will not increase, but the risk factor will.

There doesn't need to always be an over or under-way to help people cross over. If there is less volume of people, simple road signals can be used by pedestrians. We will need grade separators only if there is a high population near the stations.

While normally, safe pedestrian access is planned before building the Metro, it can still be done with some re-modelling. Someone has to take a call as this is not impossible.

5) Good, bad and the Net: Can kids really tell?

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | [RANJANI MADHAVAN](#)

Published May 30, 2017, 5:31 am IST

But chances are they could given that most couples work today and monitoring children is not all that easy anymore.



There was a time when children devoured comics of super heroes, who vanquished the bad and innocent teenage love in the Archies series.

The onslaught of technology and the internet has given tech-savvy kids access to a sea of restricted content. Violent, erotically-charged role-playing games and pornography sites inundate youngsters with adult ideas and desires they don't understand. Indian society's tendency to brush subjects like sex under the carpet leave these kids with nobody to turn to but their peers, with dangerous consequences, as the 13-year-old boy accused of rape proves. Bans or confiscating gadgets, two popular forms of admonition, elicit open rebellion. While information can't be restricted, parents and schools must teach children how to discern the good from the bad, reports Ranjani Madhavan

There was a time when children devoured comics of super heroes, who vanquished the bad and innocent teenage love in the Archies series. Cut to the present and you see the likes of Gotham and Riverdale- the adult versions of the old tales, robbed of all innocence- invading your homes via television. If you are lucky your children may not see them. But chances are they could given that most couples work today and monitoring children is not all that easy anymore.

For some parents the consequences of the easy access that children have to gadgets, violent video games and porn on the Net can be more serious than imagined. Only recently a 14-year-old boy raped a three-year-old girl in his home in the city and when asked why, said he spoke about sex and porn with his friends and wanted to experience what he had learnt from them in school. To him the act clearly did not seem a crime, but merely an experience. And neither did he seem to know the difference between sex and rape, indicating that his parents and teachers had not bothered to educate him about these sensitive subjects.

Agreeing that a child must be made aware of such issues at every stage of development, depending on how much he or she can understand, Ms Shuchitha, a parent says, " Though my two-year-old is too small to understand, we educate our nine-year-old every few days on good and bad touch as we read and hear so much about child abuse. In fact, there's so much fear today that if parents do not feel comfortable about their child's friend, they will not send him to even his birthday party as they are never sure what could happen."

While parents can step in such ways, they have a harder time monitoring the information that is readily available today on the Net and which their children can absorb without a filter. Violent video games and pornographic websites that often misrepresent reality and portray violence as pleasure and blur the lines of consent, are a nightmare for most with teenage children.

" There are many games on my phone, which have zero educational content and are only meant for entertainment. But we can't say no and keep gadgets out of bounds as it makes children only more curious and demanding. So we have limited gaming time to two hours a week as an alternative," says Ms Shuchitha.

The children's vulnerability to the influence of media, the Net and peer pressure only grows with both parents and schools still shying away from sex education. Trying to bridge the gap is Ms Nooraine Fazal, CEO and Managing Trustee of Inventure Academy. "We don't know what kind of conversations parents have with their children as they themselves may have been brought up in an environment where such topics are a taboo. So we host workshops held by experts, who teach parents how to handle questions from children," she reveals.

The workshops offer life skills programmes and discuss cyber policy, code of conduct, culture, sensitivity, respecting others, right to a safe school, and keeping oneself and one's community safe, among other topics.

The school also has counsellors for all grade levels, catering to primary, secondary and high school students. "Teachers play an important role by looking out for students who are off track, for example, checking for students who do not eat their lunch, do not interact with friends, become withdrawn and so on," Ms Fazal explains.

A study by Child Rights Trust (CRT), disturbingly, shows that 90 per cent of youngsters in Bengaluru start watching porn early on and continue doing so when they enter Pre-University.

“Porn, including child porn, is easily available. It is addictive and makes the child want to experiment with what they see. Kids are innocent and curious. This study show that watching too much porn makes them loose memory power, communication skills, and gives rise to feelings of guilt and low self esteem among them,” says Mr Nagasimha Rao, director of CRT.

Besides having problems as individuals, he believes these children could grow up to become sexual abusers, rapists and social outcasts. " Once they are caught committing a sexual offence, even as juveniles, they are scarred for life and rejected by society. And both their lives and those of their victims are affected forever. So it's not enough to stop at just good touch, bad touch awareness," he stresses.

During its study, CRT came across a case of children watching porn on their mobiles in a classroom and clicking pictures of their teacher by zooming in on her body parts. But Mr Rao doesn't think taking mobiles away, blocking porn sites and TV channels is the solution as children will always look for alternatives out of curiosity. Punishing them will not help either, in his opinion. “It's essential rather to talk to them about what are wrong words and actions and teach them about body parts. Schools need to provide sex education and counsellors,” he suggests, adding that if children are looking for answers, it is better they get them from credible sources like parents and schools, rather than misleading websites and strangers. “On the one hand we talk about protecting our children and on the other they have free access to porn. Often violence and gruesome audio-visuals give the wrong message about what sex is,” he notes.

Pointing out the dangers of social media, he says there have been several cases of strangers posing as friends and engaging with children regularly on Facebook to gain their trust and then meeting them and assaulting them on the pretext of ‘playing a game’. Clearly, the only protection the children can have is awareness and both teachers and parents need to arm them with it in this age of unbridled, and uncensored information that they can access with ease.

Is peer pressure the root of the problem?

- There have many rape cases in which the accused is a minor. Explaining them, behavioural psychologists feel that teenagers are more likely to give into peer pressure and be influenced by it.
- In one such case, a 14-year-old boy, influenced conversations with friends, raped a three-year-old girl in the city recently to experience it for real.
- And in the 2012 horrifying Nirbhaya rape, one of the accused was a minor, who was sent to a juvenile home by the court. Unlike for majors, a minor accused gets no punishment and easily gets away after serving a few months in a juvenile home.

6) A trek in the woods? Not so fast!

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | [RANJANI MADHAVAN AND PRIYAM CHHETRI](#)

Published Mar 2, 2017, 3:30 am IST

Besides the new eco trails, it also hopes to open more eco lodges and jungle camps for the convenience of tourists.



2017 is officially the Year of The Wild

2017 is officially the Year of The Wild, with minister Priyank Kharge promising new eco-trails and lodges to boost adventure tourism in the state. Environmentalists firmly oppose the move although experts argue that regularising safaris and treks in protected areas is the best way to prevent unpleasant incidents.

They are the perfect getaway. Far from the humdrum of city life, the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries of the state are a huge draw for city dwellers looking for a bit of quiet and solitude. Making them more attractive to tourists and nature lovers, the state's ministry of tourism has now decided to throw open 17 new eco trails in Karnataka's forests in 2017, which it has declared the "Year of the Wild." Besides the new eco trails, it also hopes to open more eco lodges and jungle camps for the convenience of tourists.

The ministry has so far received the okay for nine of the new trails planned, adding to existing treks in the Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary - where trekkers cover a 6 km route from Hemmadaga to Talewadi - in the Madikeri Wildlife Division of the Kudremukh National Park, and in the Mookambika and Someshwara wildlife sanctuaries. Divided into easy, moderate and tough, the treks are popular with nature lovers and others. The longest covers 15 kms, starting from Makutta-Pottachipare in Madikeri.

While Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Suresh R.S says in an official document that the trails in the forests are intended to provide people a close encounter with the rich biodiversity of the state, environment lovers are throwing up their hands in horror at the "increased invasion" of its protected areas.

"The introduction of new trails will prove disastrous," warns Dr. A. N Yellappa Reddy, keen environmentalist and a former senior bureaucrat of the state. "Allowing more people to trek in forests will only bring with it more problems than solutions. It will lead to more vehicle movement in these parts and not only pollute the areas that are ecologically sensitive but also spoil their natural beauty as tourists tend to litter the routes they trek on. The fauna live a serene life and the entry of humans will only disturb it. There is no saying how insensitive the trekkers will be to them," he adds worriedly.

But the forest department counters that the trekking trails have been organised in tune with Section 28 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Justifying the treks in a document on the subject. Mr Suresh says certified

environment as trained professionals will guide the tourists. He says the department decided to step in as people have died in unauthorised private treks in the past.

"The main benefit of organising these eco-trails is to position Karnataka as an eco sensitive, green tourism destination. Nature is the best place for people to de-stress and is perfect for adrenaline junkies as well, " he points out.

Explaining that the tourism department does not have the expertise to identify eco-trails and curate them, he says this has been left to the forest department. "Be it a dry trail or eco-trail, once it is approved by them, the tourism department will then promote it," he adds, revealing that nine new trails have been approved by the forest department so far.

Forest dept to protect core areas

The biggest opposition is to the 270 kms long Great Canara Trail, the longest in the country, proposed by the state tourism department. Strongly opposing it, conservationists say if allowed, it could harm the state's wildlife reserves.

But allaying such fears, Omer Khaizer, a volunteer with the Eco Tourism Board of the Forest Department says promoting new eco trails in the state's forests is necessary to regulate them and prevent the mushrooming of unauthorised and unsafe treks.

"These treks are certified and are not allowed at night. Also, the forest department is making sure that the core area of the forests are not touched. There is a buffer zone between the core and the tourist areas," he reveals, explaining that of the four per cent of the land in the country that is covered by forests, one per cent is labelled the core area.

" The trails will not go through tiger reserves or ecologically sensitive areas as the forest department is keen to avoid any kind of disturbance of the state's flora and fauna. These areas are too precious and it will not risk it," he assures, adding, " Due to forest fires that are likely in summer, many treks will not open until June."

Moreover, the Eco Tourism Board has regulations in place that tell trekkers and guides what they can carry and what they cannot. "The dos and don'ts on what to wear, appropriate disposal of garbage, the kind of action lost trekkers can take and so on are all mentioned in the regulations. Also, no vehicles are allowed as part of the trekking programme," points out a board member.

Ullas Kumar, Naturalist and Environmentalist : Opening sensitive areas to public will cause more harm than good

Any kind of tourism in forests will harm their wildlife. People who are interested in eco trails are already trekking regularly. So in my view opening newer areas and that too 17 of them for eco trails, is unnecessary. Opening the sensitive areas of the Western Ghats, which people depend on for their water resources, to tourists is a bad idea.

The treks around the city are alright, but opening these sensitive areas to the people without training them to care for their delicate ecology will only do more harm than good. The government is perhaps looking at generating revenue, but if the existing tourist spots and those that aren't as sensitive as the state's forests, like the backwaters of North Karnataka, are promoted, tourism will get a boost in the state and reap rich rewards.

Currently, the Bandipur National Park charges the tourists exorbitant rates and demands a steep vehicle fee. I have seen families which go there, come back very disappointed if they don't see a tiger, which is not the way it should be. The love for flora and fauna must be instilled in people, or they will lack in sensitivity, leading to a dangerous scenario. They could disturb the fauna and the wildlife may end up feeding on the plastic rubbish