

Faults Population Pressure, Encroachment And Expansion For Loss City's growth has gobbled up green cover, says ESR

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Pune: A city surrounded by hills should ideally burst with greenery. Instead, Pune today is a picture of a concrete sprawl, wide treeless roads and infrastructural plans where the first casualty is usually the greenery.

The Environment Status Report (ESR) for 2012-13 has trashed the civic body's claims of taking eco-friendly measures to protect greenery by pointing at human and allied activities steadily denuding the city's green cover and inadequate steps to boost greenery the trees.

"The city is expanding and new buildings are coming up with wide roads. This is adding immense burden on the green cover," the report said.

Over the years, the civic body has turned vast tracts of agricultural land to residential. Hills are eroded and excavated for construction and there is a political tussle over biodiversity parks which bodes ill for the hilltops and slopes.

"Population growth, rising standards of living, growing industrialization, economic activities and expanding city limits have put immense pressure on Pune's environment...proliferation of slums and encroachments on hills have resulted in direct and indirect pressure on the green cover," the document which reflects the health of the city has said.

According to the ESR, the civic body planted 30,000 saplings in 2011-12 as compared to 70,000 saplings in 2010-11. Fewer trees were planted due to lack of space in the city, said garden superintendent Ashok Ghorpade. Environmentalists say tree plantation was never a priority for the civic body. They have urged the PMC to take steps to restore and increase the green cover.

According to the PMC's tree census report uploaded on its website, the city's oldest parts have the poorest green cover when compared to other areas.

The census report has shown that Peth areas are not-so-green while wards on the outskirts have sufficient trees. The shows a tree population of 32.07 lakh, which is about 80,484 trees less than the 1996-

97 tree census figure of 32.88 lakh, despite the merger of 23 villages with the municipal limits.

However, officials said that if the tree population in some forest areas is taken into account, Pune's trees would be well over 35 lakh. Civic officials said the as per norms, there should be one tree every 100 sq m in urban areas. Pune with an area of 243.84 sq km should have about 24.38 lakh trees.

Activists said the PMC had counted bushes as trees in the census.

A green Pune was an electoral promise for political parties, including the ruling Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). "We are firm and committed to the promise made to citizens. The NCP is working in tandem with the civic administration to enhance the green cover in the city. In fact, we have suggested that the hills in the old city area be protected as biodiversity parks (BDP). This concept has been accepted by the state government and will be implemented in 23 villages merged in civic limits. Now, it is time to bring the BDP to the old city area. Depleting green cover is a serious cause for concern and we will take up this issue with the civic administration," said Chavan.

"The Cities and Biodiversity Outlook", a report published last year by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) COP-11, states that the urban expansion across the world is affecting natural resources and consuming prime agricultural land. Thomas Elmquist, scientific editor of the report has insisted that biodiversity is vital to the well-being of people in urban areas and cities must take steps to protect and enhance greenery.

However, BDPs face troubled waters. The civic administration has admitted it cannot protect the hills from encroachments and slum dwellers. It has led to a demand to scrap them and allow limited constructions to save hills from encroachments.

Former corporator Ujwal Keskar said, "A major portion of

the proposed BDP in 23 villages is already encroached upon and slums have crept up many hills in the city. The ruling NCP and the Congress have always protected and encouraged illegal slums in the city and the civic administration has not shown any interest in protecting the hills and green patches. The greenery on hills will be protected only if private land owners in the BDP are allowed to construct with a condition that they should protect trees and plant saplings."

Vanarai president Mohan Dharia and ecologist Madhav Gadgil are

against construction in the BDPs and have demanded that the PMC have a mechanism to protect green patches.

Civic officials have thrown up their hands. "We have no mechanism or manpower to protect the hills. We have requested the state government to approve special police stations for civic crimes and provide additional staff to the civic body. It is a fact that the civic body cannot protect green patches from encroachments," a senior civic official requesting anonymity said.



Graphic: Sandeep Salunke



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Pune is losing its tree cover because the implementation of the Maharashtra (Urban Areas) Protection and Preservation of Trees Act, 1975 lies entirely with the civic body.

Officials who have the authority to grant permissions for felling trees have no real stake in their conservation. If a tree is felled another must be planted. Cutting a tree in Pune and planting another on an empty plot elsewhere will hardly solve our problems.

If you have a situation where there is no more land available for planting trees, then you cannot allow felling of any more trees. Instead, the authorities are turning a blind eye to the problem

— Vaibhav Gandhi | GREEN ACTIVIST

Tree cover in the city will decline. It has become a serious issue and everyone is expressing concern about the loss of trees and biodiversity. But it is high time people act.

What we need more than anything else is a concrete plan for the next 10 or 20 years on how this trend can be reversed. If there is a determined effort towards corrective action, the tree cover can be regained.

One of the solutions is to focus on ensuring greenery on the hills. Focussing attention on Pune's hills can allow some natural forests to be retained. New housing societies should be mandated to plant and maintain trees in their surrounding areas

— Sanjay Athvale | MEMBER OF GREEN HILLS GROUP

The pace at which urbanisation and development is taking place directly contributes to the phenomena such as a rise in temperature. The high-rise buildings that are coming up are much higher than the average height of the trees. Additionally, the construction of roads and other infrastructure projects has created many more radiating surfaces. So we have a heat island effect and consequently rising temperatures.

We need to plant more trees. Trees should line both sides of the streets. There is a mismatch between the rate of urbanisation and development and the natural resources that can cope with it. To restore the balance, we may have to decrease the pace of development

— Ketaki Ghate | ECOLOGICAL CONSULTANT AT OIKOS

undermine environmental concerns.

The Bombay high court had observed that for every tree cut, three more should be planted. In a situation where there is no space for planting trees, where would anyone find place?

If a builder submits a blueprint which would require trees to be cut, the plans should immediately be rejected. A survey should identify land where trees may be planted. Greater care must also be taken in selecting the trees that are planted. The authorities should plant indigenous trees with deep roots, which won't keel over in storms

— Vinod Jain | GREEN ACTIVIST