

Roads rise up and cities go under



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Chennai is located at an elevation of 6.4 m above sea level. By 2050, 144 sq km of Chennai will get submerged in seawater owing to global warming, warns a study. Moreover, Chennai has been buried under roads, that is, elevated roads, in the past 10 years.

Chennai was inundated in the floods of 2015 and 2023 and a lot of people's assets were thrown out on the roads like mountains of garbage. The former president of the Tamil Nadu Government Engineers Association blamed the increasing upgradation of roads in Chennai for the disaster.

Elevation of roads is not a one-off event. It is the fountainhead of a series of seamless irregularities. It is a chain of abuse that is intricately woven and is visible to all eyes. Do you know what are its consequences?

Chennai that's getting buried

Way back in 1992, speaking at a seminar at the University of Madras, the then Vice-Chancellor Dr S Sadiq recalled that during his student days, on the

university campus there was an aesthetically built surrounding wall which had below it a platform that, in turn, had a road below. Now only the top of the wall is visible because the wall had disappeared as the road continued to be elevated seamlessly, he regretted. The present situation is even worse; in the last 30 years, the wall has been completely buried and in its place, a new wall has been erected.

The elliptical compound wall around the Thomas Munro statue, the walls around Presidency College, Madras High Court, and Law College, the small wall with a platform around the War Memorial and the wall of the Chennai Museum were all buried in the name of road development.

Only the wall of the museum was restored and reconstructed. This is not just a wall issue; it is also a sad tale of how the building, protected by the wall, lost its floor and got buried. Now Chennai Metro is writing the next chapter of decay.

Metro management's apathy

Metro trains are running in many countries. Underground as well as over-ground railways have been constructed. Wherever Metro lines are laid in the world and whatever kinds of parameters are used, as far as roads are concerned, only one parameter is used. It is generally accepted that the level of roads above should not rise because their passage is made 20 meters below the ground. If the road level rises, the buildings adjacent to the roads will cave in and get buried under the earth and rainwater will enter into the roads.

If the roads are continuously raised, it will cost a lot to reconstruct or demolish the buildings nearby; it will be tantamount to reconstruction of the city.

At the time of launching the Metro project, the Chennai Metro Rail made two important promises. Firstly, the roads along the Metro lines will be used only temporarily by the Metro Rail management. After the completion of the work, the roads at the same height will be handed back to the Corporation. Secondly, the government and private lands temporarily taken for Metro use will be returned along with their old structures.

But the Chennai Corporation, Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority and Chennai Heritage Buildings Monitoring System, which are supposed to monitor the honouring of these promises, have not executed their duty.

Owing to the apathy of the Corporation, the roads have been raised and houses buried at Wimco Nagar. Now pillars have been erected on the congested Thiruvottiyur highway road starting from Wimco Nagar as part of the Metrorail project.

Metro construction has raised the middle of the road to an average of two feet. If the roads on the lines of the Metro are raised by an average of two feet, the train halts have become the biggest threat. By the time the Metro projects are completed, even the entrances of the buildings nearby will end up being half-buried.

Next, the High Court Metrorail station is worse. There has been an obvious malpractice. The compound wall of Dr Ambedkar Law College campus has been demolished and the campus has been compressed and encroached upon by the Metro Rail. The Metro administration has not returned the college's old land. Moreover, it has also destroyed its heritage gateway. The buildings of Kuralagam, Oriental Insurance Company, Chennai House and Chamber of Commerce in the vicinity have been buried for half a metre. The platforms and steps of these buildings have been lost and their compound walls are completely buried.

The Metro station set up near the Central Railway Station has created an unimaginable mess. The heritage buildings opposite the railway station have been completely demolished. Only a small red building stands for namesake. One has to go one meter down to enter Victoria Hall and Ripon Buildings. The whole stretch of Anna Salai from *The Hindu* office to Saidapet has been elevated like a flyover. Twenty years ago, to enter the office of The Hindu one had to climb slowly from Anna Salai and get into the premises. So was the case with the office of The Mail, PR & Sons and Rajaji Hall. Now, if you look at *The Hindu* office from the middle of Anna Salai, you will see its old road raised by two metres. Out of it, the Metro's share is one meter. The heritage building of LIC has become shorter by one metre. Three feet are missing at the entrance to the famous Higginbotham's. Thus the buildings all over Anna Salai have been buried, all thanks to the Metro.

The solution

The entrances to the buildings affected by the raising of the road can no longer be raised. Either they have to be demolished or a tunnel should be dug to safeguard the entrances.

The Chennai High Court has already ordered that the height of the roads should not be increased in Tamil Nadu and that the old roads should be removed by four inches and new roads laid for two inches. But both Metro and Chennai Corporation have given the court order a neat burial.

The disaster has not spared even the villages. This problem can be solved only if the government understands that the height of the road is somehow or other related to the citizens' right to live in houses.

Translated by V. Mariappan.