

# Monsoon rains reveal social crisis in Bangalore, the city hyped as India's Silicon Valley

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Last month's late monsoon rains have demonstrated that the unplanned growth and decrepit infrastructure of Bangalore—the southern India city that is the center of the country's burgeoning information technology (IT) and business processing industries—constitute a major health hazard. They have also demonstrated that the city mythologized by India's corporate media and western outsourcing companies as India's "Silicon Valley" and touted as proof of India's status as an emerging world-power is home to millions of people who are forced to live in abject poverty.

Torrential rains over several days starting October 22 left more than half the city under water, with tens of thousands of houses flooded, streets impassable and at least 10 deaths. While the 525 millimeters of rain that fell on the city in October surpassed the previous record of 522 mm set in 1956, the severe flooding was largely the result of poor planning and lack of investment in basic infrastructure.

Many newly-built localities turned into lakes, with standing water everywhere leaving people stranded in their homes. Sewers overflowed and mixed with rainwater and entered houses through drain pipes.

Other parts of the Karnataka have also received heavy rainfall and according to press reports at least 14,000 homes have been severely damaged and over 64,000 hectares of standing crops destroyed across the state.

However, the biggest impact has been on the residents of the over 700 slums that have sprung up over the past decade in almost every recess of Bangalore. Forced to migrate from surrounding villages into the wrenching social reality of the city, the residents of these slums now comprise over half the city's population of 6 million.

The growth of the slums is a direct result of the destruction of the livelihood of peasant-villagers by the encroachment of industry and development on agricultural land in an ever-wider circle outward from Bangalore's city-center.

The government and developers have systematically bought up farm land to provide land for industrial sites and housing developments, without providing adequate compensation, land or jobs to the previous peasant-owners and their families. A second major factor in the increase in Bangalore's population is the stagnation of agriculture since the early 1990s, when the central government embarked on a program of neo-liberal reforms.

Bangalore's feverish construction activity also attracts large numbers of construction workers who are forced to reside in slums because their low wages are inadequate to obtain decent housing.

The floods threaten the slum residents with ruin. Some have seen their homes destroyed or severely damaged. But even those whose homes remain intact face the problem that their homes have been drenched by water laced with sewage—a potential severe health hazard—since the rainwater mixed with the sewage that surrounds most of the slums.

Few if any of the slums have such basic amenities as running water, sewage and electricity.

The attitude of the political and corporate elite to the slum-dwellers is well-illustrated by their designation of the slums as "shadow-areas." With this name, the elite further marginalizes those whose cheap labor has been instrumental in the rise of the IT parks and the high rise dwellings that now dot the city, and who man Bangalore's large garment industry.

The rains also caused havoc in the many of the better-off areas where IT workers live. Stagnant water surrounded many of the newer residential areas for days and the residents were left to fend for themselves. Indeed, because state and city authorities have failed to provide for proper drainage facilities in newly-developed areas—road-building often simply involves laying out a thin layer of stones and asphalt with no provision made either for sidewalks or underground drainage—even regular rainfall causes floods. Said one resident, “The situation is so bad that we shift out of our houses each time it rains.”

Unplanned or poorly thought out development has also resulted in the destruction of many lakebeds and reservoirs that previously acted as a natural buffer during periods of heavy rainfall. Many of Bangalore’s lakebeds now serve as reclaimed land upon which numerous buildings have been erected. As a result, these low-lying areas become naturally waterlogged and serve as an artificial barrier to receding water, thus ensuring that large parts of the city are flooded.

Bangalore is home to over 1,500 software companies employing over 250,000 people in IT and IT-enabled industries that include software, hardware and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors. The total export revenues of this group amount to over Rs. 220 billion (about US\$5 billion) and their presence has given rise to a whole group of subsidiary industries.

Both the domestic and international IT and related industries wield immense political influence in Bangalore and Karnataka and their bosses regularly berate the government about the “lack of infrastructure.” For them infrastructure means roads, power and water to service the IT and related industries and housing developments for the better-off, not proper housing, sanitation, schools and health-care facilities for the majority of Bangalore’s residents.

While the Congress Chief Minister of Karnataka, Dharam Singh, made a show of touring a few of the rain-affected parts of the city, he and his coalition government have provided little for the flood victims in the way of relief, let alone announced any serious measures to tackle the underlying problems of infrastructure, unplanned development, and slum-housing.

The lack of concern exhibited by the authorities towards Bangalore’s devastated residents parallels the

reaction by the Bush administration towards the victims of hurricane Katrina.

State officials and Bangalore’s business elite were more concerned with the success of the annual “IT.in” technology exhibition and business event held from Oct.26-29. This event has functioned as a major showcase of the state’s technology sector and has been instrumental in attracting foreign companies to the city.

Despite the overwhelming problems confronting the city, the American transnational Cisco Systems announced that it intends to invest \$800 million to set up an R&D center on 14 acres of land. This reflects the fact that foreign multinationals still hope to realize super-profits from the large pool of cheap labor in the city and surrounding area.

The Karnataka government sees its role as a facilitator of foreign direct investment and is determined to utilize public funds to provide the necessary infrastructure to this sector. It has recently announced several billions dollars worth of tax and land concessions and infrastructure projects all tailored to the benefit of these enterprises. Meanwhile, the majority of Bangalore’s resident live in squalor.



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