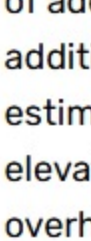


Bengaluru bids to get out of a jam

The garden city's image of being perennially stuck in traffic desperately needs an overhaul, but whether the Congress regime's Rs 73,600 crore mobility infrastructure plan is the answer is up for debate



CHOC-A-BLOC: Traffic jam on a road leading to the Yelahanka IAF station, Bengaluru, in February. (Photo: Hemant Mishra)



Ajay Sukumaran

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The first flyover in Bengaluru opened in 1999, marking the beginning of a pivotal period when the city's software-fuelled growth at the turn of the millennium would transform it into a global technology hub. But today, despite 42 elevated roads, the southern metropolis remains infamous for its traffic snarls. And that is because of a teeming vehicle count—there are an estimated 12 million vehicles in a city of 14 million people. All that may well change now if Karnataka deputy chief minister D.K. Shivakumar has his way and implements an ambitious new plan, which will rid the garden city of its traffic woes.

The minister in charge of Bengaluru city development, Shivakumar's to-do list is long, but topmost on it is implementing a wide-ranging mobility infrastructure plan worth Rs 73,600 crore. The biggest item on this list is 40 km of underground road corridors, touted to be the largest stretch of urban tunnels in India. These are estimated to cost Rs 42,000 crore, almost as much as the expense on the 80 km of additional metro rail lines being planned in the city under Phase 3 and 3A. In addition, there will be 110 km of elevated corridors and grade separators, estimated to cost Rs 13,200 crore, along with a Rs 9,000 crore plan for 40 km of elevated roads. These roads will be integrated with the upcoming phase of overhead metro rail stretches, creating what will be called double-decker flyovers. There is also a plan to construct 300 km of new roads running along the buffer zones of the city's stormwater drain network.

The ambitious plan for Bengaluru was the highlight of the Karnataka budget for 2025-26, presented on March 7. It has been two years in the making, primarily because the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government has been hamstrung by the huge expenditure on five big-ticket welfare schemes that were part of its pre-poll promises. It now plans to borrow more, taking advantage of the headroom created by the state's 7.4 per cent growth in GSDP in FY25, and prioritise capital expenditure. The government is bullish on Bengaluru, with the CM doubling the infrastructure allocation for the city to Rs 12,500 crore, from Rs 6,500 crore in FY25.



“BENGALURU CAN'T BE CHANGED IN 2-3 YEARS. EVEN GOD CAN'T DO THAT. IT CAN BE CHANGED ONLY WHEN PROPER PLANS ARE MADE AND EXECUTED WELL”

D.K. SHIVAKUMAR

Deputy CM, Karnataka

BENGALURU'S OTHER WOES

LACK OF COORDINATION

While Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) is the civic body that administers the city, crucial amenities are provided by six other para-stats, including Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) and Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB)

GROUNDWATER DRYING UP

New localities depend on borewells, leading to severe summer water shortages. The BWSSB has ramped up supply of Cauvery water, targeting 400,000 new connections in borewell-dependent areas

STORMWATER DRAINS

The city has 800 km of stormwater drains but the clogged network causes frequent flooding during rains. A Rs 5,000 crore disaster mitigation plan, part-funded by the World Bank, is underway

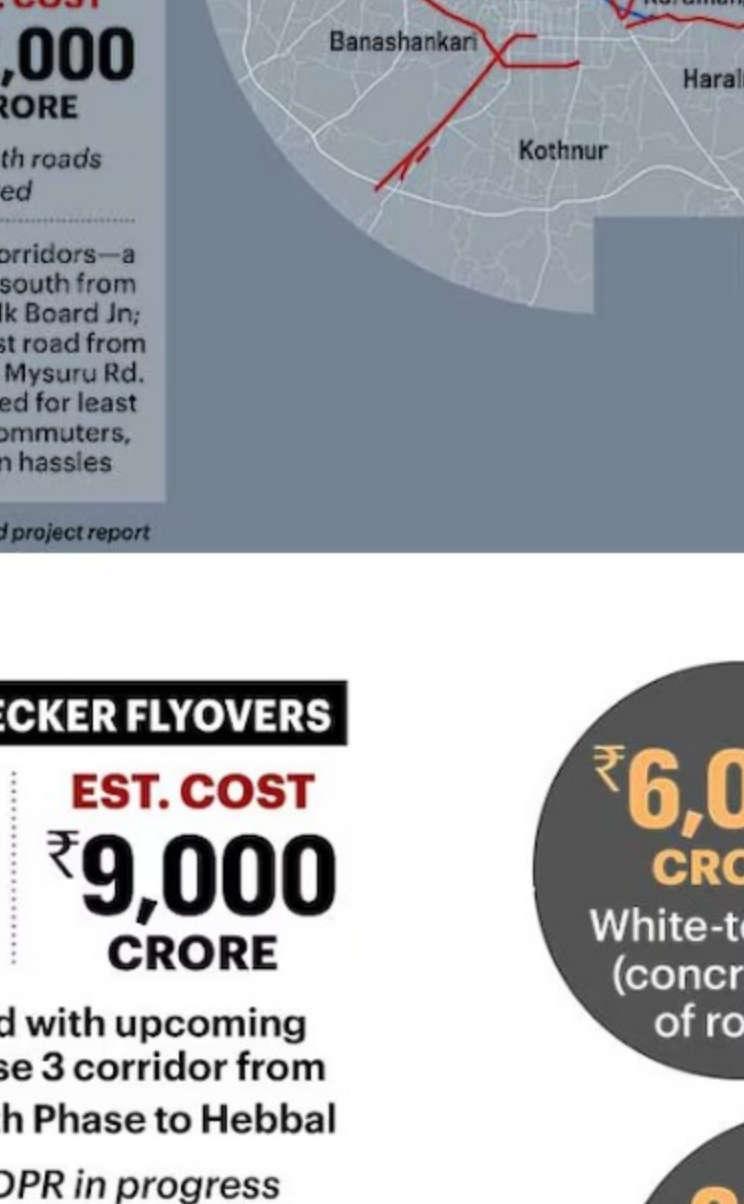
LEGACY WASTE

The city has 9.8 million tonnes of accumulated legacy waste. Initiatives on to process this in phases via bio-mining and bio-remediation

FIXING BENGALURU

The scale of the problem isn't small because Bengaluru's woes have compounded over the years. To begin with, the city has been without a masterplan since the previous one lapsed in 2015. Contributing to this is a vexing reality: civic amenities, ranging from roads, water supply, electricity, bus and metro services, are managed by a multitude of autonomous agencies, or parastats, which work in silos. Shivakumar, in fact, openly declared at a recent public event: "Bengaluru can't be changed in 2-3 years. Even God can't do that. It can be changed only when proper plans are made and executed well."

To address Bengaluru's woes, the deputy CM piloted the Greater Bengaluru Governance Bill (GBG), 2024 on March 10. The bill proposes a tiered governance system for the city, splitting the existing civic authority, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), into smaller corporations. Overseeing these entities will be the Greater Bengaluru Authority, which will serve as the city's planning body. It will bring together all the parastats onto a single platform, and the chief minister will be its ex-officio chairman. "We need a platform where each agency talks to each other and there is coordination," says Congress MLA Rizwan Arshad, who chaired a joint legislature committee to review the bill in August 2024. The BBMP was created in 2007 to tackle Bengaluru's unwieldy growth by amalgamating peripheral municipal councils and villages in an urban sprawl spanning 786 sq. km into a single corporation.



“IT'S BEEN EIGHT YEARS SINCE THE STEEL FLYOVER PROTESTS, BUT IT IS UNFORTUNATE WE'RE STILL DISCUSSING PROJECTS WE DON'T WANT”

PROF. ASHISH VERMA

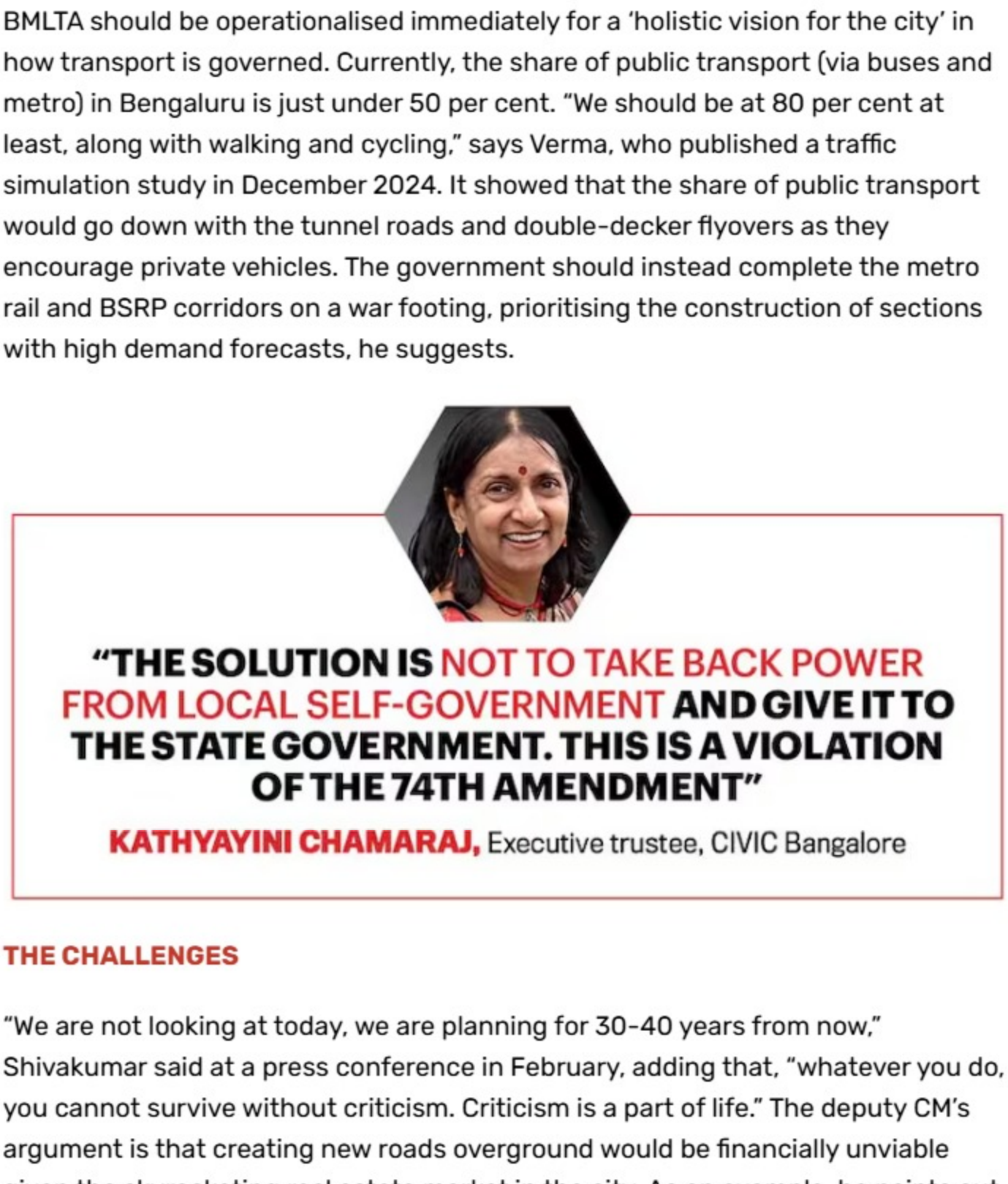
Sustainable Transportation

Laboratory, IISc

While Bengaluru's population was about 7.5 million when the BBMP was formed, it has now doubled to 14 million. "That solution no longer worked. The rapid population increase has made it worse," says Arshad. "If you want an organisation that is transparent and closer to the people, it must be decentralised." The newly proposed corporations (the bill allows for up to seven) would be responsible for collecting property taxes and managing the affairs of the region under them, while the Greater Bengaluru Authority will coordinate citywide planning.

While both houses of the state legislature passed the bill in March and it is now awaiting the governor's assent, Opposition parties and civic groups are opposing it, as they are against splitting the BBMP. "Why did the BBMP fail? Because it was not empowered with the correct devolution of functions, funds and functionalities, and citizens were not empowered with proper area sabhas and ward committees," says Kathyayini Chamaraj, executive trustee of the non-profit CIVIC Bangalore, which has petitioned the governor against the GBG Bill, arguing that the state government will take complete charge of planning, governance and funds via the Greater Bengaluru Authority. "The solution is not to take back power from local self-government authorities and give it to the state government. This is a total violation of the intent of the 74th Amendment," she says. Several citizens' groups have now come together under a common platform called the Bengaluru Town Hall (BTH) to oppose the bill and to put forward an alternative vision for the city.

Bengaluru, with its vibrant civic activism, is no stranger to dissent. In fact, in 2016, during his first tenure as CM, Siddaramaiah had to drop a proposal to erect a steel flyover in the heart of the city owing to public uproar over the threat it posed to a large number of trees. This is an episode Shivakumar often recounts in his push for mega road infrastructure projects under the 'Brand Bengaluru' initiative. On March 13, speaking in the legislature council, DKS said that the city was paying the price for not executing the steel flyover project while pointing out that road-widening in the city was no longer feasible given the space constraints and unplanned growth. "There is no alternative, so we have decided to build tunnel roads. The government has approved the first phase and we will be calling for tenders soon," says Shivakumar.



DOUBLE DECKER FLYOVERS

LENGTH 40 KM EST. COST ₹9,000 CRORE

Integrated with upcoming Metro Phase 3 corridor from JP Nagar 4th Phase to Hebbal

Status: DPR in progress

₹6,000 CRORE

White-topping (concreting) of roads

200 KM

Metro rail network by 2029 (currently 73 km)

₹3,000 CRORE

Construction of link roads adjacent to stormwater drains

₹400 CRORE

Sky-deck

TUNNEL ROADS

Currently, the two key infrastructure projects in the city are the metro rail network and the Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project (BSRP). Construction of 98.5 km of Phase 2 metro rail, besides the existing 73 km operational network, is underway while a new Phase 3 totalling 44.65 km was approved last year. All put together, Bengaluru will have a 220 km metro rail network by 2029. Meanwhile, BSRP, which was slow off the blocks, envisions a 147 km suburban rail network across four corridors.

Also on the cards are two underground tunnel road corridors—a 17 km stretch running north to south from Hebbal to Central Silk Board junction, and a 23 km east-west corridor from Krishnarajapuram to Mysuru Road. While a detailed project report (DPR) has been prepared for the north-south tunnel (cost Rs 17,800 crore), another one is being prepared for the latter. Both projects, with a total cost of Rs 42,000 crore, are being proposed under a Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT) and Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM), with the state government offering a guarantee of Rs 19,000 crore as viability gap funding.

Flagging concerns, P.C. Mohan, the BJP MP from Bengaluru Central, wrote to the BBMP in January saying the north-south tunnel road project conflicts with ongoing initiatives like Metro Phase 3A which also covers the Hebbal-Central Silk Board corridor. "The preparation of the DPR in a mere three months is not only unrealistic but raises serious doubts about its quality and accuracy. Any comprehensive DPR demands a minimum 12-18 months and must include meticulous geotechnical investigations, particularly for a project involving tunneling at a depth of 30 metres," he said. In addition, the DPR also drew criticism because of bloopers such as the mention of Maharashtra towns Malegaon and Nashik in the traffic volume analyses for Bengaluru, prompting the BBMP to slap a Rs 5 lakh fine on the consultant that prepared the report.

"Eight years since the steel flyover protests, it is unfortunate that we are still discussing projects we don't want," says Prof. Ashish Verma, who heads the Sustainable Transportation Laboratory at the Bengaluru-based Indian Institute of Science (IISc). Concurs Satya Arikutharam, an independent mobility expert who worked on the Bengaluru Metropolitan Land Transport Authority (BMLTA) Bill while previously serving as chief technical advisor to the Directorate of Urban Land Transport. "The city has to take a decision. Are you going to spend Rs 20,000 crore only for car users or are you going spend it on public transport?" he asks. "This is where the city misses the institutional capability of BMLTA."

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