

The New Indian Express

13.07.2009

Sinking sewer lines of Chennai

CHENNAI: Imagine a house constructed a few years ago is suddenly reduced to rubble. It could be because of natural calamities like an earthquake or man-made errors like poor input materials, design flaw, lousy engineering... Okay, you get the picture.

Something similar is happening to the city's sewerage system. The sewer lines built by the British over 80 years ago and those by the Chennai Corporation half a century ago are rock solid but sections of those constructed under the Chennai City River Water Conservation Project (CCRCP) between 2001 and 2006 are sinking.

The CCRCP lines run parallel to those of the British and the Chennai Corporation. But the older ones have put the new kid on the block to shame.

Sample this: a CCRCP manhole on St Mary's Road in Alwarpet has caved in – not by a few centimeters but at least 10 feet. That is about the length of a Nano car. The entire structure, including the lid, sank a few months ago, leaving a huge gaping hole on the road. Peep into the hole and you will find the manhole cover sitting a few feet below the sludge. Not a pretty sight; pretty alarming, indeed.

The Alwarpet incident is not isolated. A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that at least 125 CCRCP manholes have collapsed since 2006. Of them, about 100 have been repaired but you can't be sure that the problems there have been fully addressed. For, there are manholes that have caved in multiple times. Also, you fix a problem at one place and it erupts at another point. Sounds familiar, did you say? Isn't it typical of how the government works in India? But come on, it's public money that is involved.

You have a right to seek accountability.

Troubled spots

Among the locations where the problem of sinking manholes or ruptured sewage pipes or both occurred in the past are Arulambal Street, C P Ramaswamy Road, Devanathan Street, Greenways Road, Jagadambal Street, Subedar Thottam and North Usman Road. In quite a few areas like R K Mutt Road in Mylapore and Anna Main Road in K K Nagar, the problem recurred multiple times. A manhole on R K Mutt Road in Mylapore opposite the BSNL office has repeatedly caved in leaving a huge crater on the surface, creating endless hassle for road users and residents alike. Even today you can see a rubble dump and fencing bang on the middle of the road, which indicates that the work is perhaps still not over.

Similarly, repair work has seldom ceased on Anna Main Road that connects Ashok Nagar with K K Nagar. Here, the road itself caved in many times.

Ditto Arulambal Street in T Nagar. Contractors are still at work on Anna Main Road to fix leaky sewage pipes. As regards the St Mary's Road manhole, the contractors have been directed to change the design. Also, the new structure will come up only after fresh soil tests are conducted.

Long-term solutions

V Ravichandran, chairman of Citizens Guardians, a welfare forum, grumbles that authorities look for just temporary fixes rather than finding permanent solutions.

For example, at a place where a sewer pipe had developed a leak, an ingenious way was found to fix the problem. The area around the crack was covered with gunny bags and tied using a jute rope. Then the workers poured cement on the contraption to control the leak. If this is not a stopgap arrangement, what else is? Last year, Ravichandran filed a PIL in the Madras High Court on depolluting the city's waterways. The case is pending before the court. "Unless the authorities come forward to get to the root of the problem, solving it is not going to be easy," he says with a shrug.

Other social workers want the government to set up an experts' committee to go into the problem. "This is essential as the network should be functional for at least 30 years," they point out.

According to officials of the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB), the executing authority under the CCRCPP, the problem of leaky pipes and sinking manholes is being “exaggerated by a section of people” right from the beginning. “Problems in some areas in large projects are not uncommon. However, some people are keen to project it as a complete failure,” they claim.

Something seriously wrong

Experts in soil mechanics, structural engineering and water resources say something is seriously wrong with the way repairs are being handled.

The problem could be due to soil factors, faulty design, and sub-standard execution of work or anything else.

“But it should be possible to solve. In this e-age, when we have solutions for some of the toughest technological issues, if simple things like arresting water leakage and stopping manholes from caving in cannot be done, it can never be the fault of science or systems,” a top official of a reputed civil

construction company said requesting anonymity.

Contractors' liability

Sources in the CMWSSB point out that the contractors' liability under the agreement would end by mid-2010. After that, any repair work would be the responsibility of the Board. Does the CMWSSB have enough funds and manpower to execute the repair work at such trouble.