

Monsoon malady

Mumbai must urgently replace decrepit buildings to prevent houses collapsing in rain

The monsoon over the greater Mumbai region has come to be characterised by the unsettling annual spectacle of collapsing buildings, and this year is proving to be no different. An unsafe multi-storied building in a core area of the city has collapsed on to another, leaving at least 11 people dead and exposing once again, the decrepit base of dwellings in India's much-romanticised economic powerhouse. The disaster has brought in its wake the familiar litany of accusations, of people occupying unsafe and illegal buildings, and civic authorities failing to act in time. Mumbai's Mayor Kishori Pednekar has responded to criticism with a helpless exhortation to the city administration to remove dangerous structures. Going beyond these predictable impulses, the overburdened city needs a time-bound and accountable system of ensuring the safety of its housing stock. Coinciding with this year's monsoon, the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority identified 21 structures in Mumbai as being extremely dangerous, with an advisory to over 700 occupants to move to transit accommodation, while reconstruction is undertaken. Understandably, the occupants are reluctant, since the alternative housing is far away from their education and work locations. This is a conundrum that Maharashtra will have to address, treating it as a crisis that will only be aggravated by changes to monsoon rainfall intensity over time.

Coastal Maharashtra sits in the pathway of extreme monsoon weather events, which are forecast to increase in frequency due to ongoing warming of the Arabian Sea. Scientists including those of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology have proposed, in the context of the deluge a few years ago, that accurate monsoon forecasting over central India, incorporating changes to sea surface temperature, would help governments prepare better to save lives and agriculture. For Mumbai, what this means is to accelerate its repair and rehabilitation programme for weak structures and replace those that cannot be salvaged. The city desperately needs channels for huge volumes of water to flow out, and a plan to create new urban wetlands where feasible to store the precipitation. A rejuvenated Mithi river – its planned clean-up has been delayed by the COVID-19 crisis – could offer some relief, but more waterbodies are needed. And it will take a mass housing programme to make life safer for the thousands in hovels. A far-sighted plan to shift people from squalid buildings to modern ones is also a health imperative; such a start must be made with the most dangerous structures. It is also unseemly for political parties to use a disaster such as the one in Malad as a cudgel against the government, considering that Mumbai's civic base lies neglected over the decades regardless of who ruled.