

NOT JUST ROAD CONTRACTORS...

Auditors also took BMC for a ride

Third-party audits, introduced to ensure quality roadwork, gave a clean chit to contractors doing a shoddy job, BMC probe reveals

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The BMC, it turns out, is everybody's fool, says its own probe report.

From contractors to engineers and now auditors, everyone it hired to ensure smooth roads ended up duping it to deliver second-rate work, as a high-level investigative report examining the city's roads shows.

The preliminary report, put together after six months of inspection and analysis, was submitted to BMC chief Ajoy Mehta on Tuesday. It pins the blame for substandard works on the corporation's third-party auditors (TPAs) and civic engineers, apart from the ever-at-fault contractors.

As part of the probe, a team of civic officials led by additional

municipal commissioner Sanjay Deshmukh studied samples of recently repaired roads, only to find, shockingly, that in one case, the road didn't have a sub-base — the layer that sits right underneath the surface — as per the specifications agreed to by the contractors. Another sampling showed that only 10–15 per cent of a road was properly repaired. At some places, irregularities had botched up as much as 80% of the total repair job.

Most of these patchy roads were constructed by RPS Infraprojects, KR Construction, Jay Kumar, Relcon Infraprojects, RK Madhani and Mahavir Infrastructure. But the reason these contractors got away is because the auditors let them.

The TPAs, appointed to expose the irregularities by contractors, gave them a clean chit, the report says.

"They submitted audit reports to the

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BMC but did not mention anything at all about the poor quality of the roads. This means that they are part of the contractor nexus. So action will have to be taken against them too," said a senior civic official.

Congress legislator Aslam Shaikh said that despite TPAs, contractors took the BMC for a ride. "The probe into road works revealed that all contractors had hoodwinked the BMC. How did the TPAs fail to see what the BMC inquiry has exposed? FIRs

should be filed against the auditors, along with the contractors. These contractors keep coming back under different names. The BMC must attach properties of corrupt officials, like they do in Bihar."

The report further reveals that estimates prepared by civic officials or consultants frequently overshot BMC's budget or were not in tune with its plans, resulting in cost escalation. The civic body then decided to do away with the system altogether. At the moment, firms SGS and IRS audit civic roadwork.

BMC boss Mehta will now decide the course of action in light of the report, which also shines the light on close to a dozen civic officials for wrongdoing, including senior engineers from the roads department. Ashok Pawar, former chief engineer of the department, is at the centre of the probe, officials said.

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at over Rs 3 crore. When the case against Hassan Ali was first filed, his undisclosed income was assessed at an eye-watering Rs 1.10 lakh crore.

The order records that the main reason for the confusion that led the tax authorities to believe that Hassan Ali had this massive undeclared income was a laptop seized in a raid — it eventually turned out to be the property of a friend of his business associate. The laptop belonged to Philip Anandraj, a friend of Kashinath Tapuriah, an accused in the money laundering case along with Hassan Ali.

The authorities had picked up the laptop in the course of a raid conducted at Hassan Ali's Pune residence in 2007. It was a joint raid by the Income Tax department and Enforcement Directorate.

It, however, took the authorities nine years to figure this out. During this period a government changed, one Union Finance Minister went on record on the floor of the Parliament saying that the authorities had made a mistake in calculating the extent of tax evasion, and Hassan Ali increasingly became an embarrassment for the IT and ED officials.

The case against Hassan Ali, in fact, was filed only in 2011 after the Supreme Court questioned the government while hearing a public interest litigation filed by senior advocate Ram Jethmalani.

The ITAT, while remanding the case back to assessment officer, has kept certain issues open. It hasn't gone into the legality of the action initiated by the Enforcement Directorate. It has however, ruled that the documents relied upon by IT cannot by themselves amount to proof of income.

Khan's lawyer Prashant Patil submitted this order to the Special ED Court in Mumbai's Sessions Court on Tuesday. He told *Mumbai Mirror* that the ITAT has ruled that the documents relied by the IT can be at best corroborative evidence, but not solitary proof.

Hassan Ali became a household name after the 2007 raid on his house, which had led to wild speculations about his wealth. However, very little was known then on how a mere horse-breeder could have amassed such spectacular monies. His name was also linked to one of the world's most notorious arms dealer's — Adnan Khashoggi. It was said that Hassan Ali had laundered money earned by Khashoggi in questionable arms deals. This, however, could not be established.

While the matter has been referred back to the assessment officer, one document pertaining to an entry of \$8 billion in his account in Zurich-based UBS AG has been kept open. But the order notes that in a communication between the Indian government and UBS AG the bank had confirmed the authenticity of most of the documents with the exception of this one document.

63 trees 'left to die after botched replantation'

Thane residents say civic body carelessly moved trees from Pokhran Road 1 to a plot where debris is dumped



PICS: PRASHANT NARVEKAR

The trees were uprooted from Pokhran Road No 1, one of Thane's greenest stretches. Right: They have been reduced to leafless trunks on a small plot

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Over 60 trees that once stood on one of Thane's greenest stretches — Pokhran Road No 1 — have been reduced to leafless trunks after they were carelessly transplanted in a small plot where construction debris is tossed, residents allege.

They have now taken up the issue with the Thane municipal commissioner. "It's virtually a graveyard of trees. It pains me to see the majestic trees being slowly killed this way," said Kasber Augustine, a member of the 'Thane Citizen Voice', an association comprising representatives from 60 residential complexes.

"The trees have been replanted very close to each other, there is just a 4-foot gap between them. The roots cannot grow in such a condition."

Pokhran Road No 1 has over 20

varieties of trees, including rain, palm, tamarind, and banyan trees. Last year, a redevelopment and road-widening project put around 1,300 trees at risk. Local residents then started a signature campaign to save them and won assurances from the Thane Municipal Corporation that the trees would not be hacked off.

Sixty-three trees were uprooted from the stretch and transplanted in a small municipal plot near Dosti Vihar, Vartak Nagar. Residents inspected the site recently and were left shocked.

"Trees cannot be replanted in any random location. After the process, they need a lot of care," said environmentalist Ajay Marathe. "I was shocked when I saw the photographs of the trees that were shifted to the municipal plot. There is no space for the roots to grow."

Augustine said Thane's greenery was one of the factors why thou-

sands of people had relocated there from Mumbai. "Pokhran Road is Thane's green lung. We have spent all our life here and it is really upsetting to see trees being neglected this way," he said.

Anil Arora of Laxminarayan Residence said citizens had agreed to tree transplantation after the civic body assured them that the process would be carried out in a scientific manner. "Municipal officials are now asking us where they can replant trees. Shouldn't have they thought about it before uprooting the trees?" he asked.

Stalin Dayanand, who heads environmental group Vanashakti, said the civic body should stop "pretending" that it can carry out successful tree transplantations.

"It's an exercise that needs a lot of money and care. Before you replant a tree, its base should be watered and kept wet for a few days. This will ensure that the roots don't break

when the tree is uprooted. The process should be ideally undertaken during monsoon," he said.

"The civic body's method is far from scientific: it simply uses a JCB machine to yank the roots out. Transplanted trees today have a survival rate of 25 per cent."

Thane municipal commissioner Sanjeev Jaiswal said the transplantation of the trees in question had been overseen by an expert who had handled similar projects at Mumbai airport and Navi Mumbai highway.

"The expert says there should not been a lot of space between replanted trees. But I will ask my team to see if more space will boost their survival chances," he said. "This is the time in the country that a civic body is transplanting every tree affected by a road-widening project. We have a budget of around Rs 60 lakh for transplanting 400 trees along Pokhran Road No 1 alone."