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# Mumbai footpaths are falling prey to road widening

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MUMBAI: In the recently announced BMC budget for 2023-24, the civic body said it will map footpath facilities for all major roads and wherever they are missing or in poor shape, a cement-concrete footpath of international standard and design will be speedily constructed. A provision of ₹200 crore has been made for this work.

This announcement has surprised many citizens given the fact that BMC has, on its own, reduced the width of footpaths in many high footfall areas, forcing residents on to busy roads.

Citizen activist Rishi Agarwal, who founded Walking Project, an advocacy group for a safer and convenient walking experience, took Mumbai Mirror

through stretches of SV Road in Andheri-west, which over the past few years has been widened for motorists at the expense of the pedestrian's comfort. Agarwal who documented this trend with photographs in 2017 said in Mumbai, one has seen how increasing road width only encourages more parking or speeding. "This is why pedestrians are left with zero walking experience. On stretches like SV Road which has schools, footpaths should be given priority so that students can have a safe walking environment," said Agarwal.

Mirror walked with Agarwal on the SV Road stretch from Andheri station going towards Bandra and found that while road width had increased, the footpath width has reduced. Most pedestrians can be seen walking on the road. When Mirror contacted BMC officers in this area, they said the road had to be widened as traffic congestion had peaked.

"We widened SV Road by taking over setback from existing properties along the stretch. There was demand from motorists to widen the road. We moved the footpath back in the setback portion but ensured that 1.5 metre standard width as suggested by

the Indian Road Congress is maintained. On the contrary when the footpath was wide we would get frequent complaints that the footpath is being encroached by hawkers," said a senior official.

Agarwal also pointed at a similar instance of footpaths being reduced on AK Vaidya Marg at Dindoshi. "Here the size has been reduced to such a narrow stretch that pedestrians can hardly walk on it," he said.

Similarly, at Wadala's Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road which goes towards South Mumbai, King Circle activist Nikhil Desai said the road earlier was wide enough but due to encroachment on footpaths by vagrants, its width was reduced a few years ago. "Encroachers were removed in a huge exercise, at a huge cost. Unfortunately, nothing was achieved because today the reduced footpath along with the road in front of it is still taken over by illegal huts," said Desai. "Why are we allowing pedestrian space to be encroached in such a way? Somewhere it is the backing of the political class that allows these encroachers to thrive," he said.

Architect and Bandra resident Rinka D'monte said footpaths are akin to the veins of a city. "If one has good quality footpaths, the walking experience is smoother and people may not even consider taking their vehicles then. Also, a footpath provides last mile connectivity and hence deserves to be given adequate importance whenever a particular road is being repaired or laid," she said.

NGO AGNI coordinator James John from Andheri-east said, "Recently the BMC widened the Andheri Ghatkopar Link Road (AGLR). But hawkers have taken it over at some locations. Pedestrians can still walk, but the reason for widening it was to benefit pedestrians and not to provide cozy spaces to hawkers," he said.

However, BMC officials said AGLR footpaths were never holistically taken up for improvement in the past like it has been done now. "The improvement works of the AGLR stretch were taken up only after a thorough survey was conducted. It was found that in a few areas the footpath was uneven and vehicle lanes were not uniformly laid. The recent works looked at improving all aspects of the road," said a BMC official.