



**Lurking danger:** Electrical wires on a street in the K.R. Market area in Bengaluru. K. MURALI KUMAR

# Wired web: Surging electrical accidents in Bengaluru

Despite the focus on infrastructure development in the city, which includes some mega projects, electrical safety is often compromised, with 607 lives lost in the past five years, reports **Jahnvi T.R.** A recent accident brought the focus back on what must be done to protect citizens

**I**n November 19, after celebrating Deepavali in Tamil Nadu, 23-year-old Soundharya and her nine-month-old daughter Suviksha returned to India's IT capital, Bengaluru, along with her husband Santosh Kumar. After debarking a bus at Silk Board junction, the family took a bus to Hope Farm junction in the city's eastern part.

What followed were moments of horror. The young mother and her baby were charred to death on the footpath they were walking on. They had stepped on a live electrical conductor that had snapped. Kumar, who tried to save his wife and daughter, also suffered an electric shock. The tragic accident caused an uproar in the city, with the public and political leaders from the Opposition demanding swift action and accountability.

However, this was not an isolated incident. According to statistics shared by the Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (Bescom), which has jurisdiction over eight districts, including Karnataka's capital, between the financial years 2018-19 and 2023-24 (until October), there have been 607 fatal electrical accidents. While 572 of them were non-departmental (members of the public), 35 of them were departmental. Apart from this, there were also 203 non-fatal, non-departmental accidents, and 168 non-fatal departmental accidents in these five years.

In January this year, Gautham, a 26-year-old Bescom lineman, died of electrocution while repairing the F-29 feeder on Magadi Road. In September 2022, another 23-year-old woman, Akhila, who was also the breadwinner of her family, died from electrocution in Varthur after falling on an advertisement hoarding on the divider of a flooded road on a rainy evening.

"There is no way to walk on the footpaths in the city now without worrying about your safety. There are so many wires either dangling from poles or bunched up on one side of the footpath. How can people distinguish which one is a live wire and which one is an optical fibre cable, especially when they are walking around at night? My mother has now stopped walking on footpaths for this reason," said Kiran Kumar, a resident of Haralur.

## Kinds of accident

According to experts, 400 to 600 electrical fatalities occur every year across Karnataka. Apart from snapped conductors, the other common electrical hazards include building fires due to short circuits, flammable items placed near switchboards or electric panels, improper earthing, and electricity leakage.

A former officer of the Electrical Inspectorate

Periodically, with respect to everything electricity in Karnataka, the KERC should order compliance audits to bring some order to the chaos. If these audits happen in at least one aspect [of electrical equipment] every year, there will be some fear, even among Escoms.

**M.G. PRABHAKAR**  
Former member of the advisory committee, KERC



Electrical accidents in Bescom jurisdiction

Year	Department		Non-department		Total
	Fatal	Non-fatal	Fatal	Non-fatal	
2018-19	8	47	128	44	227
2019-20	9	20	83	37	149
2020-21	4	21	56	29	110
2021-22	7	31	101	42	181
2022-23	6	28	128	31	193
2023-24 (up to October)	1	21	76	20	118
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>572</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>978</b>

Source: Bescom



Electrical wires running close to buildings in an area near S.P. Road in Bengaluru. K. MURALI KUMAR



An open electrical box on Mysuru Road in Bengaluru. K. MURALI KUMAR

spoke of how, in the last 10-15 years, electrical accidents have increased in rural areas due to haphazard drawing of cables, among other things. "For example, for the Niranthara Jyothi scheme (which aims to ensure 24-hour uninterrupted power supply in rural areas), they have drawn new lines along the old lines, causing interference. When lines pass too close to each other and come into contact, it might result in sparks and subsequently in the snapping of conductors,

which causes accidents," he explained. He added that the victims of such accidents are usually labourers who work with contractors.

Animals have also been victims of electrical accidents over the years. "At least 20-25 elephants die every year in forest areas where branches fall and break or cause electricity lines to sag. Even in villages close to forests, there are fences which are electrified, and animals die when they encounter them," the retired officer said.

In urban areas, the problems mostly arise out of rapid, unplanned development and construction. "The buildings are constructed dangerously close to the electric lines. While they comply with regulations on the ground floor, as the building goes up, they protrude towards the road, and this results in deaths during construction. Neither does the electricity department concerned nor do the local authorities issue any notices [to contractors for violating construction regulations]," he said.

## Lack of action

After the electrocution case at Hope Farm junction, Karnataka's Energy Minister K.J. George announced that four investigations would take place to determine the details of the case. The National Human Rights Commission and Lokayukta took suo motu cognisance of the matter, and demanded reports. However, questions have been raised about the presumed silence of the Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission, the watchdog of electricity in the State.

Advocate Shridhar Prabhu, who has represented many electricity-related cases, pointed out that while there have been no systematic changes in the last few years when it comes to electrical accidents, a legal resolution has remained a challenge and the KERC has remained quiet.

"For any electrical installation to take place in the State, its safety must be approved by the Chief Electrical Inspectorate. Yet, it is a lacuna that when an electrical accident occurs, they are not held responsible. The State should also be equally responsible as they are the ones who constitute the Inspectorate. Similarly, the KERC issues licences to distributors, and it takes no action when gadgets are burnt or when there is a loss of life or limb. Let alone suo motu cognisance, they do not take action even when a complaint is filed," Prabhu alleged. "All four—the electricity supply companies (Escoms), the State government, the Chief Electrical Inspectorate and the KERC—should be held primarily responsible in these cases," he added.

M.G. Prabhakar, a former member of the advisory committee, KERC, also said the commission had not kept an active watch on the findings of technical audits and compliance audits, which are mandated for transmitters and distributors by the Commission itself. "Periodically, with respect to everything electricity in Karnataka, the KERC should order compliance audits to bring some order to the chaos. If these audits happen in at least one aspect [of electrical equipment] every year, there will be some fear, even among Escoms," he said.

The former officer of the Inspectorate also said the guidelines issued by KERC were only on paper and not being implemented. "The commission should take stringent action, and a safety committee should be formed with members from Escoms, KPTCL, and the inspectorate to implement these things. The KERC can also take up a comprehensive programme with a pilot project in a sub-division where they can create a safe electricity zone and correctly address the lacunae and unsafe practices and make it a model to follow." He added that in order to reduce accidents, there should be some focus on the quality of equipment and the kind of work provided by escoms.

Experts emphasised that despite so many electrical accidents occurring every year, the victims often did not know what legal routes they could take or how they could apply for compensation. "People do not know who to approach. There is no sufficient publicity about legal awareness. People think it is like regular litigation that takes a few years. They should know about the strict liability principle (a compensation) or writ petitions (processed sooner than regular cases)," Prabhu said.

However, he added that unlike the Motor Accidents Claims Tribunal, there were no legal services available for victims. "The State should either constitute a tribunal to adjudicate the victims' claim or give MACT the power to adjudicate even in these cases to determine the quantum of compensation." He also said that the State and Escoms should provide legal services and fund the litigation of the victims, and group insurance schemes should be introduced for all electrical consumers in the State.

## Steps by Escoms

After the recent electrocution deaths, officials of Bescom said internal meetings were held to determine the places and equipment that need immediate attention, and their maintenance and repair work would be taken up immediately. A circular was issued by the Energy Department a few days after the accident to all the Escoms and transmission corporations to implement measures such as training of substation staff about prevention of electrical accidents, creation of awareness among the public about electrical accidents, organisation of Safety Day where awareness is created about best practices and regular maintenance of electrical grids as per the safety manual of KERC and KPTCL, among other things.

The Energy Minister also said that once the investigation reports are out, strict action will be taken against those responsible, while the findings will be used to implement safe electricity measures across Karnataka. Bescom has taken up two projects—Aerial Bundling of Cables (ABC) and Underground Cables (UG). Almost five years after starting them, out of a total of 6,134 km of LT wires, 5,900 km (97%) have been converted into ABC and out of 7,182 km of HT KV lines, 6,900 kilometres (96%) have been converted into UG cables, until October.

The company had also taken up the replacement of old transformers by special design transformers (erected at a height of about 2 metres to ensure that it does not pose a threat to those who come in contact) in at least 3,000 hazardous locations and the ones which were obstructing pedestrian movement. An official said that the replacement of 40 old transformers are pending.

For assistance in case of electrical accidents, citizens can call 1912, the 24/7 helpline number of Bescom.