

Aapla Dawakhana grapple with city's notorious space crunch

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The city's flagship HBT

Aapla Dawakhana

scheme, which steadily expanded since its 2022 launch, is grappling with Mumbai's notorious space crunch. Despite serving lakhs of patients, the scheme faced periodic backlash.

Most recently, residents of Kalina expressed frustration when a fire brigade was hindered by illegal parking and the clinic occupying 650 sq ft of valuable road space.

While construction of the Kalina clinic nears completion, 110 standalone HBT clinics are operational, with an additional 97 sharing space with existing dispensaries. In these shared locations, the dispensary operates from morning until the afternoon, after which HBT staff take over for the evening shift.

A recent report by the Praja Foundation recommended relocating the 97 shared HBT clinics to independent locations. This would allow both dispensaries and HBT clinics to run simultaneously from morning until late evening.

However, health department officials cite Mumbai's severe space limitations as a significant challenge. Constructing standalone HBT clinics is also an expensive endeavour, with challenges related to water, electricity, safety, and maintenance, even when the clinics are on BMC land. The Kalina clinic faced opposition as early as September when construction only just began. Similarly, residents of the BKC Kanakia Paris Housing Society raised concerns over potential traffic disruption, echoing the issues faced in Kalina. Protests were also held in Malabar Hill, where residents objected to the clinic's impact on pedestrian access to the Hanging Gardens. Haseeb Khan, a Kalina resident, said, "We want to make it clear that no one is opposed to clinics, but rather the location of the clinics. It cannot be the reason for more problems. Services like fire brigades or ambulances need to be able to pass quickly."

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) argues that clinic locations are selected with these concerns in mind. Rules mandate that there should be a slum population of 15,000 to 25,000 within a one-kilometre radius of a clinic. However, the slums are densely packed, leaving little room for construction.

"Gap analysis is conducted, dividing the population into slum and non-slum categories. For every 25,000 residents, one Aapla Dawakhana is required," said a medical officer from a South Mumbai ward.

In some slum areas, opposition also came from residents, citing concerns over disruptions to their livelihoods. The medical officer said that consultations with all stakeholders are held prior to selecting the location, which includes residents and local political leaders in the area.

"The maintenance department then conducts a feasibility survey to ensure it doesn't obstruct any civic amenities," the medical officer added.

The agitated residents across various localities claim such consultations are unheard of. While officials avoid locating the clinics near high-rise buildings.

Another medical officer from South Mumbai explained, "But there are situations where we opt for a location near a high-rise or at a dead end if there is no other accessible option for slum dwellers."

A top health department official said, "There is redevelopment happening everywhere, with high-rises built next to slums. Almost every tower in the city has slums next to it."