

RIVERS REMEMBER

#CHENNAIRAINS

and the Shocking Truth
of a Manmade Flood

KRUPA GE

A Part of Our Home Dies

1 December 2015, Chennai

Social media is rife with rumours about a flood. Stories of crocodiles escaping from the Madras Crocodile Bank, a rumour that also did the rounds during the tsunami, are back on WhatsApp. This time, it is accompanied by grainy photographs and news clippings that look at least a decade old. I know these are not true, but something else creeps up on me: a palpable fear of flooding, especially the neighbourhood my parents live in.

I call my father, and he assures me there's nothing to worry about, because their home—even though only a few hundred metres away from Satya Nagar, which is on the banks of the Adyar River and often goes under water during heavy rains—has never flooded. In any case, cement bags filled with sand have been readied, my father says, so that bunds may be raised to prevent any water from coming in. I am not entirely convinced, but I have no reason to believe that my childhood home will flood. We agree to stay in touch and to keep our phones fully charged while the power lasts.

Soon enough, there's a blackout across most parts of the city, including the T Nagar area, where my spouse Swaroop and I live. We have been so worried about waters entering my parents' home that we have forgotten to store water in ours. As the

power goes off and the water pump stops working, we realise we have run out of water. Not a drop around, either in a bottle or a bucket.

We tie ropes to buckets and draw water from the underground tank outside our apartment and carry them over to our house. We spend as little of it as we can. Every resource is maximised. A frugality that harks back to a different era. We try to stay off the internet to save power on our cell phones and ration our social media usage, even as information deficit envelopes us in an eerie silence. I post, on Instagram, what I think is a stupid, yet bizarrely accurate photograph of my feelings. A miniature human toy hanging on to dear life from the inside edge of a filled wine glass. I caption it: "Things are looking a bit grim here." We try to read to get over our fears. Swaroop is reading R. Nath's *Private Life of Mughals in India* and I am reading Haruki Murakami's *Underground* .

My brother and sister-in-law, Balajee and Subadra, who live a little away from our home, are on battle mode too. They switch their phones on by turns, and that too only to check on all of us and to look for signs of emergency. They seem ready for whatever might be thrown their way.

They live in a first-floor apartment, and their car is parked on the ground floor. Their home too, like ours, is tucked away on a quiet street, removed from too much noise and traffic but still right in the middle of the city. It is colourful and filled with artefacts and artwork that Subadra, a self-taught artist, is working on just then. They too are trying to make the most of what is available, rationing backup lights and fans.

Back in my parents' home, my mother too, like all of us, has an odd sort of feeling in her stomach. Unlike any of us, however,

she isn't really waiting for anything to happen to her. While my father tries to reconnect with the world outside, looking for scraps and bits of information on the internet, she is busy packing. But how does one pack twenty years of one's life and into what? Where does one go for boxes large enough and how does one know how much time one has?

My parents' house is compact. At approximately 650 square feet, it is a typical Chennai flat on the ground floor of a three-storeyed building. It is home to Hindus, Muslims, Tamils, Telugus, Punjabis, Sourashtrians, Kannadigas and, until some time ago, to the last of the area's Anglo Indians. The building had always been robust and mixed, even before my parents moved in twenty-five years ago. And this diversity has only got better with time. The south-facing living room wears a dark, cool and sometimes gloomy look, even in the afternoons when the rest of the city is parched, dry and hot. From the street, when the apartment's door is open, you can see right through the living room, to the kitchen, and then through the kitchen windows into the building behind, and further down, to my mother's older sister's house.

The kitchen doubles up as the prayer room and is lined with idols, photos and holy collectables from all over—Varanasi, Vatican and Mecca. My mother is a believer and a Madras-bred secular gal. The food in that kitchen is magical: thick, tangy kozhambu, melt-in-your-mouth potato curry, and the best rasam in town. It heals when you are sick, invigorates when you are down and it lulls you to sleep on Sunday afternoons. No matter what she makes, it tastes like comfort food. My father too is a wonderful cook; his dal is unparalleled.

My parents' home has two bedrooms, two bathrooms—one Indian and one western—and mosaic tile flooring that is cool all through the year. The open lofts are filled with my grandmother's utensils, and diaries and notes left behind by my communist grandfather, who founded the Cine Musicians Union of Madras. In there, also live dolls wrapped in bits of old torn dhotis and sarees, which come down only once a year to be displayed during the nine-day Navratri festival, Golu.

There isn't space for too much furniture, but every nook has been optimised to its fullest. There are shelves nailed to wall corners, a showcase on the wall that can be reached only if one stands on the long, brown stool that's been around for as long as my parents have been married. There's a hexagonal dining table in the living room. There's a three-seater sofa in wood, with red- and gold-coloured cushions and a diwan made in Andhra, where my father used to work. There are a few plastic chairs, a bed made in Tirupati from back when my parents were a young couple, and a computer table on which sits a good old-fashioned personal computer. There's an LED TV lent by a friend. And memories, oh, so many of them, in the form of knick-knacks strewn all around the house.

There are cooking utensils in the open shelves of the kitchen that have stayed in the family for over thirty years and heirloom pots passed on from my grandmother—most of them stainless steel, some of them bronze. There are two steel bureaus, one of them as old as my parents' marriage and the other bought to accommodate my brother Balajee's and my clothes. The older bureau is filled with sarees, some silk and over fifty years old, and many chiffons. Its locker is home to all of my parents' secrets, ones my brother and I are only quasi-privy too, ones that my

mother guards. It's not filled with money or gold, really. They are just papers—receipts, correspondences and the like. Lots and lots of it, collected over the years.

So how does one begin to wrap all of this, one's labour of love, one's home, bundle them up and carry them over to safety, when one has no warning or no knowledge of what is to come?

While my father keeps a vigil to check if water levels are rising and by how much, my mother rounds up anything that can become a container—a large blue barrel with a black lid that they keep around to store water during the horrid water shortage that hits Chennai every year between March and June; buckets, so many of them; and dhotis and sarees.

She throws papers, whatever she can lay her hands on or thinks is important, into the barrel, and with the help of two young boys, her neighbours, carries them up to the first floor of the building into someone else's home. She gathers all the silk sarees in a dhoti and sends them up. She grabs everything small, valuable and easily packable, and begins to put them away, when my father finally chips in to help my mother, half-convinced, while Swaroop and I wait in our house and Balajee and Subadra wait in theirs for news.

My mother now takes a torch and walks around the apartment building, wading through the darkness that has engulfed the entire street. It is pitch dark and she's alone. She shines the torch along the drains. She sees dark, large insects crawling up and down the pipes and stays far away, but would wonder later if she had imagined them in the darkness and if the shadows had played a trick on her. She is auditing the water level in the drain sumps of the building. She goes home and removes the covers from the drains and checks on the water levels there. She's

convinced that the waters are going to come in, and that they are going to come in through the drains. She's convinced when no one else is even anticipating it. She walks around restless. She chats with neighbours. Everyone's worried, their furrowed faces lit by candles, by now the only source of light. There's no backup power anywhere.

There's darkness. There's silence. There's fear. There's a creeping sense of discomfort in the air, which is new to those of us cushioned till now by the privileges of the salaried class. For others like my mother, forgetfulness comes in handy, for Chennai has witnessed floods every few decades (1903, 1943, 1978, 1985 and 2002). But there's also a renewed sense of camaraderie among the people of the building. A quiet understanding that makes it alright. Offers have come from those who live in the upper floors: 'If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask.' 'Come sleep in our home if something happens.' 'Would you like a cup of tea or something?'

After a lot of thinking, worrying, wondering, chatting with people in the apartment, accompanied by nervous laughter, my parents go to sleep. They try to sleep. A very light slumber that dances around wakefulness descends, as if it knows something is coming.

~

2 December 2015

At 4 a.m., there's an urgent knock on the door.

'Aunty! Aunty!' Manoj, our young neighbour calls.

Amma opens the door.

'Water's entered our house. It's rising steadily,' he says.

'It hasn't come here, pa,' Amma says. Before she can get her bearings and look for her glasses, it begins.

Water gushes in from the kitchen's and bathroom's drains as well as from the road. A quick human chain is formed in that darkness, as black, sludge-filled water that has mingled with waste from the sewers by this point, starts to fill up my parents' home. More things Amma spent the night packing are quickly transported up the stairs.

Just as they prepare to leave the house, my mother says to my father, 'Go get the rice. We can't let so many kilos of it rot.'

My father tries to go back in, but the water is unexpectedly slippery and he almost falls. He tries to go in again, and then gives up. My parents and the young boys of the building are now debating if they must lock the house or not.

How do you decide what's best for your house when it's filling up with 'water' that has come up almost to your neck? Do you just close the door? Do you lock it? Do you leave it open? Will the water go away if you leave it open? Or will it still stay inside?

A million questions zip through his mind but there are only a few seconds left. Appa shuts the door and as the greasy water threatens to drown him, he fumbles but eventually manages to lock it.

He wades through the water and joins Amma on the first floor.

~

I get a call from an unknown landline number.

Groggy and still in bed, I pick up the phone.

'Hello.'

'It's me,' my father says. I spring up from the mattress.

'Are you okay? Where are you?'

‘Water entered the house last night. Around 4 a.m. We are safe, don’t worry. We are upstairs on the third floor.’

My heart breaks a little as his words slowly register. ‘We are coming there to get you, okay?’

‘The water’s come up to the first floor, almost. Impossible for us to go down or for anyone to come in. Anyway, we are on the third floor now. Don’t worry. Water can’t possibly come all the way up here,’ he says reassuringly.

‘Is the house okay?’

‘Hmm. I don’t know.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘We are actually having a decent time. So many of us together in the building, right? So it’s all good.’

‘I asked you to come, right? Why didn’t you just leave then?’

‘If we hadn’t stayed, we would have never been able to save as much as we did.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah. Your mother saved all that’s important. The furniture and stuff, I don’t know what’s going to happen with that. But everything else is fine.’

‘Oh.’

‘Look, this is the only phone working and we are able to make calls but not receive. You can try reaching me on this but I am not sure if it will work. Don’t worry about us. We are fine.’ And then, he’s gone.

I open Facebook and write, ‘Marooned in T Nagar while my parents’ home flooded at 4 a.m. Beyond frustrating. Endless suckfest.’

After waiting around all morning, looking out the window, watching the water levels go up and down and then almost reach our ground-floor apartment—which, thankfully, is a few feet higher than the road—Swaroop and I have had enough. We charge our phones in his car parked just outside the apartment, and are thinking of taking it out and going ... somewhere. Anywhere.

His red A-Star car, which Swaroop has nicknamed Saroja (because roja, or rose, is red), had been our companion through the first half of that November. We were on a road trip, from Chennai to Kanyakumari. We passed through Pondicherry, Tranquebar, Nagore, Vailankanni, Sikkal, Tanjore, Tuticorn, Manapad, Kanyakumari and Madurai. We missed the rains by a whisker in many of these places; just as we left a town, we would receive a call from my father about flash flood warnings. The rains finally caught up with us as we drove back home from Madurai to Chennai. It poured so heavily that we could see nothing on the highway, and it was sheer luck that kept us going. The car's wipers fought hard, but all we could see that night was sheets of water as if we were standing behind a waterfall. When we hit the outskirts of Chennai, we were sure the car would stop moving. The roads were inundated heavily around Tambaram, through which we had to enter the central part of the city, where we live. Saroja held on admirably, and we reached home safe on 15 November, two days before the first round of widespread flooding in the city. My own car, a gold-coloured Alto that I bought with my journalist's salary on EMI—I had vowed to buy myself a car after having swallowed abuse at the hands of men on public transport all through my childhood, shrinking with rage and shame—is back in my parents' house, *safe*, far away from the basement car park of my building.

We get a call at around two in the afternoon from Hredai, Swaroop's cousin, who lives not far away. He says there's no flooding anywhere near his home and that he has power, and there's no sign of distress at all. He threatens to wade in to give us supplies. So we decide to go to him instead.

We shake it off, whatever it was that was holding us back and get into Swaroop's car. We reach the main road, under the GN Chetty Road flyover in the heart of Chennai and I am almost certain the car is going to stop, because there's just water everywhere. It enters the car and reaches our ankles. We drive through the water and try to comfort each other. People are rushing to places. Cars have stopped in the middle of the road and are beginning to float a bit; that's how much water there is. The water inside our car is steadily rising and almost hits our knees.

We reach Cathedral Road, barely a kilometre away from our home, and are stung by the realisation that not everything in the city is drowning. We feel betrayed. Some roads seem to be holding up. And we are shocked by just how normal things are by the time we reach TTK Road in Alwarpet, barely three and a half kilometres from home.

'For a while, we felt guilty that we had power and there was no flooding here. We switched everything off. Because how do you react to something like this?' Hredai asks us when we reach his place in the evening.

I charge my phone and try to reach my parents.

Nothing.

I then make some plain instant noodles and eat. Dinner for desperate times.

‘People are stocking up on war footing. Milk, eggs, bread, what have you. Instant noodles seemed like the best option to us for times like this,’ our host says.

I try calling Balajee and can’t reach him either. I tweet asking for information on Srinagar Colony, where my parents live and is about six kilometres away from Hredai’s house. I run a search for it on Twitter—hundreds of ‘unable to reach my parents’ posts from anxious children, just like me, show up. I put my phone on charge and go to sleep on comfortable mattresses spread out for us on the floor, and wait.

We would learn later that the previous night, Balajee and Subadra had watched a nightmare unfold in their first-floor flat.



My brother and sister-in-law watch from their balcony as water rises steadily, because of the Mambalam Canal, which has till then, for all practical purposes, only been known as some sort of a sewer to most of us in the city. (It is only after the flood I would learn that the Mambalam Canal runs right through GN Chetty Road, few metres from my home as well.)

The two of them watch the water rise every few minutes. It goes from ankle deep, to knee deep and then, the cars in the building begin to float. Later, the cars are submerged completely. They are bewildered because it’s so gradual. Of all of us, they have the worst night in some ways because they keep thinking the water will recede any minute now. It is dark, so they can see only what the narrow beam of the torch illuminates. Their own car begins to float. And then my brother’s old bike, which has been with him for over a decade, disappears under the water.

All through the night, car alarms keep going on and off. They sound like trapped animals crying for help. Their neighbours on the ground floor, just like my parents, caught unaware, drop everything and run to the first floor. Everything valuable, everything dear, just left as is inside their home. They too eat instant noodles and try to rest but sleep eludes them.

~

Swaroop and I spend the day hanging by the phone, trying to think up ways to combat this sense of gloom.

Nothing.

It has been a ridiculously dull day and we try our best to stay away from social media. It's addictive. We post about my parents and ask if someone has gone to the area on a rescue boat to check in on the elderly, who live by the hordes there. It's funny how overnight we are just as helpless as the hundreds of NRI kids trying desperately to reach their parents or find out about them. It's funny how the floods can shrink the distance between the USA, UK, UAE and TTK Road and can place a distance the size of a continent between TTK Road and Srinagar Colony. It's funny how in this age of information—when all we have to do is scroll down Facebook timelines and WhatsApp chat windows for updates from the people we love, cherish, loathe and stalk—a blackout of this nature can drive us to the brink of insanity. We refresh our feeds on Facebook, hit search on Google, search for hashtags on Twitter and look just about everywhere for news of our loved ones, for any news at all. It's as if an addict has been asked to go cold turkey. Add to this the fact that most of the people that are trapped are unable to come online and post updates, while their families, we, are online, creating a network

of hysteria. As if the only way to show we care is by being hysterical. Sometimes, maybe it is.

In the evening at around 4, I receive a call from Balajee. I am jumpy again. We are unable to connect to the network well. The call keeps dropping and frustration threatens to break me.

Finally, the call connects. Balajee and Subadra are safe. They have waded through neck-deep water (and by water I mean the same sewer water that besieged my parents' home). Like us, they too didn't want to wait alone in their apartment any longer, and want to meet us. They have run out of water and food. They are on Venkatanarayana Road, which is on one side of Chennai's lifeline, Anna Salai. This main road runs from the northern end of the city near the Cooum River, all the way to the south-western part, Guindy, across the Adyar.

Swaroop and I make it to Chamiers Road, which is on the other side of the historic Anna Salai. We are separated by a few metres, yet unable to cross the road. There, on Anna Salai, at that spot called Nandanam Signal, which at that time of the day would usually be teeming with vehicles and hundreds of humans, now has floodwaters gushing through it. Ferociously. So bad is the situation that we see army personnel, with ropes tied across the road, trying to transport people. Even they aren't sure what to do. Our hearts sink. Our calls stop connecting. We stare at the waters before retreating in defeat.

Later in the day, the two wade through more water and make it to Subadra's maternal home, two kilometres away from us in Gopalapuram, another area untouched by the floods, and we meet them there.

3 December 2015

I receive a call from my father saying their building is no longer flooded. Water has receded and everyone is safe. We want to go across, but there's no way for us to reach them because the main roads are still marooned and all access into the colony is cut off. Once we know they are out of the woods, we are a wee bit relieved. We go to a small shop in Gopalapuram, Pickwick Silkhouse, and buy new clothes. It hadn't even occurred to us to pack.

~

5 December 2015

Two excruciatingly slow, painful days have passed. As waters recede, we go to my parents' home. The city wears a look of despair and absolute disarray. Eerie, murky and nothing like the Chennai we have grown up in for three decades now. The poor stand in queues on roads, as buses filled with volunteers distribute aid. Those rendered homeless, as their homes have been washed away, take whatever comes their way—sarees, nighties, hot homemade food, buckets, dhotis, lungis, mineral water bottles, sanitary napkins, mosquito repellents—sometimes running behind vans and cars that have run out of supplies. These are some of the most hardworking people, the working class of the city. Memories of their arms extended for food, clothes and water bottles would remain etched in our minds, for a long time after the flood. This is especially painful to watch as food security has been among the biggest success stories of Tamil Nadu (TN).

The tree-lined streets around my parents' home, where I learned to cycle and where carpets of flowers from kondrai

trees that find mention in the Tamil poems of the glorious Sangam era welcome me usually, looks like a giant garbage dump. Despair grips me as I wonder how this city is ever going to recover from this.

Then we open my childhood home. And it looks like a war was fought in there. A battle with the Adyar River.

What no one tells you about floods like this is that it is not water that comes into your home. Let me tell you now once and for all so when it happens to you—and happen it will, for our cities are not flood resilient—you can be prepared. Floods are the new norm, everywhere in the world. And what flows into your home when it floods, is sewage. Almost always. Mostly human waste, but also other waste.

The floor of our home has a thick layer of sludge, and upon it, my mother who's eager to walk in and see her home, however bad its shape might be, falls. Our hearts stop for a few seconds, before she gets up and marches on.

Everything looks black, as if someone brought a lorry full of sludge from a gutter and meticulously smeared every single item in the house with it—stainless steel utensils, mattresses, bedsheets, pillows, nooks and crannies filled with trinkets that have built up over twenty years, photographs of gods, grandparents, idols, buckets, mugs, papers, oh, so many. No piece of furniture is in its place. The gas cylinder has moved out of the kitchen and is next to the entrance. The fridge is on its side. The washing machine upside down. And the house stinks. A stench that is unbearable and unlike anything we have ever experienced. Our beautiful home is destroyed. Everything is gone. The home we grew up in, that sheltered us from rains and the hot Chennai sun, where countless life events happened, things built and bought over

years, life savings, a lifetime of everything, an entire way of life, is gone. Unable to bring ourselves to do anything, or say anything to anyone, we leave. In silence. To come back another day. On the way out I see my car. My father's left its doors open to dry it out. Fungus has taken over the interiors. It smells rotten. It is no longer the golden chariot I knew. It is all but metal scrap now and will never run again. I will never hold that steering wheel in my hands and feel grateful for the chances that came my way.

We will rebuild our parents' home, no doubt. We will buy a different car, in time. Money isn't as hard to come by now as it was when we were younger. Things have changed for me. For us. But I think of the younger me and the people who are as vulnerable now as we were then. The enormity of it all. Of the images we usually see with utter indifference on television, of people running towards helicopters that drop ration on to rooftops, somewhere else, in Orissa maybe, or Andhra, during a flood, or just beyond our parents' home in Satya Nagar. Of rains lashing and water, water everywhere you turn, of words we throw around flippantly, as if it has nothing to do with us, words like flood, relief, aid, helicopters, ration, boats and rescue missions ... All this takes over our mind. Our life. Our sleep.

What I did not know then was that my parents had moved almost immediately into a neighbour's apartment on the third floor when the water had come in. Mr Chandrashekar had opened up his home to them with great generosity. They were all worried, sure, but it was with some amount of incredulousness that I heard stories of my parents having dinner by candle lights, of using rainwater for cooking or drinking, and a production line of idlis in one neighbour's kitchen for over a dozen people marooned in nearly six feet of water and with nowhere to go.

A Part of Their Home Survives

We didn't think they'd remember. But they did. They remembered their many homes, every single one they had breathed in before, thrived in. It was as if nothing had changed. As if someone had turned the clock back. Their ancient homes looked different now, but once they started to make their way in, they claimed it as their own, again.

You see, we had thought of them as but minor obstacles to building a bustling metropolis. We displaced them, disallowed them from entering their own turf. And then we built on top of their homes. They had been around for long, for as long as time can be. And yet we said there was no place for them in the city.

All we saw of them was their struggle for survival, the remnants of their decrepit homes, their unkempt facades and the endless barrage of mosquitoes they bred, as if to strike vengeance. When we passed by them, we covered our noses and looked away.

Then, when the skies made love to the ocean and pregnant clouds burst forth with droplets that grew slowly into raging thunderstorms, puddles turned into ponds, and then lakes. The floodgates of their memories were thrown wide open. It was time for them to come back to claim our uneven tar roads, with their

bodies covered in grime, dark and brown, like syrupy jaggery and molasses.

There are three of them that call Chennai their home: the Kosasthalaiyar, the Cooum and the Adyar. Rivers. Their home survives in their memories, and they showed us its power in December 2015.

~

The ancient practice of kudimaramathu—kudi meaning people and maramathu meaning repair, wherein a village was responsible for maintaining, repairing and taking care of water bodies—died out over time. Though the TN government announced an eponymous scheme that harks back to this practice, first in 1975 and later in 2017, it has repeatedly faced hiccups,¹ with farmers complaining of monetary loss and corruption.

The waterways of yore, managed by the Tamils and the Telugus, who inhabited this city in large swathes, consisted of aaru, or river—the name Adyar actually comes from Adai-arū—and eri, or lake—like the Retteri, meaning two lakes, which receives water from the Red Hills Reservoir and the Korattur Lake. The names of many neighbourhoods in Chennai are derived from Tamil words for water bodies. The word karanaṁ in Pallikarānaṁ, for instance, refers to a water body, and thaṅgal, as in Pazhavanthaṅgal and Vedanthaṅgal, refers to irrigation tanks. There were also kulams, or ponds, in the nomenclature, like in Kolathur.

Though Chennai has retained names of ancient waterways and areas that derive their names from water, there's little glory left for these water bodies. Think of all the 'lake view apartments' that no longer enjoy views of lakes, like in the Nungambakkam

area built on a lake to reclaim land for development, or the Lake View Road in Mambalam built by filling up what was once called Long Tank, which no longer exists except in historical maps and the musings of the city's historians. Long Tank used to be between the Adyar and Cooum Rivers. Powers that be, a potent mix of real estaters, politicians and policymakers, have sold us dreams of owning a piece of this big Pattanam—maritime town—by telling us that it's okay to build on marshes, lakes and poromboke lands that were reserved for shared communal uses.

They failed us. And in turn, we failed our rivers.

Where Does Our Water Come From?

Water, rather the lack of it, has always been a concern for those of us living in Chennai. Loud calls of ‘thanni vandaachu’ to announce the arrival of the Metro Water lorries, resound across rich and poor neighbourhoods, especially in summer.

Until the floods in 2015, I hadn’t paid much attention to where our water comes from. It was only when the water had finally reached my own home, without the help of lorries, that I found out about the four large reservoirs—Puzhal (1876), Poondi (1944), Sholavaram (1876–77) and Chembarambakkam (from the Pallava era, 400 years ago)—in suburban Chennai, which take care of the city’s water needs. This is also supplemented by groundwater, desalination plants in Nemelli and Minjur in neighbouring districts, the Veeranam Tank that brings the Cauvery River’s water and the Telugu Ganga Project that brings water from the Krishna River in the neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

But one river, over all the others, even though it does not flow through the city, has captured the heads, hearts and politics of Chennai. From festivals along her banks to paeans sung in her praise, it is the Cauvery, unlike any of the city’s rivers, that is on the lips of every farmer, citizen and neighbour of Tamil Nadu.

Even as Chennai battles for the Cauvery, boycotts IPL matches and engages in bitter banter over sharing water, it has ignored her sisters who call this very city home—the Adyar, Cooum and Kosasthalaiyar Rivers.

The 136-kilometre-long Kosasthalaiyar splits into two branches outside Chennai at the Kesavaram Dam. The main branch, Kosasthalaiyar, feeds the Poondi Reservoir and then flows through the Thiruvallur district. From there, it reaches the Bay of Bengal in the north of the city.

Meanwhile, the other branch, Cooum, heads south from the dam into central Chennai's Kilpauk, Nungambakkam and Triplicane areas, before heading to the Bay of Bengal.

The Adyar begins at the Chembarambakkam Reservoir, from where it travels through Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur and southern Chennai, before joining the sea near the Adyar area.

Cutting through all three major rivers is the manmade freshwater navigation channel, Buckingham Canal, built in 1806.

Chennai also has an elaborate system of natural and manmade drainage. This includes many small lakes, drains, and canals. The city's rivers, however, are seasonal and remain dry for a large part of the year. They receive excess water, if any, after feeding its reservoirs. Many people do not even realise that they are crossing rivers and canals while crossing the bridges in the city, for they look less like rivers and more like parched playgrounds, ripe for leisurely games of cricket and kite-flying, or they look like sewage canals. The 150-year-old beautiful Napier Bridge built over the Cooum near the Marina Beach has fewer admirers because of its stench. The same goes for the Periyar Bridge previously called St. George's Bridge built in 1805.

It is this very complex network of interconnected water bodies and drainage system that drowned us in December 2015, when rains lashed the city.

Major Waterways of Chennai

<i>Waterway</i>	<i>Total Length (km) – Chennai city</i>	<i>Length (km) – (Chennai Metropolitan Area)</i>
River Cooum	18.0	40.0
River Adyar	15.0	24.0
North Buckingham Canal	7.1	17.1
Central Buckingham Canal	7.2	7.2
South Buckingham Canal	4.2	16.1
Otteri Nullah	10.2	10.2
Captain Cotton Canal	2.9	4.0
Kosasthalaiyar	-	16.0
Mambalam Drain	9.4	9.4
Kodungaiyur Drain	6.9	6.9
Virugambakkam– Arumbakkam Drain	6.9	6.9
Total Length	23.2	157.8

Source: Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority. The Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA) refers to Chennai city and its suburbs, Kanchipuram and Thiruvallur districts. The development of all three regions is overseen by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority.

How a City Went Under

Between 8 November and 11 November 2015, several parts of Tamil Nadu received 125 mm to 280 mm of rainfall every day. By mid-November, a swollen Adyar greeted people, and a nervousness was apparent. Unable to sift through the rumours and news breaks, people waited in anxiety.

The Chembarambakkam Reservoir's Full Tank Level (FTL) is 85.4 feet. By 24 November, it had water up to 83.8 feet,² and what had occurred a week before, on 17 November, created concern among the people of South Chennai, when 18,000 cusecs of water—over five lakh litres per second—was released from the reservoir,³ severely flooding the neighbourhoods of West Tambaram, Mudichur, and some parts of Pammal, Anakaputhur, Manapakkam, Saidapet and Kotturpuram,⁴ all on the banks of the Adyar.

Through the month of November, 1,218.6 mm of rains had pounded the city.⁵ That's 1218.6 litres of rain over a square metre. To put this in perspective, the usual rainfall expected at this time of the year is less than one-third of this, around 400 mm.

However, between 24 and 30 November, the city received very little rainfall and the time was ripe for the authorities to release more water from the Chembarambakkam into the Adyar. But

they did not. Even though there were predictions for heavy to very heavy rainfall during this period, the reservoir was kept at 85–88 per cent full. Newspaper reports the following week said that this holding of water between 24 and 30, despite warnings, exacerbated the situation caused by the ‘once-in-a hundred-year-rain.’⁶

The city was moving unusually slowly. It was, in fact, tottering back to its routine from a really wet November. People in low-lying areas were told, ‘Well, that’s the price you pay for building your home on a lake,’ in as many different ways as possible by city planners, social media pundits, environmentalists and politicians. Why do homes get built on lakes and tanks in Chennai? And why do people, rich and not-so-rich, move in there? The poor and marginalised do not build their homes on lakes and tanks, because they cannot afford it. They settle *around* water bodies, on their banks. And yet, when it comes to the removal of ‘encroachments,’ they are the first in the line of fire.

On 14 November, the then chief minister J. Jayalithaa had called the initial damage due to heavy rains in various areas ‘inevitable.’⁷ And so people too were telling themselves there’s nothing anyone could have done. A small price to pay in the large scheme of things. For calling a piece of land your home in Chennai. The big city. Pattanam. In fact, for most of the city that lived in these low areas, flooding was a matter of routine, though this year had been extraordinarily tough.

Every year, when the rains come to Chennai, erratic and sparse as they are, many homes submerge. Nobody complains loudly and there is usually no one to complain to. The city waits for the end of the wet and debilitating November and to step into December, usually the most tolerable of months, mostly weather-

wise but also otherwise, as the Tamil month of Margazhi falls in December.

'Margazhi thingal madhi niraindha nannalaal'—the month of Margazhi, filled with the light of the moon—so begins *Thiruppavai*, written by the only female Vaishnavite bhakti saint-poet Andal, and heard across Vishnu temples of Tamil Nadu this time of the year. Temple visits are re-scheduled from evenings to early mornings, and *'Margazhi thingal madi naraya pongal'* is a favourite twist on the classic song in the city—'In the Margazhi month, my lap is full of pongal'—referring to the hot pongal prasadam offered to all who step into these temples. Large kolams adorn the entrances of temples and homes, and a feeling of festivity is in the air. Carols flow out of churches, as Christmas season begins. Raisins are soaked in rum and Carnatic concerts are awaited. A large number of visitors, mostly NRIs, are expected, for the music season as well as yearly family visits during the Christmas break. For many 'eligible' young men and women living abroad, the December break is the perfect time to come back home to Chennai and look for a future spouse. They see a number of 'candidates' and mull over them until the auspicious month of Thai that begins mid-January, when marriages are aplenty.

That December, as salaries, for the lucky few that drew them towards the end of the previous month, trickled in, people were thinking of replacing furniture, mattresses and cushions that had been damaged in the floods on 17 November. Chennai wanted to relax and enjoy its most favourite month, but an unrest loomed over it. The rains seemed unrelenting.

And then it happened.

After a lull in the rainfall in the last week of November, 490 mm of rain pounded parts of the city on 1 December.⁸

Officials opened the Chembarambakkam and let 29,000 cusecs of water out into the Adyar, over a period of twelve hours. This alleged 'once-in-a-hundred-year-rain,' a freak incident in one of the hottest years in Chennai, plunged the city into untold misery and wiped out the lives and livelihoods of many, even as rains continued to lash the city unabated.

On that day, the Chembarambakkam saw an inflow of 31,000 cusecs, 26,000 of it before six in the evening.⁹ And as this large amount of water joined the networks of rivers and drains, which were already full because of breaches and swollen lakes, there was pandemonium.

In fury and frenzy, the Adyar engulfed parts of Chennai. One by one, homes of the rich, poor and all those in between, with palm frond roofs, Mangalore tiles, asbestos and concrete ones that are sloping and straight, cycles, cycle rickshaws, homes of musicians with nadaswarams, veenas, violins, thavils, tamburas, mridangams, keyboards, drum kits, flutes, guitars and pianos, abodes of astrologers, believers, atheists and agnostics, offices of lawyers with bundles and case notes, autorickshaws, SUVs, sedans, luxury, imported, second-hand and antique cars, mansions, hotels, hostels, factories small and large, flour mills, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi schools, IT parks, call centres, petty shops, tea shops, supermarkets, shops for expats stocked with condiments from Korea and Japan, seaweed and udon noodles, atho shops that sell Burmese food, police stations, playgrounds, parks, stalls laden with fruits on the sides of the roads and covered in blue tarpaulin, banks, ATMs, malls, pharmacies, trade centres, clubs of the elite, libraries filled with books old and precious, petrol bunks, bridges, highways, mud, tar, concrete, arterial and remote roads, subways, railway

tracks, housing colonies, villas, far-away houses built by the slum clearance board, whole slums, apartment buildings, universities, colleges, the governor's bungalow, reserved forests, insurance offices, cows, calves, goats, dogs, cats, ducks, LPG offices filled with cylinders, hospitals filled with the dying, the pregnant and people suffering from senility, wedding halls, buildings under construction, public toilets, sign boards, name boards, MTC buses, lorries filled with wares, skin clinics, burger joints, milk depots, toll booths, schools, ration shops with sacks upon sacks of rice, wheat, dal and sugar, post offices, fishing hamlets, meen body vehicles, beef stalls, aircrafts, terrified puppies, temples ancient and new, those under trees, in T-junctions and sacred termite hills, mosques that host the wealthy and humble, churches that have been around from when Christianity first arrived in Madras and where apostles lived and breathed, mutts where seers sit, durgahs with the remains of saints, homes of priests and ministers, iron boxes and coal blocks of men and women who run ironing stalls on street footpaths, money plants, curry leaf plants and terrace gardens of retired men and women, lamp posts, telephone poles, transformers, commemorative arches, barbershops with antique furniture, tiny beauty parlours run by independent-minded lower middle class women, salons where Kollywood goes to polish up, military hotels, 'pure veg' bhavans, roadside biriyani stalls, TASMAs filled to the brim with bottles of alcohol, tools of trades, photo, video and sound studios, flex banners announcing weddings, deaths and birthdays, Xerox shops, cinema halls, Kwality Walls ice cream cycles, districts, villages, suburbs and the tunnels meant for metro rails ... all went under water.

The city's sewers filled up and the water spilt out, on to the streets, into homes, with no warning whatsoever, in the dead of the night, as darkness enveloped the city like a thick carpet. In many parts, no one heard of a flood and of officials asking them to leave to safer areas.

Officers parroted to the press that those on the banks of the Adyar should leave but there was no clarity on which areas were part of the floodplains, especially when this much water was being released. As many parts of the city were experiencing power cuts, the press statements issued by the district collector's office did not even reach the intended audience, for people were not watching TV or listening to the radio. Even if the information did reach them, many didn't realise their homes would flood. Apparently, not even the Chennai airport was prepared.

All the areas through which the Adyar winds went under. In Mudichur, the south-western suburb of Chennai, water rose to fifteen feet, destroying lives and homes. The story was just as stark in West Tambaram, Manapakkam, Meenambakkam—where, on the Adyar's floodplains, the secondary runway of the airport is located—Ekkaduthangal, Jafferkhapet, Saidapet, Adyar, Kotturpuram, Raja Annamalaipuram and finally, the posh and upmarket MRC Nagar from where the water drains into the sea.

The Mambalam Canal, which was intended as a 'flood accommodator', and joins the Adyar, overflowed. As did the Nandanam Canal, which in turn joins the Mambalam, and further added to the woes of the people living in and around T Nagar and West Mambalam, bringing water in these areas to the height of six feet. An underground metro tunnel in Saidapet took water from the Adyar River and delivered it with great

urgency to Teynampet and T Nagar, and these neighbourhoods went further under water.

On arterial roads, inside university buildings and giant IT parks, the river ran amok, its brute force threatening to knock down and carry away to the end of their lives, even the young and stable, let alone the old and frail. To walk against the current was hard and even harder to walk in its direction. Whichever way you were going, you were at risk of being pulled down by the flow, as if the river were a jealous neighbour waiting for you to fail. The only way to walk was by holding on to ropes. No one knew how to navigate this ferocious, unrecognisable being in their midst. Not the fishermen who could brave through the rough seas, nor the volunteers in sturdy jeeps and lorries, and certainly not the disaster management personnel from the armed forces.

The next day, trains, buses, share autos, cars and bikes were replaced by catamarans, coracles, fibre boats, lifeboats, large tubs, even kayaks, in which fishermen, actors, volunteers and the Good Samaritans of Chennai came out in large numbers to rescue, be rescued and in turn rescue more people.

What Caused the Floods?

A combination of factors—which occur time and again in many cities across India, particularly those on a coast—was responsible for the Chennai floods. Only a part of this was due to environmental elements beyond control such as a hot ocean possibly attributable to El Niño, high moisture content, lack of winds to carry away the clouds, and heavy rains. But the other two causes were entirely manmade: 1. Bad urban planning and 2. Abysmal disaster management planning.

The Delhi-based think tank Centre for Science and Environment captured¹⁰ how unsustainable urban development can turn even a marginally heavy rainfall into a beast. ‘Chennai had more than 600 waterbodies in the 1980s, but a master plan published in 2008 said that only a fraction of the lakes could be found in a healthy condition. The area of 19 major lakes has shrunk from a total of 1,130 hectares (ha) in the 1980s to around 645 ha in the early 2000s, reducing their storage capacity. The drains that carry surplus water from tanks to other wetlands have also been encroached upon.’

This disregard for the water ecosystem, combined with the state’s utter apathy during the disaster, caused the floods in Chennai. The unpreparedness of the state was visible in shocking bureaucratic actions such as: Not opening the sluice gates of the

Chembarambakkam Reservoir days before the predicted heavy rains, which would have eased the water out through the Adyar River into the sea. Keeping the reservoir almost full despite warnings of rains. Lack of coordination between those in charge of letting water out from various reservoirs into the lakes and canals across the state. Disaster management units that were unprepared and seemingly untrained to deal with a flood and a raging river. A non-existent disaster management plan in the state. Shutting off power. Poor phone connectivity that impeded not only locating those trapped but also calling for backup by those involved in risky rescue operations. Not sending out word to people that they were about to drown.

The weather conditions did go against the city, no doubt. A parliamentary committee¹¹ that looked into the floods said 'that the weather in various parts of the State of Tamil Nadu changed rapidly causing deep depression between 8 November and 10 November 2015; that formed low-pressure zones over South West Bay of Bengal between 28 November and 4 December 2015. On 1 December depression struck Chennai and the adjoining districts with such great intensity that large parts of the metropolis got marooned, causing untold suffering and destruction. The devastating flood also affected the adjoining districts particularly, Cuddalore, Tiruvallur and Kancheepuram.'¹²

Despite this, the committee still blamed illegal encroachment and faulty town planning as the major cause for the floods. Long-term factors like encroachments on river plains and beds as well as lakes, stormwater drains that hadn't been desilted, lack of floodplain zone planning and large-scale settlements in low-lying areas were all held responsible. But the committee also maintained that the removal of encroachments must be a

'balanced one as it has human and social consequences.'¹³ This irresponsibility of the authorities played out during the floods as well, the committee noted. The powers that be released water into the Kosasthalaiyar, the Adyar and other riverine systems, which then inundated the low-lying areas. This was further compounded when water from other lakes surrounding the city, such as Puzhal and Cholavaram, were also released.

In the course of this probe, the committee was informed by the secretary of the state's Ministry of Home Affairs that 'Obviously all state governments do take steps to prevent disasters. ... But, even if everything had been functioning absolutely perfectly, this kind of rainfall would inevitably have led to flooding. There was no way of preventing that occurrence. It happened once in 100 years.'¹⁴

The 'once-in-a-hundred-year-rain' theory was repeated every time someone asked questions of the state. The truth, however, is that, while it may not have rained as much in a hundred years, it almost always has been raining *like* this every decade in TN and causing floods. Moreover, a hundred-year-flood is technically not one that can happen only once in a hundred years. It simply means that in any given year, the probability of the occurrence of a flood of such high magnitude is one per cent. A hundred-year-flood can occur even in two consecutive years.¹⁵

The committee was unsatisfied with the government's statement, rightly, and noted in its report that 'any natural disaster of bigger intensity has the propensity to cause extensive damage. Thus, instead of putting the blame on the forces of nature, we should use advanced technology to fight it out. Moreover, the administration of both Centre and State should work together and remain vigilant to tackle the situation. [...] Natural disaster

of high magnitude will always adversely affect people in large number and the administration has to respond in the fastest possible manner. Accordingly, the NDMA [National Disaster Management Authority] and all concerned bodies of central and state governments should have established procedures so that vital time is not lost in wriggling out [sic] procedural delays.¹⁶

Given the repeated pattern of floods in places like Mumbai (July 2005), Surat (August 2006), Srinagar (September 2014) and then Chennai, the report said that states must scrupulously follow the NDMA guidelines and review town planning, giving importance to clearing flood passages, ensuring proper drainage, providing safe passage to excess water in lakes and other water bodies, and desiltation of river beds.

The 2005 Disaster Management Act of India, which incidentally came into force after the devastating tsunami of 2004 that ravaged coastal TN and took the lives of thousands, mandates all states to create a State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA) to oversee disaster management in every state.

The Madras High Court criticised the TN government over the defunct state of this authority. ‘The Disaster Management Plan should have been dovetailed into the provisions of the ... Act long time ago and had that been done, possibly the situation which arose last year in December could have been avoided,’ the judges noted in their order in 2016.¹⁷

Before the 2015 floods, the state’s disaster management authority had met a grand total of one time, on 28 May 2013, even though a government order from 2005 requires it to meet every quarter. And during the floods, it did not meet even once.

Section 20 of the Disaster Management Act requires each state to set up a ‘high power body’—a ‘state executive

committee' (SEC) that is responsible for implementing the plans of the SDMA, as well as, most importantly, coordinating response in the event of a disaster, like the Chennai floods.

A Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report on disaster preparedness in India in 2013 found that the SEC in TN, which was set up in January 2009, has met only once, in June 2009. There is no reference to any meetings of this SEC even during the floods. Though there was an executive council called the Tamil Nadu State Disaster Management Agency (TNSDMA), set up in January 2009, it was not the same as the one mandated in the act. The SEC, according to the act, is a statutory high power body with its membership, duties and powers all fixed by the state. The council, on the other hand, is primarily responsible for the functioning of TNSDMA. The membership, duties and powers of the mandated SEC and the executive council that was set up were entirely different. In any case, this council, whose own by-laws dictate that it meet at least once every three months, has met only five times since its inception—thrice in 2014, once in January 2015 and once in January 2016.

Given the state's track record, it is not surprising that this council too did not meet during the floods of 2015, between October and December of that year. Even more shockingly, the minutes of this council's meeting held on 13 January 2016 has no mention of the floods. Instead, the meeting seems to have dealt with nomenclature, administrative and financial issues rather than those that a high power body is supposed to be looking at in accordance with the NDMA guidelines during a crucial period.

Following the rap from the high court,¹⁸ the State Disaster Management Plan for 2016 was eventually submitted to the

court. Here is a little-known nugget: The plan was a duplication of Himachal Pradesh's plan and even had the same typographical errors. How could a hill state's disaster management plan work for Tamil Nadu? In 2018, the TN government finally came up with a State Disaster Management Perspective Plan (2018–2030) that looks at understanding and tackling disaster. It will go down as one of Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami's biggest legacies for he has done something that more powerful and popular chief ministers in the past have failed to do—giving the state a disaster preparedness-related goal that is also achievable. This new document proposes goals that can be accomplished by the year 2030 using systems—such as multi-hazard alert response and tracking system (like TN-SMART), real-time forecasting, spatial decision support system for major river basins and early warning systems—as well as investing in disaster management. Whether any action has been taken after the creation of this plan and whether it will continue when the next government is formed, remains to be seen. Also, can a state like TN that has been battered by natural disasters so often wait until 2030 to become truly disaster resilient, when work should have begun in earnest back in 2005?

The CAG listed out various shortcomings in the state's preparedness for the future.¹⁹ The Centre had proposed the creation of a flood protection wall or an embankment in the Adyar River near the Nandambakkam Bridge as early as in July 2008, under its Flood Management Programme (FMG). This plan, however, was withdrawn by the chief engineer of the TN Water Resource Department in March 2012, with the state government claiming that it was not able to acquire 0.69 hectares of land for the project. The CAG felt that this could

have been one of the contributing factors for heavy inundation in the Nandambakkam area of Chennai during the 2015 floods.

This report also held the state government guilty of diverting funds to works that were not approved as part of the FMG. And as the TN government delayed the submission of audited expenditure statement by up to twenty-five months, additional financial assistance promised to the state, a staggering ₹361.43 crore, was not released. The CAG also revealed that the lack of legislation for floodplain zoning in the state—marking out regions that are likely to be inundated in the event of a flood—resulted in buildings coming up along the waterways, which lead to inundation in Chennai and its suburbs during the 2015 floods.

The CAG also laid the blame on the state's Technical Advisory Committee's inertia in evicting encroachments. This committee met only twice between 2011 and 2016. Even though it had ₹400 crore at its disposal under the Twelfth Five Year Plan, the committee did not identify flood-prone areas or come up with plans to deal with floods.

In the aftermath of the flood, even as the state tried to recover from this mammoth destruction, there was a huge mismatch between the aid that the TN government requested from the Centre and what was eventually granted. The parliamentary committee that studied the floods also called for measures to address this gap.

Tamil Nadu asked for ₹25,912.45 crore towards relief and restoration work following the floods.

It received a paltry ₹1,940 crore for this 'once-in-a-hundred-year' flood.

Memories of Adyar

The Adyar River, 272 years ago, was the site of a battle that changed the course of Indian history. On its grounds, a crushing defeat was handed to Mahfuz Khan, an ally of the East India Company, by the French led by Captain Paradis, who marched with his men from Pondicherry, through Quibble Island on the Adyar Estuary, arriving at the river's southern bank. This battle seems to have happened inside both the Adyar and Cooum Rivers in Madras.

Just 500 French men had, in effect, defeated an army of 6,000 horsemen, 30,000 foot soldiers, 2,000 rocket men, 15,000 match-lock men and 30 pieces of artillery, in Mylapore near the Adyar.²⁰ This would then lead the British to think seriously about raising regiments of sepoys in the subcontinent, leading to further battles.

In 1870, the Adyar filled up and rose so high as to flood the barracks and parade grounds, near Palevaram (now Pallavaram), which was then eleven miles south-west of Madras. The area, about six miles from the sea, had a population of 4,000 back then (3,000 natives and 1,000 European and members of the East India Company).

A few decades later and more than a century after the Battle of Adyar, the river would no longer resemble the battleground that

it was, and was very different from the polluted home of water hyacinth that it is today. In 1909, *The Theosophic Messenger: A Monthly Magazine for the Interchange of Theosophical Opinions*, published by the Theosophical Society, spoke of the kind of love the river received:²¹

Unceasing admiration is expended on the beautiful Adyar river, which divides the property of the Theosophical Society from Adyar proper—a suburb five miles to the south of Madras, and after crossing the elegant bridge of seventeen arches very near the Theosophical Headquarters, a feeling of contentment tempts the wish never to cross back again into the world that knows not the complete satisfaction of life in this little paradise. Following the river along for about a mile and a half through the grounds of the Society, brings one to the Bay of Bengal, the eastern boundary which improves the picturesqueness and temperature very much. In these waters the early riser catches glimpses of the most wondrous reflections and combinations of colours, principally gold, so gloriously brilliant and variable with each new day. The Sunset is equally magnificent and its radiance over the water through the great variety of green trees, plants and flowers, cause the residents to seek the many views, all as beautiful as they are diverse.

If you were out and about at sunset a few years later, in 1921, you might have run into an officer who too seems to have loved the river dearly. From the anonymous accounts of his time in India, we learn that some things have just not changed in Madras. Like, 'you do not have to dress terrifically'²² while you are in this city. We do loathe sartorial despotism.²³ And that one of the most delightful things about Madras is that it is at the

edge of India from where the 'blue Bay rolls in at its feet.'²⁴ The writer waxed eloquent on the Adyar and its sanguine sunsets:²⁵

In Madras, too, the Civilian discovered a great river called the Adyar, on the banks of which stands a Club that looks exactly like a piece of the old White City of Shepherd's Bush. Perhaps it is. On the Adyar you may for a consideration row in boats. The Civilian cannot row, and frequently incommoded his fellow athletes, but he liked the Adyar. It is chiefly notable for kingfishers and sunsets; there are three different kinds of kingfisher and a different sunset every night. The kingfishers sit upon a telegraph wire which crosses the river and make suicidal plunges at intervals; two sorts of them "a large and a small" are red and blue just like our own at home, and the third and most delightful is black and white. The sunsets on the Adyar are the most wonderful things, for they always come on after the sun is out of sight. He goes down away up the river behind a bank of cloud and everything becomes chilly and dull; the false sunset in the East dies out and there falls a tremendous silence. You are to wait a quarter of an hour or so and then you must say, "There will be no sunset to-night." This breaks the spell and suddenly you feel the faintest of breezes at your cheek and a wave of orange light leaps up from all sides at once, glowing and swelling and deepening into purest rose. It will last perhaps a quarter of an hour, and for that quarter of an hour you may drift in an enchanted world of colours the banks and the water and the kingfishers and even your own dull and prosaic self all charmed into a new and rose-coloured existence. At the end of this time the spell will flit as suddenly as it came and the world will settle down to a quiet silver grey in the hope of a moon to come. Now there are sunsets and sunsets, but this sort of thing does not happen except on the

Adyar. Sunrise in India is good almost everywhere, but for these reasons the Civilian thinks you must go to the Adyar to see the sun setting.

Fair warning, the Civilian's love seems to have run dry when it comes to the 'indigenous' people of Madras. In this very book, there are pages upon pages detailing the exact kind of contempt the colonisers had for the colonised. In his bid to prove to the English audience that the 'funny native' trope of the locals is false and that actually they are dangerous, he writes, "The Indian servant, peon, coolie, artisan, tradesman, or lower-class subordinate is not really funny ..."²⁶ and that British civilians like him '... live among a people whose aim and intention is to cheat you, to defraud you, to bewilder and bamboozle you, to exploit you for every anna, every half-anna, every pice and pie you are worth.'²⁷ Among many other offensive things, he also writes, '... your dressing-boy wears your shirt and gives you eczema—if nothing worse.'²⁸ Several anecdotes dehumanise the people who served him and these stories have titles such as 'Fable of the Lagging Coolie,' 'The Implacable Kshatriyas,' and 'The Sweeper's Cow'.

In 1928, Allister Macmillan, in his book *Seaports of India & Ceylon*, described the many 'delightful' sites built around the Adyar:²⁹

The Adyar Club commands a delightful prospect over the River Adyar, while close by is the Madras Boat Club. Just outside the Municipal toll gate is the Elphinstone Bridge across the Adyar. On the opposite side of the river is the handsomely laid out compound of the Theosophical Society, when Mrs Annie Besant introduced to the world the Indian youth, Krishnamurti, as the embodiment of the new Messiah for the redemption of humanity.

But not much later, in 1939, things were not so different from 2018, it would appear. Percy Macqueen, the then district collector of Nilgiris, wrote in the *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume*.³⁰

During recent years the north bank of Adyar has been rapidly developing into a teeming suburb. It was formerly a quiet resort of the wealthy Europeans, who lived in a few large mansions surrounded by wide lawns and big trees which recalled the features of an English Park. The mansions still remain but the parks are rapidly disappearing under a load of bricks and mortar.

Soon after, in October 1943, Madras drowned. On the same day, it also came under its only air attack from a Japanese aircraft in the Second World War.³¹ There were no military damages but there were a few civilian casualties, newspapers reported. The bomb did not take many lives but the flood did. The Cooum and the Adyar flooded, inundating nearly half of the city, though the damage from the Cooum was far worse than from the Adyar in those floods. In an interview to *The Hindu*, recalling the 1943 floods, naturalist V. Guruswami said:³²

It was a holiday and we—my brother Kalyanasundaram, our cousin Swaminathan and I—decided to spend the day at the house of our brother-in-law at the Egmore Railway Quarters. We left Triplicane and reached Egmore around 9 a.m. It was raining heavily, but we had no idea that in the evening, we would trudge back home in waters that would threaten to swallow us. As the flood waters rose dramatically, residents of the quarters abandoned their houses and took shelter in the wagons stationed in the Railway yard. There was no let-up in the rain and we decided to brave it out and return home on

foot. It turned out to be a hare-brained decision, because the Gandhi–Irwin Road was under water that was waist-high for a tall adult. Whenever a heavy motor vehicle trundled past, the waters would rush in waves towards us.

People were washed away or died as their homes crumbled on them, boats plied the roads of Madras, dead cattle were seen drifting away, and the river banks carried an extraordinary amount of furniture that had been washed away from people's homes. Older parts of the city like Mylapore, George Town, Royapuram and Triplicane miraculously did not flood.³³ And this would repeat itself in 2015.

Love and Loss on the Banks of the Adyar

On the morning of the floods, the family of Anantha Narayanan, who live in the southern suburb of Keezhkattalai, asked Narayanan to not go to work because of the rain forecast. His workplace abuts the Maraimalai Adigalar Bridge—the first to be constructed on the Adyar upon an olden causeway by the Armenian trader Coja Petrus Usca in 1726, and which would later that day be submerged, cutting off access to large chunks of the city.

It was a Tuesday, and every Tuesday evening there was a face-to-face meeting of the entire team; Narayanan was not going to skip it. He took an early morning train to work, instead of his bike. Through the entire journey, he kept tabs on the rains through Facebook. He assumed that trains weren't going to stop, and he could always go back home should things get bad. There would definitely at least be an autorickshaw out there that would take him home from the station, if not an Uber or Ola. Even though his own home was just a hundred metres away from the Keezhkattalai Lake, and his office was on the banks of the Adyar, he was not worried. At all. He didn't have an inkling of what lay ahead.

“The next time something like this happens, I will think twice about venturing out. But at that time, there was no history. So I never thought it would happen,” he said, when I met him months later.

It was a work day like any other, except he was fully drenched despite having travelled by train and keeping his raincoat on. Narayanan had a spare shirt, thankfully. It was a cold day in the office, with the air conditioning on. At 5.30 in the evening, the meeting started as always, and by 6 he was thinking of leaving. That’s when he heard from colleagues that trains were being stopped near the Pallavaram area because railway tracks were blocked by water. Pallavaram is a historical neighbourhood in Chennai where a hand axe belonging to the Lower Palaeolithic Age was discovered for the first time in the entire subcontinent, before a wide array of such discoveries were made elsewhere.³⁴ It proved that the environs of Chennai were inhabited during the Stone Age. It was also a cantonment under the Mughals and later the British. Archival maps from the British period show that the Adyar heavily inundated Pallavaram as early as 1827 and 1870.

Narayanan decided to take the train till Pallavaram that day and head home from there. He took a different street to the station and not the one he usually used because he was warned by those on the street that there was water up to the waist there.

~

At the Annai Special School in VGP Salai that is just a little away from Narayanan’s office, on the river’s banks, K.S. Mariappan was stuck alone with four of his pupils, all with mental disabilities. Mariappan, who uses crutches as a result of a polio attack,

would later that night wade through chest-high water, and with the help of local autorickshaw drivers, transport the students to a colleague's home. Mariappan would himself have to be carried upon the shoulders of bystanders to safety, as would the kids.³⁵ Not even V.G. Santhosam, the current chairman of the VGP group and the brother of V.G. Panneer Das—after whom the road is named—would be spared. He would see eleven feet of water enter his home in Saidapet, and would leave with his family, on a boat. He would remember the floods of 1985, when he was on a boat himself rescuing and helping others, and smirk at fate.³⁶

Worried about their very futures, just a few hundred metres away from both Narayanan and Mariappan, were the inhabitants of Thideer Nagar in Saidapet. Thideer, meaning sudden, is the name given to areas of settlements of huts in Chennai. As these hutments pop up overnight, the area they are located in is called Thideer Nagar—Sudden Settlement. Chennai has many such Thideer Nagars. The Thideer Nagar in Saidapet has two 'batches' of settlers. The older ones who have been resettled there by the government in concrete homes and the newer ones who live in thatched-roof huts.

In just a few hours, the horror of it all would sink in. Even as Thideer Nagar's 1,000 families stayed huddled in nearby schools, the Adyar would swallow whole thatched huts made of thousands of woven coconut fronds that cost each of its poor owners nearly ₹10,000, and a few hundred kilos of casuarina poles that cost at least ₹5,000 per home. And when it's done with its holy mess, the river would leave nothing behind. Not even a trace of where their homes once stood. At the older Thideer Nagar, with its concrete walls and tin roofs, the shell would

stand, hollowed out, while everything inside would have drifted away,³⁷ like a tiny plant caught in the path of an elephant running amok, as the angry river would go on a rampage reclaiming its path.

What Thideer Nagar residents did not know then was also that in less than two years, the entire lot of them would lose access to the city, as they would be relocated far outside the metropolis as a consequence of what happened that day.

Further up ahead from Thideer Nagar, the 150 families who call Salavayalar Colony their home would watch as Dhobi Khana in West Saidapet, where the Saidapet Salavayalar Sangam or the Washer People's Union office is, goes under. In a few hours, the waters would devour everything here too, and the inhabitants of the area, resettled here by the late chief minister Kamaraj, would have to leave their homes and workplace, not walking, but swimming and atop boats, bundling up what they could. They would watch as the Adyar takes away with it all that they had saved up through a lifetime of hard work of beating, washing, steaming and ironing clothes. Among the things the river would take with it would be precious trousseau gathered for the wedding of a young woman, scheduled to take place in less than a week, even as her father Irudhayaraj would watch helplessly, reduced to tears.³⁸

~

Narayanan caught a train at around 6.30 p.m., along with a friend who decided to leave his car behind in the office. To reach the next station, Guindy, the train took fifteen minutes, as opposed to the usual five. They were beginning to get restless about the train's speed when they realised that every time another train

passed them, theirs had to stop. The tracks were all flooded. To reach the railway station near the Chennai airport, which was en route to Narayanan's home and only around six kilometres away, it took them two hours. In the train, Narayanan met students of IIT Madras with huge suitcases, on their way out of town, like the several thousand that were looking to flee it. The students told him that they couldn't flag down an autorickshaw and had to walk five kilometres with their luggage to the Guindy station.

What the students of IIT Madras didn't know just then was that at 8.30 p.m., the airport would officially stop operations and close to 5,000 people inside would be stranded—some on transit, others to see off a loved one and many on their way out to other cities.

Without paying heed to warnings from environmentalists and aviation experts, the 2,925-metre secondary runway of the Chennai airport was built on the flood basin of the Adyar in 2011, by erecting a bridge over it and hindering its path. As early as 2008, aviation safety specialists such as Captain Ranganathan had expressed apprehensions over this very possibility, calling this endeavour a 'white elephant'.³⁹ Predictions were made. And they would come true, stopping those IIT students and others from escaping a flooding city. The prophecies included warnings of the Chembarambakkam Reservoir overflowing into the Adyar, and the river's flow being constrained by this secondary runway, causing extensive flooding in the surrounding areas. As always, these warnings fell on indifferent ears.

Just as foretold, here was the Adyar, to claim its right of way.

Their flights too cancelled, husband Maruthanayagam and wife Nirmala Pushpam, the vice principal of a city school, would hail a cab later on, and try to go home to Pallikaranai's

IIT Colony. The taxi driver would drop them off at Velachery about five kilometres from the couple's home, beyond which he would tell them it was impossible for his car to go. There would be too much water. Unaware of a breach in the nearby Kovilambakkam Lake, the couple would try to walk home. Their bodies would be found five days later, in a pile, washed away by the lake, along with eight others. The couple would leave behind their grieving mothers and a ten-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter.⁴⁰

Narayanan and his friend reached Pallavaram that was two stations away from his home at 11.45 p.m. Only one platform was operational at the Pallavaram station that night. So all the trains had to go past the station, change tracks and come back to the sole working platform. At one point, Narayanan saw six electric trains, in a row, like ducks in a pond.

He was not big on carrying a lot of cash—even before demonetisation—and had just about ₹200 in hand. No ATM nearby was working. It was pitch dark outside the Pallavaram station. The two of them walked to GST Road, about a kilometre away, which still had cars and trucks plying. Most restaurants had shut and the ones that were open wanted cash. So the two of them didn't eat. His friend decided to go back to the station and spend the night there. Narayanan asked him to come home, which was a mere three kilometres from where they were. His friend didn't want to get stuck in Narayanan's house and so went his way. Narayanan tried to flag down vehicles late in the night, but no one stopped. About half-a-kilometre later, as he was turning into the 200 Feet Road, a car stopped to ask him if the road was open.

‘I think it is, because I have been seeing cars and bikes go and come,’ Narayanan said.

‘All the subways between here and Pallikaranai are flooded and closed. I need to go home to Pallikaranai. Do you think I can?’ the driver asked him. Narayanan made a guesstimate and said that this was a wide four-lane highway and that he didn’t think there was going to be any flooding here, so the man could possibly go all the way to Pallikaranai. The car’s owner had gone to the airport at 11.30 that morning to board a flight. He had, in fact, been sitting inside a flight ready to take off, but was then told the airport was closing, and sent back.

Narayanan finally got a lift from the man. By then it was 12.15 in the night. They drove on, but a kilometre before Narayanan’s home, the car was stopped. The road was closed and a rope had been tied across it. It looked like people had been there for hours, because in many of the cars parked there, the headlights were off and people were fast asleep inside.

He could see his apartment building and told the policeman in charge that he wanted to head home, pointing to it. He was allowed to go. As he walked on the highway that was built across a lake, he heard water flowing furiously. Usually, at this part of the road, there was no sound of water because it was all just still water. By the time he reached his building, there was water up to his waist.

Right outside his building was an old canal—it usually just had sewage water flowing through it. That night, it was sewage and more. Before he could figure out what was going on, he was staring at six feet of water in front of his building. When he finally battled the water and stepped inside his home, it was 12.30 a.m.

Upon reaching home, Narayanan would realise that Meera and his mother-in-law had been through a dreadful couple of hours waiting for him and his sister-in-law, Lavanya.

~

Lavanya was coming back home in an office bus from Sholinganallur, on the IT corridor of the city, and was dropped off at the Keezhkattalai bus stand, after a lot of confusion and traffic at around 5.45 in the evening. Lavanya had seen the lakes breaching the 200 Feet Road en route and water spreading everywhere.

It was chaos when she got off the bus—backed up traffic, flooded roads and what not, and she was just about wondering how to get to her sister's home a mere 250 metres away. As she waded in slowly through the water, there was fear of being electrocuted or falling into a manhole. The water was dangerously high in many smaller roads. It had become dark and there was no power.

That is when she ran into two acquaintances who lived close by. She decided to walk with them. Halfway through, they were again standing in waist-deep water. It was as if they were walking through a river. Were they? The three held hands and reached an apartment building that was built at a higher level, and waited in the parking lot. Four 'bachelors' who were living in that building in a 3 BHK flat on the second floor offered their home to this rain-washed trio.

They stayed the night in the strangers' flat. The next morning, the three of them waded through chest-level water and reached one of their homes. From that building's rooftop terrace, Narayanan and his family could see Lavanya and she could see them, and they waved to each other. They couldn't do much else.

Finally, later in the day, the Pallavaram municipality brought a boat to rescue people. The boat went in, brought Lavanya out and took her home.

Even as more rains were being forecast and people were being asked to leave, through announcements on megaphones, nobody was leaving. The Pallavaram municipality chairman visited and said, 'We are here trying to save people but they don't even want to leave their homes. Tomorrow if something happens to them, the blame will fall squarely on us and they'll say we didn't do anything.'

Until Narayanan reached, there was confusion at home. Until they heard from Lavanya, there was more of it. But once the family was united, all was well because they had power backup. So from the air conditioning to the internet, everything was working fine.

The rest of the city wasn't as lucky.

Washed Out by the River

The banks of the little river Adyar presented a curious spectacle for all the washing of the capital was being done there by a thousand dhobies, male and female, near the bridge; and the river-sands were covered with countless garments of all colours, while the air was filled with the thunder of a thousand wet cloths slapped upon the flat stones.

From Edwin Arnold's observations in *India Revisited*,⁴¹ two things are clear: that a thousand men and women worked on the banks of the Adyar washing clothes, and that travellers visited Marmalong Bridge to watch them, as also attested by other traveller accounts from that period. They also took pictures and made postcards of these people. This continues to this day, for no dhobi ghat or dhobi khana in India is without camerapersons wielding bulky DSLRs and taking pictures of those hard at work, with or without consent, participating in a gaze that fetishises caste-based labour.

~

Banu Chandran was born in Salavayalar Colony, and first lived in Gotha Medu or Kotha Medu, in this colony, on the banks of the Adyar in Saidapet. After she finished class five, she moved

to Satya Nagar, also on the banks of this river, to take care of her brother's baby, and then to the nearby Rangarajapuram after her marriage. She has lived around this one river her entire life, which at most times is just about snaking through the city with just a little 'water'. Chandran's current home is located behind Srinagar Colony where my parents live, near Little Mount—legend has it that one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, St Thomas, lived and was martyred here.

We residents seldom remember that all four of these places—Little Mount, Srinagar Colony, Satya Nagar and Rangarajapuram—are on the banks of the Adyar, even though, every day, we cross the Marmalong alias Maraimalai Adigal alias Saidapet Bridge, which connects South Chennai to the older parts of the city.

'My parents were also salavai thozhilali,' Chandran said, when I met her after the floods. Salavai means washer and thozhilali means worker. 'My father ironed clothes until very late in his life, and my mother helped him. They didn't want to rely on anyone even in their old age. They earned their own wages until the end. They wouldn't even come to my house; they were very independent.'

Chandran's current home in Rangarajapuram is an independent, one-storeyed, tiled-roof building. Over the last two decades, the occupants of Rangarajapuram have seen the prices of their property grow higher, and prosperity has been ushered in. Many have sold their lands, and apartment buildings have replaced old homes, while others have remodelled and built multi-storeyed homes that perk up the narrow roads with their dazzling vastu colours—here an orange or there a purple.

There's a small room on the ground floor in Chandran's house, which is now occupied by tenants; it wasn't on the night the river breached. Chandran lives on the first floor. Since she's closer to the roof, she endures the harsh sun between the months of March and June. It is this hot home, on the first floor, that would save a vast amount of her life's belongings from being washed away in the floods.

This area has never flooded as badly as it did in December, according to Chandran. 'There would be water and flooding every Diwali, back when I lived in Satya Nagar,' she recalled. But the only time they had to move out of their home and into the Anna University campus, which is on the other side of the Adyar across Satya Nagar, was in 2005, during the floods that took the lives of over 150 people from across the state. That year, water lurked around their ground-floor room, but seemed to change its mind and go away quietly, winding down a different path. Some years later, it came almost up to the entrance of their home, but then drained away.

'This is the third flood I am witnessing since moving to this area. And this is the biggest one of them all. This time, not only did the river submerge our ground floor entirely but also came up to the staircase leading to our home in the first floor. No one came to tell us to go anywhere and there wasn't even very heavy rain that day here. So we didn't expect it to flood like that. We didn't go anywhere because we didn't think there was any reason to. Two whole days later, we see them coming in boats,' she said, with annoyance and resignation. 'And they ask us, forty-eight horrible hours later, if we want soru [rice]; if we want thanni [water].'

If she had been warned, Chandran said, she would have emptied out the ground-floor room, gone somewhere safer or at least bought rations. 'Until the end, everyone in the area was convinced that it wouldn't come into our homes. We all thought, just as before, the water would tease us and threaten us, but in the end it won't take us out.' Take them out, it did. For three days, the entire family was stuck upstairs, cooped up in the room on the first floor. Without water and access to even a bathroom, which was also submerged, they managed by cooking whatever was in the house. They ate goduma ravai (wheat semolina) and ration shop pacha arisi kanji (raw rice porridge).

Besides all the things that were in the ground-floor room, Chandran also lost an old potti—a brass iron box with wooden handle—which works on hot coal and is way more expensive than the electric ones and had been in the family for years. 'My husband left it below because we needed to get it repaired. It's gone now,' she said. Chandran's family is finally picking up the pieces after the floods and is moving on, three years later.



In Satya Nagar live some of the oldest occupants of this neighbourhood, having been here for over forty years. It is their tin-roofed, concrete shell homes that are affected first, whenever there is a downpour, and it is they, the original inhabitants of this erstwhile forest-like landscape, that bear the brunt of evictions when the city wants to 'beautify' its rivers and banks. While many of the old residents have moved out, renting out their homes to live elsewhere and do other jobs that promise a better life, a few remain here because they work close by. Some of the older women from this neighbourhood work in universities as peons

or as household help and nannies, while the older men work as autorickshaw drivers, sell plastic wares in exchange for old clothes, and so on. These homes have borne witness to struggles of people from the working class and the oppressed castes, who have strived to give their children quality education, and who are all now slowly beginning to see the dividends of education. The older women and men have finally stopped working so hard, because their children, who now work in companies in the city, earn handsomely. These dividends are a result of their proximity to the city, its educational institutions and that river that wrecks their home as it pleases. This advantage of proximity received a fatal blow in December 2015.

Even though there was no warning, the people of Satya Nagar, seeing a swollen Adyar, left their homes and sought shelter in the nearby schools, twice—once in November and then in December. Even though they had been dry and safe elsewhere during the December floods, they came back home to huge mounds of sludge, mud from the banks and all the waste that the river had carried in, and smeared their homes with, from the ground up to the roof. It took the inhabitants of this area, who live a mere few metres away from the river, months to clean up their home, and several people I spoke to said they received the maximum aid from volunteers and very little from the State.

Now Satya Nagar is nearly empty. Many of its residents have moved into homes allotted to them in Semmenchery, twenty-six kilometres away, as part of the large eviction drive after the floods displaced the people living along the Adyar and Cooum. Some are still around for various reasons—their work is close by and they don't want to move to the middle of nowhere or

they haven't been allotted a home and allege that local politicians demand a bribe of up to ₹40,000 for the allotment of a single housing unit. Some want to leave because they no longer wish to live in this 'seru and sagathi' or mud and waste, some don't want to leave because this is the only place they know. The demolition drive is yet to begin and its threat looms large.

An Invisible People

If there were ever apprehensions about the Indian news media and its attitude to places outside of Delhi and Mumbai, they were all dispelled during the floods of 2015. All through November, as the suburbs of Chennai and the villages in TN flooded and the city was in the throes of a disaster, the national media ignored the news. Not many from the city called the media out then, because Chennai, like many other parts of this vast country that are ignored by its media, was used to it. In fact, nobody even expected the national media to report on issues pertaining to the city with any nuance. But something tipped that December. Even as the city turned into an island and was plunged into deep darkness, as lives were being lost and a disaster of unimaginable proportions was underway, there was not a squeak in the national media about it. For those who were marooned, it didn't make any difference, but for those outside, the silence was deafening and demeaning. The country's first city, its fourth largest metropolis, with close to seventy-one lakh people had become invisible. There was no information about an entire city even as those outside the flood-affected areas waited helplessly, unable to find out just what had happened to their loved ones.

If there was news anywhere, it was only on social media. From rain forecasts to rescue coordination, the city depended

on volunteers sitting as far away as Bengaluru or even the USA, and the hundreds and thousands in Chennai's few dry areas with power or internet. Many victims of the floods who had managed to get to safer, drier places, found themselves shaken from whatever lull they had been experiencing. It was a wakeup call, being this close to disaster and realising that help was not forthcoming, from anywhere. So they began volunteering to help the others still in trouble.

The state knew about the kind of rains that were to batter the city and its suburbs. Why this never translated into action is anybody's guess, as officials have maintained that they did all they could but it was the 'once-in-a-hundred-year-rains' that was responsible for the floods.

For information on rains during those crucial days, and ever since, Chennai hasn't had to look too far. A handful of pluviophiles, hobbyists posting on weather blogs, have since become our go-to guys. The most reliable among them, known to us as TamilNadu Weatherman, is Pradeep John.⁴² John was right and the BBC's weather predictions wrong, more than once that December. With all of 1000 likes on his Facebook page till then, he went on to capture the city's heart with his forecasting in November 2015. Today, there are over 50,000 reviews on his page and over 6 lakh likes and almost everyone in the state recognises him, thanks to the regional media that has rightly showered him with accolades and admiration. John has been blogging about rains since 2010 and has been interested in them from when he was fourteen years old.

As early as 8 November, John wrote on his Facebook page, 'Depression causes havoc as highest rains of the year lash Chennai and surrounding regions ... Massive inflow can be expected in

Redhills Lake tomorrow.' He followed this up on 19 November with, 'These easterlies are difficult to predict w.r.t. intensity with sudden inflow of moisture, they can dump heavy rains in short period. Avadi which is already suffering from floods was badly hit by today evening rains. Chennai city got just 3 mm....'

By 23 November, his updates contained even more prophetic statements, such as: '... the worst news—more rains to follow. Particularly in the worst hit flood areas of south Chennai and ECR. Chennai has crossed 1000 mm for the month of November in 2015. Only in 2005 October and 1918 November we have got more rains. Soon it will break those two months and will be wettest month ever.'

As early as 28 November, he had written about the convergence and divergence that we would read about in the news only after the floods. 'What is this actually, is it a depression or cyclone? ... Divergence and Convergence is increasing and it's going to be night time the strongest period for NEM'. B. Mukhopadhyay, Additional Director-General of Meteorology (research), India Meteorological Department (IMD), Pune, told *The Hindu*,⁴³ 'An individual episode like that on 1 December is a combination of several factors and in every such episode, the combination changes. On 1 December, the lower-level moisture supply was high and upper air evacuation of the moisture was also strong. We call this phenomenon upper air divergence, and the effect is that the cloud becomes very intense. Both coincide very rarely.'

Even though there were warnings for rains from the IMD, the sun was out and about even as late as 29 November. This led several people into clutching at a false sense of hope that the predictions were wrong. John, though, was insistent. 'There has been a weird delay in rains lashing in Chennai, but models still

continue to show unrelenting rains from today till next 3 days. This may be the 1st time in so many years when both the models predicted rains and have failed in their predictions.’

And then he wrote, later on the same day: ‘... we are expecting some activity from tonight or tomorrow into next 3–4 days. The meteogram for Chennai show large continuous rains. It’s only indicative tool but confirms chance of heavy rains. As I told earlier, one day of the next few days will get that heavy flooding type rains.’

He was right, of course.

A Tamil documentary on Cyclone Ockhi—which took the lives of several hundred fisherfolk from TN and Kerala in November 2017—by Divya Bharathi, asked why a country with sophisticated technology was unable to predict and warn people ahead of calamities, when a hobbyist like John could. FIRs were promptly filed against Bharati just four days after she released the trailer for *Orutharum Varela (Nobody Came)* on 28 June 2018 on the grounds that her film ‘insulted the national flag, promoted disharmony between communities, disturbed public tranquillity and portrayed the government in bad light’. And then came news of intimidations from the local police and even threats to her safety.

Why, indeed, was the state unable to reach out to people even as weather bloggers like John did?