

Letter from Chennai

'Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.'

INEFFICIENCY (OR WORSE) KILLS

The Adyar River hardly deserves the designation. It is a sluggish stream a little over 40 km long, and passes through Chennai on its way to the Bay of Bengal, augmented sometimes by the contents of the Chembarambakkam Lake, and always by the sewage from the city. Around 1991, the storage capacity of the Chembarambakkam Lake was enhanced by raising the bund. Under the Krishna scheme, water (donated by Andhra Pradesh) is brought by a canal from the river Krishna to the Poondi reservoir, and from there by canal to the Chembarambakkam Lake.

Chennai receives rain from two monsoons, the southwest and the northeast. The former brings us some showers at the tail end of the season in July and August, not enough for our requirement, but usually helpful to eke out our meagre supplies till the arrival of our real monsoon, the northeast, from October to December. Most often the monsoon fails, and we are in dire straits till the arrival of the next one, but every now and then the heavens open and the Adyar swells into a real river, and on occasion it floods the areas around. There was one such flood in 1976. I was not in Chennai then, but I was here for the next catastrophic flood in 1985, and found myself marooned on the first floor of my house with sewage-laden water coursing through the ground floor and my car submerged. I consider myself fortunate for I am 3 km from the Adyar, and there are many residential localities on the river bank where people lost all their belongings and some their lives. There was much recrimination. We were told that authorities were helpless because the rains were just too heavy, and there was a threat that the Chembarambakkam Lake bund would get breached, so the authorities had to open the sluice gates and discharge a huge amount of water into the river, more than its capacity to transmit in its natural channel.

Clearly it was not the rain itself, but the sudden release of water that led to the floods of 1985 with their destruction of people and material. What have we learnt in 30 years, and what have we done to prevent such a catastrophe? Many suggestions were made then. A committee was appointed in 2008 to draw up a development plan for the city. One of the members of that committee said the recommendations made in that report have been ignored. A number of lakes and marshlands in and around the city served to absorb heavy rains and drain them into the soil, thereby preventing floods and replenishing the groundwater. The experts wanted them to be preserved. No encroachments were to be permitted, and there should be no building on these lands.

Since then, 300 such lakes, tanks and marshes have been built over, and concrete does not absorb water. How could this have been allowed? The procedure for constructing a new building is complicated. Sanction must be obtained from the municipal corporation to build on that site, even if you own it. The plans of the building must be submitted and approved before you can break ground. If an area has been designated as one that should not be built on, how can anyone obtain permission to build on it? Questioned about how permits were given for so many of these constructions, an official said that many buildings were illegal and came up without sanction.

Now you and I and anyone else could do something illegal or

even criminal and could manage to conceal it from everyone else, but I do not see how, short of having the services of a genie from the Arabian nights, you could construct a building, large or small, without everyone who passes by getting to know about it. Corporation staff of various levels of seniority exist in every part of the city. The sad story of our city is that either they are all visually handicapped, or for undisclosed reasons they connive at illegal constructions.

Every area of the city has detailed plans for roads, stormwater drains, sewage pipes and water and electricity supply, and no one is supposed to occupy a building unless all this is complete and the corporation issues a certificate that you can move in. Yet drains and sewers are never complete. Every heavy rain brings flooding on the streets, sewage overflowing and people having to wade through this mess. Our city is a happy hunting ground for leptospira and other unsavoury germs of every description.

Now let us return to this particular flood from the Adyar. For days, every weather reporter on the internet and on television, and our official meteorologist, was forecasting rains of unprecedented intensity. Could not the filling of the Chembarambakkam Lake have been predicted, and could not the release of water have been increased gradually several days before the flooding? We are told that the authorities were helpless because the rains were just too heavy, the inflow into the lake was just too high, and there was a threat that the Chembarambakkam Lake bund would get breached, so the authorities had to open the sluice gates and discharge a huge amount of water into the river, more than its capacity to transmit in its natural channel. These are the very words I used to tell you of the disaster of 1985.

What have we learnt from the experience of 1985? Once we found discharge from the lake could not keep pace with the inflow for days, and with the forecast of still more rain to come, should not the areas near the Adyar and our other 'river', the Cooum, have been evacuated days in advance? Should not the disaster response team of the Central Government been alerted? The authorities just kept quiet and waited for our fate to overtake us. The rains had eased on the night of 2 December, and most of us went to bed expecting the water that was already flooding our roads to drain overnight. We slept peacefully thinking the worst was over.

That night the authorities were forced to open the gates of the lake bund. It took 4 hours for the flood to reach the worst affected areas of the city. I believe this margin of 4 hours should have been used to warn people and to evacuate them from the danger areas. It would have been impossible to save property or personal belongings within 4 hours, but if the city had an emergency response plan people could have been moved to safety. They might have been able to salvage the vital documents that are so necessary for life in the city, for students to pursue their education. All is now lost.

The city police have a large number of cars donated by the manufacturers that have factories in the state, and we claim to be the Detroit of Asia. These cars are usually parked on busy streets with lights flashing, and they are all equipped with loudspeakers through which policemen issue instructions to violators of traffic rules. Could not these have been driven through all the flood-prone areas making as much noise as possible warning residents to move away? Lorries and buses could have gone to every area and taken everyone to safety. I shudder to think of the plight of

those living on the banks of the Adyar, rudely awakened by flood waters entering their houses. By that time escape from the buildings was impossible. Some managed to climb to upper floors or rooftops and avoid drowning, but some found themselves trapped inside and drowned in their own homes as the water level rose. Some were blown away by the force of the flood waters, and drowned on the roads. Many of the workers in shops, or in houses and apartments as domestic servants, lived in shacks on the banks of the river. Their homes and belongings were washed away, and we do not yet know exactly how many people died.

Of course the blame game has started, accusations are flying. The opposition says the party in power has failed us, the present rulers say all the damage was actually due to the errors of the previous regime. I know the actual culprit; it is not the present ruling party, nor our former rulers. We the people should take the blame, for we give our votes to whoever promises us television sets or mixers and grinders, or free electricity and free cable connections, and do not hold them accountable for the lack of drainage, for making us wade through sewage, for failing to prevent so many preventable diseases, for laying roads that develop potholes or even huge craters after the first shower.

Our cloud does have a silver lining. When torrential rains delayed traffic for hours, when diversions were necessary because of flooding of roads, we displayed a discipline on the roads that is never found in normal times. Motorists crawled patiently in line. No one tried to get ahead of everyone else by overtaking and squeezing into any small gap in the traffic. Horns that generally honk continuously from morning to night went silent. By and large the youth of the city displayed heroism in saving the lives of many senior citizens and handicapped people who could not make it to safety on their own. They showed civic sense in getting out on the roads and warning motorists, cyclists and pedestrians of potholes and craters in the road concealed by the waters flowing above them, and altruism in raising funds and contributing labour to gather and distribute food, clothing and utensils to the newly homeless crowding in school buildings. There were a few sordid incidents of politicians trying to take credit for the relief supplies by forcibly pasting pictures of their leader on the packets, but authorities encouraged and assisted such altruism, apart from doing what they could to rescue and rehabilitate the afflicted. One Trust that I know of usually works to provide computers and other educational materials to schools. The members diverted their funds and energies to provide packets of cooked food for the evacuees in the school. Finding people miserable without bedding to sleep on, they found a wholesale dealer and obtained his entire

stock of 600 blankets immediately and distributed them. They also provided clothes, kits of kitchen utensils and groceries to hutment dwellers who had lost everything. They said there was no interference by authorities in their work, no attempt to usurp the credit. We are also told that duplicate copies of documents will readily be made available. Insurance companies, for which these are bad times, have been cooperative and helpful. The workshop where I took my car that survived near-drowning worked overtime to help people get their cars back on the road, and also gave a 40% discount on the bill for all flood-affected vehicles. Many drivers of autorickshaws, normally a rapacious breed, plied without charge to help their fellow citizens.

The Health Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu, and that of the Chennai Corporation, seemed stunned at first, but on 8 December 2015 they swung into action and made up for lost time. A public notification was issued with advice to the public on action to be taken. Staff from the government and the corporation health departments were pressed into action, supplemented by workers who were brought in from other towns. Single doses of doxycycline were administered as prophylaxis against leptospirosis. Though coverage was patchy, there was no outbreak of disease. Bottled drinking water was distributed, and a massive clean up operation was carried out, removing garbage and liberally spreading bleaching powder. Bleaching powder was given free to each family. A dedicated telephone line was set up to advise people on how to cope with different problems. Unfortunately, this was so badly overloaded with calls that almost no one could get through. Mobile medical clinics went to different parts of the city to tackle health problems early. Though there was much scope for improvement, these measures proved adequate to avert a medical catastrophe. There was no outbreak of infectious diseases.

Amalorpavanathan, Ramakumar and Sivasubramanian¹ have done an excellent analysis of the situation after the floods and have suggested measures for efficient response to such natural disasters. One hopes the authorities will study the suggestions and make sure that we will be better prepared for the next one. How much better it would be if the long overdue preventive action was taken and the city was kept free from calamities.

After all the suffering, the common man's response ensured that Chennai's darkest hour proved also to be its finest.

REFERENCE

1. Amalorpavanathan J, Ramakumar M, Sivasubramanian S. Preparedness in disaster situations. Lessons from Chennai floods 2015. *Eco Pol Wkly* 2016;**51**:30-4.

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