

Letter from Chennai

MICHAUNG

I was aware of the convention of giving a name to a cyclone, so I was not astonished that the latest one to assail us was given a name, but the name Michaung was unexpected. Since the states along the eastern sea coast are the usual targets of the cyclones that arise in the Bay of Bengal, I expected an Indian name, and I had not heard the name Michaung in any Indian language. Was it descriptive of any property of the cyclone? I looked up the word in the three dictionaries I have immediate access to—English, Hindi and Tamil. I drew blank. I then turned to Google. The first page referred to some 30 or 40 news reports on the effects of the cyclone. I had to go down 20 more references on page 2 before I found what I wanted: a link to the website of *Business Today* headlined ‘Cyclone Michaung: Who named it? How do cyclones get their names? ...’ There I learnt that the name was proposed by Myanmar, and it means resilience and fortitude. The Myanmarese were way off the mark. These are admirable qualities, far from the diabolical, malevolent, destructive, evil qualities that this cyclone demonstrated.

After two days of suspense, the cyclone missed Chennai and hit Bapatla, some 300 km north of Chennai. That does not mean we had it easy. While there were no cyclonic gusts of wind, Michaung brought us a deluge: of the two observatories in Chennai, one recorded 29.5 cm, the other 34.5 cm of rain in 24 hours, the heaviest one-day record in the past 70 years. There were many more open areas for water to drain at that time, and we have built over almost all of them, so flooding now was much worse than it was then. Flood waters have entered my house five times since I moved here in 1984, but we had around a foot of water flowing through each time in the past, and it drained out in a day or so. This time we had three feet of water, and the measures we had practised in years past proved totally inadequate. We moved the books from the bottom shelf of the three book cases in our drawing room to the guest room beds. The carpets were rolled up and placed on the dining table, along with the contents of the bottom shelves of the cupboards in the kitchen and the store room. The cars were moved to the house of a relative who lives at a higher altitude. I have three bedrooms upstairs as once upon a time my grandmother, my dependent brother and my son stayed with us. My son has now moved away and my grandmother and brother have moved to better worlds, so two of those rooms are vacant, and served as emergency accommodation for the two house servants (a couple), their son (who lives with them though he works elsewhere) and the watchman, all of whom live on the premises, their accommodation being at ground floor level.

We six were marooned upstairs. There was no prospect of getting the kitchen going. We could see people wading through chest-deep water on the roads. A few cars floated down like boats on a river. We survived the next 3 days by the kindness of Apollo Hospital and one of its car drivers. The hospital sent one consignment of food every day, enough for two meals for each of us. The driver drove his car as far as it would go, and then waded the last 150 metres with the food trays held high over his head. When the water

finally drained out, the floors remained coated with a layer of mud and... (I avoid thinking of what else, but the smell was foul). I had to call in a team of professional cleaners who took several days to get the house to a liveable condition.

Utensils and implements that could withstand boiling were sterilized, plastics were discarded, along with a small library of soaked books. The dealers in waste paper said they could not use such paper, so this could not be recycled. Mine is one house, but the entire neighbourhood was affected just as badly, and we all had piles of material to be discarded. We are grateful to the Chennai Corporation, which invited us to discard whatever we did not wish to keep. We left all this stuff on the pavement outside our houses, and the corporation cleared all of it without charging us extra.

I have narrated my tale of woe in some detail, but I need to stress that I am more fortunate than several lakhs of my fellow citizens. Flooding was as bad or worse in many areas of the city. Many people live in single-storey structures. I was marooned upstairs, but these people had no upstairs to be marooned in, and had to climb to their roofs and get soaked till they were evacuated by boat. Thousands ended up in school buildings, struggling with severely limited toilet facilities, sleeping on bare floors, their clothes soaking wet and nothing else to change into. Charitable organizations struggled to keep them from starving. A few people were reported to have drowned. How many fell ill with diarrhoeal diseases and fevers? No figures have been publicised.

An oil refinery in the northern areas of the city had an oil spill, and the oil was carried by the floods to a distance of 20 km, adding oil stains to the damage from the flood waters. The Kosasthalaiyar river flows through the northern parts of the city. In happier times, it provided a bountiful harvest of marine life for the fishermen and therefore to the population of that part of the city. Now the oil-filled waters have killed all the fish in the river and the coastal area near its mouth, affecting both the fishermen and their regular customers.

During the past few months, our present government boasted of the lakhs of crores it had spent on improving the water drainage of the city, and claimed that floods were a thing of the past, caused by the inefficiency of the previous government. Now they speak only of the help they are giving to the flood-affected citizens. What happened to all the lakhs of crores? Obviously, the drainage of the city remains hopelessly inadequate.

We the citizens bemoan our fate, and blame the two parties that take turns to rule us. But are we just suffering unfortunates, or are we partly responsible? The corporation reported that it had removed nearly 1000 tonnes (1 tonne=1000 kg) of garbage and debris from the water channels in the city, the three rivers and the Buckingham Canal—garbage and debris that we had dumped into them illegally. This was a major factor in the clogging up of water drainage. Not only do we get the government we deserve, we also get the flooding we deserve.

What is the future of the city? We are on the sea coast, and climate experts tell us that icebergs at the poles of the earth are melting and sea levels are rising. They have measured

water levels and predict a rise of a few metres in the next few decades. Meanwhile, the population of the city increases steadily. I am glad I am unlikely to survive long enough to see the city drown, but I worry about coming generations of Chennai citizens.

PEST CONTROL

In recent months, we have had an invasion of rats in the house. I bought rat poison, which is freely available. Glue traps were in short supply, and I had to place an order and wait. The manufacturers of rat poison assure us that the rats consume the poison, go out of the house and die in the compound. Unfortunately, the rats do not seem to have read the instructions on the package. A few of them relished the poison and consumed large lumps of it, then hid in a corner inside the house and died there, leading to an unholy stink. We had to search in the depths of cupboards, empty everything out and locate the dead rat, dispose of it and then sterilize the contents of the cupboard as well as we could.

I sought expert help, and looked up 'pest control' on the

internet. There are hundreds of firms offering this service, but almost all of them undertake to eliminate termites and do not mention rats at all. I applied to a few that promise to dispose of all pests. They either wrote back by e-mail or called on the telephone to enquire what was the pest I wished to be rid of, but when I mentioned rats I heard nothing further from any of them. Since it seems easy enough to use poison and kill the rats, perhaps it is the search for the bodies that is the real challenge.

The servant couple who live on the premises have a cat as a pet, and that cat seems to have picked up a partner. The feline couple seems to have forgotten that their traditional role is to dispose of the rats, or perhaps their masters feed them too well with vegetarian fare. I console myself that it must be the rain that drives the rats indoors, and, now that the rainy season has ended, they will stay outdoors for the next few months.

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