

## Letter from Chennai

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### THE DELUGE

When I was a primary school student, the house I now live in did not exist. The whole area was a rice field. Chennai was then Madras, which grew out of three villages, Mylapore, Triplicane and Egmore, each of which had a major temple in its midst. The British established Fort St George a mile north of Triplicane. Over the years, the villages grew and reached towards each other and to the Fort and beyond, and the whole area became Madras. The fields were replaced by roads and buildings. In the late 1940s, the owner of this rice field divided his land into plots, one of which was bought by a gentleman known to my father. He built a house on the plot in 1949, and lived here. On his death, his son sold the house to my grandmother, and in course of time I inherited it, but I only came to live here in 1984 when my profession, which had taken me overseas and to other parts of India, finally brought me back to Madras.

I presume this would have been the story of the evolution of most of India's modern cities. My house is now in a fairly central part of the city. Chennai is relatively flat; most parts are a metre or two above sea level. There are two rivers running through central Chennai, and most of the street water drains into one of these, and thereby into the sea. There were many lakes, open grounds and flood plains all over the city, and, while we had a very heavy north-east monsoon and also occasional storms over the city from the Bay of Bengal, flooding was not common.

Came independence, and the city grew and grew. Industries sprang up in the vicinity, commercial establishments flourished, and with them came people, multistoreyed apartments, schools, colleges, shopping malls, and all that goes with a modern city. Gradually the lakes and flood plains were encroached on, filled, cemented and built on. Replacement of earthen surfaces with cement meant that the rain water had no access to seep into and replenish the ground water, and so it accumulated on the roads till it could find its way into the overloaded storm water drains and ultimately the rivers. Our problems started there.

The rivers carried silt which lodged in the mouths of the rivers and prevented the water from draining into the sea. This was supposed to be regularly dredged and the channel kept clear, but we rarely do what we are supposed to do, and the river mouth was sometimes not fully open. The storm water drains tended to get clogged with mud, debris, often plastic and other junk. We are supposed to segregate our garbage and have it cleared by the corporation or the private companies to whom the authorities delegate the work. On the whole, the garbage clearance is fairly satisfactory in most parts of the city, but we cannot be bothered to collect the garbage and deposit it in the appropriate places. It is often so much easier to throw our plastic bags and garbage on the road, and they find their way into the drains and clog them, so the water accumulates on the streets.

We had bad floods in 1985, and the government, the corporation and the citizens decided we must do something about it. The lakes, ponds and flood plains were mapped, and laws were enacted that there should be no encroachment on these areas that were vital for the city. There should be no building on these sites, and the area should be available for rain water to drain into the ground. Alas, every law is just a challenge to us to break it. We fill up these areas, cover them with concrete

and build skyscrapers on them. And if we have citizens ready to break the law, the authorities who are supposed to keep us from sin look the other way. It is possible to break many laws on the quiet, but an illegal skyscraper cannot be concealed. All of us suspect what induces our authorities to connive at this, but we cannot proclaim it openly because most of us cannot prove it, and those who can perhaps benefit from concealing it. As a result, the area available for rain water to drain into the ground has shrunk to perhaps 10% of what it was a few decades ago, and that water runs through our streets.

When they were constructed, our houses were well above road level. In my childhood, when a road needed to be resurfaced, the corporation would dig down to the base of the road, replace the graded stones (known to the engineers as road metal), then pour a layer of tar and roll it, and that road would last for around ten years before wear and tear necessitated that it be resurfaced again. Today, the corporation has a machine that spreads a thin layer of road metal and tar on the surface and rolls it. The surface is a few centimetres above the old level, and it remains smooth and excellent till the next rain, but then it washes off and needs attention once more, so it needs attention every year. That means another contract, someone makes money every year instead of every decade, and everyone concerned is happy, except we who live along the road. Each fresh coating raises the level of the road, and our gardens sink below the road surface, so that rain water fills our grounds and cannot drain out. We have to wait for it to evaporate when the clouds clear and the sun comes out. The corporation health officer threatened the citizens that we would be fined for growing *Anopheles* in our gardens. I bought a pump and tried to pump the water out onto the roads for it to drain with the storm water, but as the road is now higher than my garden it just came back. Along with other citizens, I planned to go to court if the health officer carried out his threat to levy a fine, but he thought better of it and we heard nothing further.

During one of her spells in power towards the end of the last century, Jayalalithaa passed a law that all new multistoreyed buildings should instal rain water harvesting structures to drain surplus water into the soil. Even before that rule, and though mine was not a new building, I thought it was a good idea and installed a system in my house. The North East monsoon (Chennai's major monsoon from October to December) was exceptionally heavy in 2021, the third highest in recorded history, after 1918 and 1985. And compared to those years, the area available for this rain to drain was 10%. Large parts of the city were flooded, including my house, and I became a refugee in the house of a hospitable relative. I should not complain. The water drained off in two days, I needed another day to thoroughly clean the house and disinfect the floor (remember the water that wells up on our roads from the overflowing storm water drains is approximately half sewage), and I could go back home. There are areas of the city where this water stayed in the houses for weeks. Our corporation prides itself that it is the second oldest in the entire British Empire, the first being London. We should hang our heads in shame.

We started with ignorance, for which perhaps we should not be blamed, as all cities grew on flat lands, and many in India on

rice fields as did Madras. But after the floods of 1985, we knew the importance of open areas, lakes and flood plains. They were mapped out and clearly demarcated as not to be built on. And yet the majority of these areas have been encroached on and built up. How could this happen when it was against the law? Every one of the buildings has come up with sanction from the corporation. Every building needs a completion certificate from the corporation before anyone can move in. The builder and the corporation have both broken the law. This is either corruption or inefficiency or both. It should not have happened, but now that it has, surely both the guilty parties should be punished. I was put to some expense and inconvenience to get out of my house when it was flooded, and to make it habitable again. As I said earlier, I should not complain as there were thousands who were in worse condition than I. There has been some loss of life too, people who were electrocuted when live wires fell into the accumulated water, a few who drowned when they fell into open storm water drains. Wading through infected water causes leptospirosis, and this flares up during and after every monsoon. Sewage contamination of the water supply causes other problems such as typhoid. Can the survivors, and the relatives of those who die, be compensated by money? No compensation is provided to those who lose property damaged in floods, or who spend money to make their houses habitable again. Surely the officials and contractors responsible for this state of affairs should pay. They are never made to.

Life is cheap in Tamil Nadu. The government should fight to preserve it, but instead encourages activities that increase risk to people. In the midst of a Covid-19 surge, with all kinds of

restrictions imposed on our normal lives, *jallikattu* was permitted again, and we read of people dying in this senseless activity.

And so we began with pardonable ignorance, and then we understood the problem, and enacted laws to keep our drainage areas open and unbuilt to minimize flooding. We citizens then broke the law and built on the area that should have remained open, abetted by the authorities who connived at it either due to inefficiency, dereliction of duty, or corruption. In addition, obvious preventive measures, such as dredging the mouths of rivers and clearing storm water drains before the monsoon season, are not carried out, though the monsoon arrives in the city punctually as if by appointment every year.

In the last few years, the city has expanded immensely, and many suburban clusters have been brought into the corporation. The unfortunate residents of these areas were happy about being included in the area served by that august body. They now realize they would have been better off with a smaller and more responsive municipality. Many either spent weeks wading through sewage, or fled their homes and stayed elsewhere till the sewage-laden water drained off.

Ultimately, we the people must take the blame. Election after election, we vote one of the same set of parties back to power, and this is the civic service they provide us.

Let me look at the bright side. You need not go to the expense and inconvenience of making a trip to Venice to see a city with canals instead of roads. Just come to Chennai during the north-east monsoon.

M.K. MANI

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