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## Disaster at the Margins

A history of Chennai's floods

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*Chennai's floods are embedded within inequality and the wider ecology of disasters in low-income settlements. Seeing their regularity purely as planning and engineering problems neglects this complexity.*

In 1969, the Tamil writer Asokamitran penned a novel titled *Thaneer* (meaning “water”) about the daily drudgery of collecting water in the city of Chennai. Jamuna – a middle class and upper caste resident in the emerging suburb of Anna Nagar – awakens sharply at the sound of raindrops, to collect rainwater in a pot and avoid the long queue at the water tanker. This is a [common sight](#) across cities in postcolonial South Asia, where large queues assemble to collect water from lorries (water tankers) or at hand/motor pumps with an agglomeration of buckets and vessels.

While Asokamitran’s novel was about a lack of water, too much water – in the form of flooding – continues to plague Chennai as well. In 2015 – as Krupa Ge’s book *Rivers Remember* catalogues – a devastating flood hit the city, in which over 300 people lost their lives and thousands more were displaced from their homes. Six years on, the city and its residents are left continuously anticipating the flood annually. In 2021 too, widespread waterlogging affected neighbourhoods across the city in the monsoonal month of November. Back too, were the images of 2015 – of inundated homes, boats on streets, and damage to property and life haunt the city — with the quantum of rain not dissimilar in both years.

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Following the 2015 flood, the city’s [past and present-day maps](#) started to circulate among major publications and on social media. Several regions in the city, commentators pointed out, were flood plains: water tanks, lakes, or marshes that have been built over. Indeed, the first planned suburb of Madras city, of Theyagaraya Nagar – now a bustling marketplace – was built through reclaiming large portions of the Long Tank. While the 2015 flood has kindled this important urban imaginary, we need more than engineering and planning solutions – since these tend to think of water as a stock, of surplus and deficit, for the *city* as an entity.

But read through the production of Madras city in the 20th century, floods are a far more complex phenomenon than engineering drainage systems and building over water bodies. Flooding, and disasters more broadly, are profoundly uneven in nature. For instance, North Madras, historically home to the city’s working classes, rarely figures in present-day news-media narratives of floods. The unequal production, impact, and representation of floods is embedded in property making and belonging, and forms part of a wider ecology of disaster.

### An unequal burden

Chennai’s hydrology has been fundamental to patterns and rhythms of life – whether the East India Company setting up its first urban settlement in South Asia; the postcolonial state and developers reclaiming and building over bodies of water, or the urban poor finding homes in low-lying, flood-prone areas. Different hydro-geographies within the city experience the rainfall differently. For instance, in the coastal parts of the city, damage to houses, boats and human life has been due to cyclonic storms and wind, while on the banks of the Cooum river, houses are submerged repeatedly.

Floods predate the city’s rapid expansion in the mid-20th century. In 1910, the Madras Corporation report remarked that the summer season for that year was the worst on record in 80 years. Due to the incessant rains, the ground-water levels were up 6-8 feet, and construction of different kinds became impossible. In 1943, when the city faced a similar situation of vast flooding but with a significantly larger population, the armed forces were called in to help supply food and water for city inhabitants. Calling for relief, the mayor of Madras, C. Tadulinga Mudaliar, observed that: “The poor people in slum areas are the worst sufferers. Thousands of women and children are helpless and require urgent relief. I appeal to everyone in the city and outside to contribute their might to grant relief to the distressed”. The mayor’s call was for relief, rather than structural change, even as it recognised some lives, and the city itself, as ecologically marginal.

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In the postcolonial era, decolonisation and industrialisation led to the rapid expansion of South Asian cities. From 1941 to 1961, Madras city's population almost doubled, to 1,729,171 from 881,445. A special report titled *The Slums of Madras City*, published in 1965, counted 548 slums, which housed about a quarter of the city's population. Although the report mentioned flooding only a handful of times, it clearly recognised that slums were disproportionately located in low-lying regions, typically on the fringes of waterbodies.

Take for instance “Attu Cheri”, on the left bank of the Adyar river. The report observed that “during floods in the river, water enters the slum and causes damage to the huts. The inhabitants leave their huts, move to safer places like Corporation schools and other public buildings and return to their homes after the floods subside.”

With a large proportion of the population residing in slums, any account of flooding requires a wider understanding of ecological disasters from the margins of the city. Yet, despite earlier significant floods, there is little in the records of the Chennai Improvement Trust, established in the 1950s, or in the first Madras (interim) masterplan, published in 1967, to suggest that floods were seen as a serious threat. As Madras grew rapidly, its planners were preoccupied with industrial zoning, the creation of suburbs, and concerns such as sewage and drainage (largely for property taxpayers). The memory of 1943 was short and the underlying logic of housing, as the anthropologist Karen Coehlo has put it, continuously set the poor in the path of the flood.

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Floods were only one part of a system of elemental disasters to hit slum settlements. Fires and lack of access to clean drinking water characterised the existence of low-income housing settlements as they grew in twentieth-century Madras. The irony of flooding near low-lying homes is that clean water supply has remained continuously inadequate in these areas. When the earliest water-supply schemes were designed for the city, they were created first for British officials, then the armed garrison, and subsequently the “rate-paying” upper-caste city elite. Whether in flood, fire, or water scarcity, British colonialism never designed systems of drainage, water-supply, or fire safety for these marginal settlements, even as the city increasingly relied on workers residing in them.

Even as floods badly affected the city again in the 1960s, there was little planning for the communities affected by them. Poor housing was understood as a risk to the public health of the city at large and to the city's workforce via mortality rates, epidemics, and chronic diseases, but little was done to connect this to seasonal (and therefore perpetual) ecological risks.

## Life on the edge

Conversely, ‘slum rehabilitation’ happened precisely on floodplains, marshes, and large tanks. The first Madras Urban Development Project, funded by the World Bank and initiated in June 1977, identified Arumbakkam, Villivakam, and Kodungaiyur – all in the city periphery – as sites to rehouse inhabitants living in slums. All the chosen sites were reclaimed waterbodies. The logic was that tank-beds were often common lands, which could easily be acquired.

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The World Bank, in reviewing this scheme in 1986, recognised that these spaces faced serious drainage problems and could even lead to flooding during the monsoon (Bremner 2020). Yet, newer resettlement colonies, such as those in Thoraipakkam, established after the devastating 2007 tsunami, continued to be built on floodplains or marshlands (Raman 2011).

Paradoxically too, while the state did not want people to settle on the banks of rivers and lakes, it was only in these low-lying areas that land was available for newcomers to the city, such as refugees from Burma. The ability to settle on land and claim ownership and belonging in an area easily accessible to the opportunities the city offered, was crucial to the way residents made their homes.

Consider the story of G. J. Abel: a man with a small family, employed as a weaver in the mills of Madras. He was earning a fair monthly salary until chronic disease meant he could no longer continue to work. With the payout, Abel bought a small piece of land in

a slum adjoining a waterbody and built a small house. In 1968, however, a fire destroyed the house and all of Abel's possessions. Starting again on the same piece of land, Abel was able to set up a vegetable stall in another part of the city.

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In the 1970s, for the newly created Tamilnadu Slum Clearance Board, the solution to life in low-lying areas was to forcibly prevent new settlement and evict existing dwellers to far-flung suburbs. Yet, as stories of disaster, relief, and everyday life reveal, for residents such as Abel these homes offered easy access to the city's opportunities. Disasters, and indeed abrupt resettlement, as [Gautam Bhan has argued](#), forestalled the possibility of slow and incremental upgradation. Housing was, for the residents, “time and life.”

## A political response

As the climate crisis looms, Chennai is emerging as a laboratory for organizations such as the [World Bank](#) and the [Rockefeller Foundation](#). While the World Bank has long held interest in urban development schemes in the city, international organisations are renewing efforts under the rubric of “resilience” and ‘smart cities’ in response to the 2015 flood and the city's low-lying coastal location. A new World Bank scheme, titled Sustainable Urban Services Program, for instance, states that it hopes to “help break the recurring cycle of floods and droughts plaguing Chennai, the program will support an integrated management of water resources, the water supply system, and demand.”

But floods cannot be understood in purely planning, engineering or geographic terms. Instead, they are embedded within property relations, inequality, making of homes and belonging, and the wider ecology of disasters in low-income settlements. As the city braces each year for spells of low-pressure cyclonic activity across the Bay of Bengal, “unprecedented natures” can no longer remain a political alibi. Rather, a political response must emerge from understanding the complex historical functions of disaster and risky life for the urban poor across Chennai.

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