

FLOODS

India, Tamil Nadu: While Chennai's sanitation workers help the deluged city, who's looking after them?

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Tens of neighbourhoods with the city's working population have been inundated. The damage to their houses is just the beginning of their loss.

While Chennai's army of public sanitation workers work all hours to help deal the city with the floods, it seems there's nobody to care for them.

Some of the sanitation workers live in the slum clearance board colony of Chemmenchery, to the south of the city. At 5am on Tuesday, they were warned that the nearby Perumbakkam Lake would breach its banks and they had an hour to get to safe ground. This was an improvement on a fortnight ago, when the lake overflowed without warning at 3am, flooding their homes, sweeping out their belongings and closing off the exits of the colony's inner streets.

At the time, the nearly 5,000 families were left stranded without electricity, water or food. When the floodwaters receded three days later, they returned to a mess and the stench of sewage everywhere.

"The water supply in tankers has stopped, electricity connections were cut," said Jayasudha, a resident of Chemmenchery. "Food is a huge crisis for us since the supply only reaches the main road and doesn't come into the colony. Utensils have been washed away by the water and there is no facility to cook."

Help in the form of drinking water, a clean-up of the neighbourhood and a medical camp arrived after the Penn Thozhilalar Sangam (Women's Workers Union), of which many residents are members, pushed the Slum Clearance Board to act.

That process of picking up the pieces has been disrupted less than a week later. Residents of Chemmenchery are once again scattered, looking for shelter as Perumbakkam Lake's levels rise dangerously high. Families living on lower floors cannot move to higher floors since the flats are merely 140 sq feet in size, barely big enough for one family. The only public building in the neighbourhood, the government school, is also deluged.

Apart from the nearly 400 contractual public sanitation workers who have been slogging overtime without extra pay to service the city through this terrible monsoon, Chemmenchery's other residents are domestic help, auto drivers and other daily wagers. Some work on construction sites, and many others as security and service staff for companies that service tech offices or homes in the new upmarket complexes along the IT corridor running south of Chennai. Most of them have been unable to work for more than a few days this month, either because they could not travel out of their flooded neighbourhood or because they found safe shelter too far from work.

In MGR Colony, close to the River Cooum and the middle class-residential colony Anna Nagar, last week's rains left half of nearly 1,000 families with their homes inundated. With schools closed and homes underwater, few were able to go to work. A domestic worker Geetha, described the situation thus: "Most of our things were spoilt by water including electrical appliances, clothes, ration etc. We are struggling with the children and can't go to work." Today MGR colony, like Anna Nagar, has over eight feet of water. Families have moved to higher floors, where they have found rooms or moved to crowded, insanitary camps set up by the city corporation.

We have received no news from this neighbourhood in the last 24 hours. But in parts of the adjacent Anna Nagar, floodwaters on Wednesday were as high as the first floors of buildings.

A little further west along River Cooum, the MBS Nagar settlement in Nerkundram was evacuated last week to a government school. Residents left with only their clothes on, since they were given no time to gather their belongings. This is a community where the men mostly work as daily wagers in the wholesale market at Koyambedu or at the interstate bus terminus, and the women are domestic workers. They returned to find their homes flooded or swept away. One resident said, "The monsoon has put us in trauma. We aren't able to go to work. Our kitchens are flooded and rice, dal and oil are spoilt by sewage water. Price of one set of idlis is Rs 30. Prices of vegetable, provisions, milk has become so high that we aren't able to afford it. We are neither able to cook nor afford to buy food."

Over the last few days Nerkundram has been deluged again and now MBS Nagar is submerged in water to roof height of the mostly single-storey homes.

There are tens of neighbourhoods like Chemmenchery, MGR Colony and MBS Nagar in Chennai and its periphery. As the city prepares for more rains and its rivers remain in spate, the city's working population in these neighbourhoods which relies on informal work and daily wages must contend not merely with being displaced, damage of property, but also with loss of income. It will take them a great deal more than just going back to work to rebuild their lives after the waters recede.

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P.S.

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