

## **India - Chennai Floods: For Chennai slum residents, access to flood relief depends on luck and muscle power**

Tuesday 29 December 2015, by [NARAYANAN Nayantara](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2015).

### **Neighbours in a Chooleimedu slum have ended up in two very different kinds of relief shelters.**

Deepa Rajkumar is eight months pregnant. On the night of December 1, when the rains hit Chennai the hardest, she was in her house in the Namachivayapuram slum in Chooleimedu. "The water came in from the river and was up to chest height. We somehow got out," she said, standing in a big, dry classroom in Loyola College.

The college has accommodated 1,200 people from Namachivayapuram in three floors of the social work department. The rooms are large and plenty and the temporary residents have spread themselves out. They have received mats to sleep on and bedsheets to cover themselves with. Student volunteers ensure that food and water are distributed on time.

At 3pm on Saturday, the second of three daily cleanings was underway in one of the bathrooms. Diaper-wearing toddlers held on to their mothers in the corridors. Older children played in a ground in front of the building where a fire truck and police van were stationed. Student volunteers noted the entry and exit of visitors and materials.

"It's run like it would be prescribed in a manual. Or at least close to it," said Hari Balaji, Tamil Nadu state coordinator with the non-governmental organisation Sphere India.

Not all the residents of Namachivayapuram are in the Loyola college shelter. After escaping the water and after most of their neighbours were taken to Loyola College, 500 people were sent to a primary school just up the road from their settlement. There are fewer than 10 rooms at the school and one toilet.

"They come [from the government] to give us food and water and leave medicines. But we don't get anything else," said S Sandhya, who had been staying there for four days.

The temporary residents of the school have been cleaning the premises themselves but said that the single toilet has become unusable. They have been trying to find basic material, which is proving tough. "It is very cold here and we don't have bedsheets," said 70-year-old R Mary. This, despite many relief-laden cars having been in the vicinity.

"When any material comes here for the shelter, people waiting outside come and grab things and take them back to their houses," said S Sandhya. "Especially, the men. We can't fight them and so we don't get anything." With no municipal representative or volunteers keeping watch at the school, distribution of relief had become a free for all. "There, it's happening again," a woman in the shelter remarked when raised voices at the school's entrance caught everyone's attention. Two girls had

walked into the school and had been surrounded by a crowd of men and women. After some shouting and shoving when the crowd cleared, one of the girls was in tears.

After being escorted outside and catching her breath, the girl, who did not want to be named, said "I just came to leave biscuits for the children. But everyone pushed us and tore the packet."

"Some of these people are from our area but are not staying in this shelter," said Sandhya, about those grabbing bedsheets and biscuits.

Everyone in the Namachivayapuram has lost almost everything. Four days after the worst flood this season, the lane into the slum was still slushy and the houses damp. Whether within a shelter or without, it's obvious that people left to fend for themselves were getting desperate. Asked whether she would come back to help with food, the girl with the biscuits said, "Of course, we have seen how bad it is. We will come again."

### **Nayantara Narayanan**

\* Scroll.in. Dec 11, 2015 · 08:55 am:

<http://scroll.in/article/774804/for-chennai-slum-residents-access-to-flood-relief-depends-on-luck-and-muscle-power>

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## **TAMIL NADU FLOODS: A Dalit village in Cuddalore was left to fend for itself through 36 days of flooding**

**The 45 houses of Ambedkar Nagar received no flood warning, no relief material and no visit from the authorities for a least a month.**

"For 36 days no one has come to check on us. Forget bringing us things and giving us help - no one has even come to ask 'how are you'll doing?', 'are you'll safe?', 'are you'll alive?'" L Pavai was in tears as she spoke of the neglect her hamlet - Ambedkar Nagar in the Parangipettai block of Cuddalore district - during the rains and floods of the past month.

There are 45 houses in Ambedkar Nagar of which only 11 are made of concrete. There others are all mud and thatch structures. On the night of November 10, as the rest of the country was caught up in Diwali festivities, Ambedkar Nagar, along with large parts of Cuddalore experienced its worst flooding in a century. The district got 50% more rainfall on November 9, 10 and 11 than the normal rainfall for the entire month of November.

As water rushed in from a nearby river, some of the mud houses were completely washed away. Others were severely damaged. As the rain continued for the rest of the month and into December, the stubborn waters refused to recede from the streets and houses of Ambedkar Nagar. Residents like A Subramaniam say that little help has come to them and they have nowhere to go.

"My wife, five children and I have been staying here only," said Subramaniam, who had to wade through shin-deep water to enter his house a month after the first floods, when at least two feet of water entered his house through the thatched back wall and destroyed, among his other belongings, his refrigerator. Subramaniam acquired a plastic poster from a nearby temple to cover the gaping

hole in the back wall.

“My feet are full of sethu punnu from walking around in all this water,” Subramanian said while displaying the wounds on his feet due to intertrigo, a condition in which sores develop due to bacterial or fungal infection of moist skin. When asked if he had reached out to authorities or other people in the district for help, Subramanian only said quietly, “No relief material has come to us. We can’t go and ask anyone also.”

Dalit villages like Ambedkar Nagar have not only been the hardest hit by the floods, they have also been excluded from relief operations, according to a report by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the Social Awareness Society for Youth in Tamil Nadu. The report, based on a survey of 8,400 houses in Cuddalore district, found that out of 1,337 houses that were damaged 1,276 belonged to Dalits. Among the 433 acres of crop lost, 378 belonged to Dalits.

This unequal damage, the report says, is due to the fact that Dalit settlements are relegated to low-lying areas near rivers, streams or canals at an average distance of 1.5 kilometers from the main villages they are attached to. Ambedkar Nagar, for example, is located on the near the Kollidam river about half kilometer away from the main Kavrapattu village that consists of about 400 Kallar households, a Most Backward Caste group. Ambedkar Nagar residents said they hadn’t received any warning about flooding in their area or a visit from any government official in the aftermath.

Subramaniam and his neighbours have been left in the cold when it comes to aid because of the inherent caste-bias among government officials too, according to Pandiyan Kamal, director of the Social Awareness Society for Youth. “Whenever disaster occurs, Dalit people are excluded from relief assessment and emergency response,” he said. The report also alleges that political strongmen in neighbouring villages are blocking the flow of relief material into Ambedkar Nagar.

“Even if we ask for help, when we say we are in Kavrapattu, they won’t come. I don’t know why they are scared to come,” said Pavai.

### **Flood after flood after flood**

This isn’t the first time that Ambedkar Nagar has battled flood waters. When the tsunami hit in 2004, the waters flooded the village and receded in a day. Then came Cyclone Nisha in 2006 and then Cyclone Thane in 2011, each one slamming into the village. Most of the 11 concrete houses that have been built or are under construction are from the funds allotted for rehabilitation of Cyclone Thane’s victims.

“Each household gets Rs 120,000 to build a concrete house but the money can only be claimed after submitting the bills,” said Pavai, who is the cluster leader of a grassroots federation called Inaindha Kaigal - joined hands - set up by the Social Awareness Society for Youth. “So people here are slowly building their houses from their savings. For some people, building has been going on for more than three years. They build a little more each time they have saved up enough.”

Near the entrances of the few houses completely constructed from Cyclone Thane funds, are mandatory pictures of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa.

Kalkunam village in the Kurinjipadi block west of Parangipettai was one of the worst affected villages this season, registering two deaths and at least 250 houses of its 300 houses destroyed. “For at least a week, we were in the same clothes,” said John Bose, who lives on the Dalit and Christian side of Kalkunam. “We normally get 20 kilos of free rice from the ration shop. We are making full use of that. For vegetables we are making do with whatever little comes from the NGOs.” Aid has started trickling into Kalkunam since local press started reporting the destruction, but only after Chennai

had its worst rains in the beginning of December.

Jasmine Mary has been living in the community hall of Kalkunam church with her seven-month baby and son attending third standard at the local school. She has been struggling to get by on the Rs 3,000 compensation the government has given her for her destroyed hut. "I have already spent Rs 1,500 to buy my son's school books that got washed off in the rain. Then there is milk for the baby and lots of other things."

While the people in Kalkunam are struggling to get back on their feet, those in Ambedkar Nagar don't even now how. Ambedkar Nagar hasn't got the meager attention or compensation that Kalkunam has. It has neither a house of worship or a community hall to serve as temporary shelter. Families are scrounging for any sort of covering to lay on still damp floors before they sleep.

More than ten years ago, the families of Ambedkar Nagar lived on higher ground but were moved to their present location to make way for a road. "For the last four or five years, every time the water comes, it's same problem over and over again," said Pavai. "In this place, there isn't even space to bury our bodies when we die."

### **Nayantara Narayanan**

\* Scroll.in. Dec 16, 2015 · 09:15 am:

<http://scroll.in/article/775850/a-dalit-village-in-cuddalore-was-left-to-fend-for-itself-through-36-days-of-flooding>

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