



Heroes of Chennai

We salute the spirit of the city of Chennai and its countless denizens who braved several odds to help others in the time of the unprecedented floods during November - December 2015.



The tarmac and runways of the Chennai International Airport were flooded on December 1 and the airport remained closed till December 6, leading to the cancellation of 119 flights. Around 30 aircraft were submerged during this period. The Airports Authority of India carried out rescue operations along with the Indian Air Force and evacuated almost 1,500 passengers and 2,000 airport staff. Photo: Indian Air Force



On December 1st 2015, around 370mm (14 inches approximately) of rain lashed Chennai. The city had not seen a wetter day in December for the past 100 years. In the month of November, Chennai reported 1,218 mm (47 inches approximately) of rain, more than 300 percent of the normal rainfall that is expected for the month. People whose homes were flooded, lost their belongings and a large part of their lives.

As the city geared up for the festival of lights, Deepavali (Diwali) in November 2015, it began to rain on November 8 and continued to rain for a whole week. It started to rain again on November 23, and by the end of the month, the Chembarambakkam reservoir, one of the city's main water sources, had almost reached peak capacity. On December 1, the downpour became torrential and water was released from the reservoir after it had exceeded the capacity. By midnight, an area of about 4 km around the River Adyar, which flows through the heart of Chennai, was submerged.

Thus began the nightmare of Chennai, with relentless rain for 48 hours and the flooding from the reservoir. The rains let up around December 4 and the flood waters started to recede but not

before taking 421 lives and causing a loss of ₹14,668 crore (US \$2.2 billion approximately).

The year 2015 will be remembered and chronicled by the weatherman and the historian alike as the Year of the Flood. The residents though, will remember it as the Year of the People. The rain did not just come down, it stayed down. The city that would cry for rain year after year, for once, cried for the deluge to stop.

No one was spared, not the rich, not the poor, not the middle class. The rising waters made no distinction between huts and tenements or bungalows and high-rises. They rose with a hauteur that mocked the notion of safe habitats, and engulfed everything in their wake. Those

who considered themselves fortunate for having escaped inundation were still left without food, water and power for over 30 hours. People whose homes were flooded lost their belongings and a large part of their lives.

There were pitiful instances of cries for help from the old and the infirm, the differently abled, pregnant mothers and little ones. In many areas, the flood waters rose beyond fifteen feet and that too, in a matter of hours. The water surged like torrents through narrow streets and by-lanes with the force of rapids.

Communication broke down completely. Even where there was power, there was no connectivity. The local administration and government agencies were overwhelmed and unable to cope with such an unprecedented situation. Most of the staff of civic agencies also fell victim to the floods.

Amidst this, it was the power of the people that came to the fore. Putting considerations of their personal safety aside, fighting weariness and sleep, heedless of hunger and thirst, the city teemed with volunteers coming together to save lives. Some of them were in organised groups and others worked by themselves, braving hardship to rescue people they did not know and most probably would never meet again.

Some names came to the fore by the sheer dint of the enormity

of relief work they performed. Younus was responsible for saving more than 2,000 people in distress. Imran, a Class XII student, who worked non-stop for over six days, made the ultimate sacrifice. He died of infection caused by intrusion of sewage into his system. Unnamed fishermen from the *kuppams* (fishing hamlets) along the coast pressed their boats into service, bringing out thousands of people from areas under water, resisting strong currents. Many of them had already lost their homes and belongings but this did not deter them from saving the lives of

those in danger.

Several NGOs and private organisations played an active part, gathering food, drinking water, clothing and medicines, and distributing them swiftly. Residents in every area formed private groups and reached out to the less fortunate who were housed in temporary shelters, providing them with warm clothes, blankets, food for the adults and milk for the infants. The Natural Disaster Response Force (NDRF), Navy, Army, Air Force and Coast Guard played a vital role in the rescue operations

and the distribution of food and relief materials. A team of ex-Service officers formed a group that monitored over 2,500 volunteers who in turn, had absolutely no hesitation in risking life and limb to save lives.

In this stupendous effort, it is difficult to point out individual heroes, although there were hundreds of them. What stood out as a lesson for all humanity was the eagerness to help, to invite complete strangers into their homes, share the frugal supplies available and reach out to the community in distress.



The relief operations were bolstered by efforts from NGOs, private organisations and individuals, who tirelessly collected and distributed food, drinking water, clothing, medicines and other essentials. Photo: Bhumi Relief Centre

This indeed was Chennai at its best, standing up and standing together in misfortune and distress. It would be impossible to name or even count the number of volunteers, who exemplified a marvellous collective energy and action to help friends and strangers alike. Many of the heroes are unsung, unknown, unheralded and now mostly forgotten, but here are some stellar examples.



When the going gets tough, the tough get going. The Natural Disaster Response Force (NDRF), Navy, Army, Air Force and Coast Guard played a vital role in the relief and rescue operations during the floods in Chennai in 2015.



Bhumi, Chennai's largest independent volunteer organisation with 10,000 volunteers in 200 centres across India, has been helping educate underprivileged kids since 2006. Pitching in for flood relief work, it set up a relief centre to collect aid pouring in from its branches in Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai. Its network of 5,000 volunteers in the flood-hit city helped reach relief material to communities in Chennai, Chidambaram, Kanchipuram, Panruti, Puducherry, Tindivanam, Tiruvallur and Virudhachalam.



Coming to the aid of schools that were amongst the worst affected institutions in the floods was the volunteer group TNFES (Tamil Nadu Floods – Education Supplies). Many schools had their doors and windows swept off along with benches and desks. Those that were still standing were used as relief centres and their toilets and pantries were left in a mess.

Since its hundred days of formation in March 2016, TNFES has reached out to 37 schools across Chennai, Kanchipuram, Tiruvallur and Cuddalore districts. Its assistance includes cleaning the school premises, reconstructing bathrooms and kitchens, providing stationary and sports equipment, books and drinking water facilities.

"We have an open group on Facebook that anybody can join," says Sridhar Venkataraman, a member. TNFES volunteers surveyed the schools, collected inputs, inspired confidence in the headmasters and drew up a clear chart of requirements for sponsors. Soon, corporates reached out with sponsorships; TNFES has associated with agencies like Rejuvenate India Movement and Milaap, to route funds for rehabilitation.

Photo: Suchandra Das



Like a modern-day Noah, Shraavan Krishnan came to the rescue of hundreds of animals who were caught in the swirling waters of the flood. Dogs, cats, snakes, slender lorises, jackals, monkeys, deer, lizards and rats from the Nanmangalam forest and IIT Madras campus were swept on to the streets of the city and into homes of panic-stricken residents.

Krishnan, who runs Hotel for Dogs, a dog boarding house in Chennai and Bengaluru, and his team, worked with the Fire and Forest departments for over 36 hours to evacuate and rescue animals and people. Attending to nearly 400 calls, putting people on boats and building makeshift rafts for animals, the team used Krishnan's house on the East Coast Road as a station for relief material. This 25-year-old says the floods brought to mind an old-timer's description of Chennai, as a city for fishermen with only boats to be seen. "I saw something similar during the floods," he says. Thanks to his relief work during the floods and subsequent to his social media popularity, he has been able to get many supporters for issues like environmental degradation, civic apathy and animal rights.



Siddharth, the star of several Tamil, Telugu and Hindi films, began trending during the floods. The actor became the face of volunteerism in Chennai, tweeting from @Actor_Siddharth to spread information about the floods and to coordinate relief efforts. Rendered homeless, albeit temporarily, when his swanky home was flooded, (his office, studios and cars were also damaged), Siddharth joined the relief efforts across the city.

Using Twitter to mobilise volunteers, Siddharth and Balaji Patturaj, the radio jockey popularly known as RJ Balaji, managed to get food and other materials collected and delivered to the victims of the flood. After the floods, Siddharth and Balaji set up the Chennai Micro Fund to offer long-term relief and rehabilitation to victims who had lost their livelihood in the floods.