

SHARED BLAME: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON CHENNAI AND CYCLONE MICHAUNG

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December 06, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 08:37 am IST

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Apportioning blame for calamity after a natural disaster is almost impossible, but Indian cities have often tried to ease this decision, and Chennai on December 4 was no exception. Late [on December 3, rains began to pummel Chennai](#) as Cyclone Michaung, soon to intensify into a super-cyclonic storm, parked itself roughly 100 km east of the city. By the next morning, most areas had recorded more than 120 mm of rain, with a few recording more than 250 mm. The figures represent a breathtaking volume of water to be delivered in a single day — and which Tamil Nadu Minister for Municipal Administration K.N. Nehru echoed when he said the city had not received as much rain in seven decades. But that is not the full story. The narratives built around disasters influence the responses to them, and proclamations that attribute a singularity to a natural calamity often feed an unfair line of reasoning in which nature shoulders all the blame. Just as the [rain intensified over Chennai on December 4](#) morning, the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited shut off power in the city as a precaution, presumably to prevent loose cables from electrocuting pedestrians in dirty water. That such a precaution was required at all speaks volumes about the state of the power infrastructure. There are no quick fixes or short cuts in addressing years of inadequate investment in maintenance and repair. Several trees were toppled, water stagnated on almost all roads, overhead cables flew loose, and storm water drains were choked with plastic trash. Many trains were cancelled, the airport had to be closed, and there were reports of people being stranded at many locations. Yet, that 2023 was not [2015 redux](#) is to the city's as well as to the storm's credit: the former because of the warnings and preparation, more resilient civilian infrastructure, and people's memories of 2015; the latter because it dumped less water than the 2015 torrent did in a single day.

The extent to which climate change 'boosted' Cyclone Michaung is for attribution science to say, although it would be naive to wait for any verdict other than that warmer seas are feeding stronger cyclones. But the city's ability to respond to such storms has been compromised by decades of unplanned construction, defiance of zoning, and some forms of public indiscipline, especially littering. Expecting the resulting problems to be resolved overnight, or even by a single government, is unreasonable, yet the progress needs to be much faster than it is at present, if only to preclude the need for drastic, even oxymoronic, measures such as cutting power supply to guarantee safety. Finally in Michaung's wake, Chennai can start by doing something it failed to in 2015: treating its sanitation workers — mostly Dalits and Adivasis — better.

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