

The rot in rehabilitation

A file picture of houses along the Cooum River, in Chennai. | Photo Credit: [R. Ragu](#)

Another season of evictions has begun in Chennai. As temperatures soar in the city, thousands of families living along the Cooum river watch bulldozers reduce to rubble their homes, painstakingly built over decades.

Over 4,000 homes were demolished to “restore” the Cooum in 2017. Scores of once-buzzing neighbourhoods, with their schools, youth clubs, community halls, and shrines, are now wastelands of debris. Their buried histories will soon be overwritten by landscaped parks with fountains or bicycle tracks, going by national trends in urban riverfront development. Contemporary eco-restoration projects are everywhere dislodging ecologies of low-income settlement and urban livelihoods, whether on the Yamuna in Delhi, the Sabarmati in Ahmedabad or the Musi in Hyderabad. River rejuvenation has emerged as among the most exclusionary interventions in our urban development landscape, sparking large-scale human tragedy.

Rehoused and excluded

Where do the people go? The more fortunate, who can prove eligibility, are rehoused in vast ghettos that have sprung up on India’s metropolitan peripheries, shaping a new urban geography of apartheid. These resettlement colonies have high concentrations of Dalits, Other Backward Classes and indigent Muslims whose disconnection from the urban mainstream has earned them the label of “a new urban untouchability”.

In Chennai, families evicted from the banks of the Cooum were moved to resettlement colonies in Perumbakkam and Gudapakkam outside the city, where the government has built thousands of multi-storied tenements. In official accounts, they have been rehoused in “integrated townships” with all the basic amenities.

However, the reality is starkly different. Behind the façades of the new buildings, a third-rate quality of construction and services emerges. Residents point to leaking roofs, crumbling plaster, and broken pipes. Although families were moved to Gudapakkam over a year ago, street lights have not been provided, compromising the safety of women and girls. The settlement is 35 km from the city, but nothing has been done to ease the commute of workers and students. Government childcare centres (anganwadis) are absent. All this has blocked women from rejoining the workforce. In Perumbakkam, where 10,000 families live, a small primary school has functioned for over two years from residential tenements, violating the Right to Education Act. Only teachers use the indoor toilets, while children are forced to use the open spaces behind the school. By Integrated Child Development Services norms, the settlement should have 62 anganwadis. Only seven have been established. There are only two ration shops where there should be 10.

These are not simply teething problems. Chennai’s older resettlement colonies, Kannagi Nagar and Semmencheri, built in the early 2000s, have seen some improvement over time, yet discrimination remains inscribed in every line of their structures and systems. In Semmencheri, 6,500 families have been housed since 2006 in units measuring 150 sft. Residents report that water, supplied through public taps, is erratic and contains worms. Drainpipes are broken and sewage stagnates in some areas. Classrooms in the primary school are too few and too small, teachers are indifferent, and the quality of the food is poor. The Primary Health Centre, built six years after resettlement, has three of five sanctioned doctors, all trainees with little experience. So, patients are redirected elsewhere for even slightly complicated complaints and for all first deliveries. The term “sub-standard settlements”, used to refer to slums, is ironically apt for these

state-built colonies ostensibly intended to improve living conditions for slum-dwellers.

Social problems

But physical conditions are only the tip of the iceberg. Delhi's Bawana, Mumbai's Mahul, and even Chennai's Kannagi Nagar, now regarded as the queen of resettlement sites, are fearful places for parents of young children. Young boys are routinely chased, rounded up, beaten and incarcerated by the police under pressure to control crime. Rates of child marriage in Kannagi Nagar are high, as parents see marriage as the only way to protect daughters from sexual assault. Numerous instances of trafficking and kidnapping of girls are reported. The sale and abuse of drugs and alcohol, and the incidence of domestic abuse, theft, suicides and murders are much higher than in other parts of the city. Senior police officials and local school authorities confess helplessness. They ascribe these problems to broken livelihoods, economic stress and indebtedness, and to the effects of crowding lakhs of low-income residents from hundreds of city slums into a single substandard settlement.

Resettlement colonies are simmering sites of discontent and despair. The rot in resettlement models must provoke a rethinking of this approach to building "slum-free cities".

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