

# Chennaiites, may our tribe increase!



PAVITRA  
SRIPRAKASH



@pavisriprakash

**The writer is  
an architect,  
urban  
designer,  
dancer  
and chief  
designer  
at Shilpa  
Architects**

**P**romboke is for you and me... sang TM Krishna, barely a month ago in an effort to raise awareness about the environmental degradation at Ennore Creek and its fallout on the local fishing community in North Chennai.

Fly-ash dumping by thermal stations and encroachments by polluting industries have messed up this natural waterway. To further exacerbate the issue, two ships owned by the same private enterprise collided just off the Kamarajar Port causing an oil spill near the mouth of the Creek last week!

The oil slick engulfed 70 km of Chennai's coastline – from Ennore to Mahabalipuram. An oil spill is amongst the worst environment-polluting phenomenon worldwide. It is a disaster with long-term effects on the overall eco system. That it happened in our backyard is a wakeup call for our city to look seriously at the health of our waterways and creeks. However, it is immediately important for us to focus on the victims of the spill.

About 2,000 students and volunteers spontaneously launched a massive citizen driven cleanup operation, while the Government and Port Authorities did not know how much oil had actually been spilt.

The Port said it was 1MT, the state government claimed it to be 20MT, the media guessed it as 70MT; but the rescuers estimated the sludge to weigh 95MT (to be fair, sludge has a good proportion of water). There is debate over whether the spilt oil is from the cargo of the ship or it's own fuel. Without knowing how much or what oil had been spilt, the government engaged a host of PSUs including Indian Oil Corporation to press their resources into action. Unfortunately, it took two whole days to mobilize the formal clean-up measures.

While the effort of the volunteers is laudable, we must acknowledge the risks involved in exposure to petroleum products such as heavy fuel oil, and the hazards of handling toxic spilt chemicals without appropriate training and equipment. Several studies show

that oil spills and related clean-up efforts can pose numerous challenges to the health of individuals and communities. Oil is absorbed by fish and crab which people eat.

Besides, the oil sludge settles on the seabed with long lasting environmental effect. Exposures to select hydrocarbons can cause long-term chronic and neurotoxic effect on humans. The repercussions of the spill are going to be felt for a long time. Right now several Olive Ridley turtles which breed at this time of year are washing up dead or oil-soaked and struggling to breathe. The feeding grounds of the migratory flamingos at Pulicat Lake will also be affected.

Chennai has been battered in the last two years by floods, cyclone, drought and now oil spill, but every time we bear it stoically! Let us now mobilise public awareness to build better safety measures and faster emergency responses. I urge you to join me to salute Chennai's spirit, it's never say die attitude and may we continue to remain, on guard!

