

Let's befriend our waterways!

Chennai is a city of rivers, lakes and the Bay of Bengal. Protection of our water bodies is one of our biggest challenges. We witnessed the city reeling during the 'flood of the century' last year. With the monsoon coming, could there be more calamities befalling us? Is another big disaster waiting to happen? How can the people of Chennai manage all these celebrations without polluting the land, water and air in the coming months?

Ganesh Chaturthi just passed us and after the sweets and celebrations were over it was time for the idols to be immersed in the sea. There is a tinge of nervousness and a bit of disappointment in me. We all know from the looks of the hundreds of bright colored Ganeshas with plastic garlands making their way on diesel powered vehicles to our already strained coastline for 'visarjan', there is trouble brewing, as they are of POP (Plaster of Paris) / cement and covered in toxic paints. Clearly not the most environmentally friendly festival! The POP will take months to dissolve in our waters altering oxygen levels in the water and affecting marine life. Paints often have lead, which dissolve and are absorbed by fish – which are con-

sumed by the people in the city. Diseases come back to haunt the very folks who were out celebrating – it's a vicious cycle that needs a break.

As much as we love our festive season, let us focus for a minute on the health of



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our waterbodies. We know from our flood experience that clogged and shrunken river mouths, blocked drainage and garbage coupled with torrential rain are bad news for the city. We seem unprepared to handle this, but yet somehow we continue to pollute and never feel bad doing so.

In the aftermath of the floods last year we promised many things to ourselves. The Government decided to clear the squatters from illegal encroachments on the lakes and riverbanks, international examples of flood management in other cities for us were sought to be adapted for us. The flood management plan considered identifying the city's flood plains, de-silting of the storm water drains, addition of new drain networks, major clean ups of river banks, dredging and freeing up the river beds for better flow of water. Other innovative ideas such as adding marine life, which could eat up vegetation and thereby enable free flow of water, were also discussed!

On the other hand, I wonder if Chennai is sinking due to the over extraction of ground water. We are at an average of +2M above mean sea level (MSL), which is a lot less than the average +6M (MSL) that I recall from my high school geography lessons. Something is terribly wrong! Unless our hydrology is balanced, we will have more problems than floods during rains. As citizens of Chennai, it is our job to befriend our waterways — be it river, lake or sea. Ensure we restore our hydrology, protect it and not pollute it!