

Chennai's slum-dwellers relive last year's floods

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Slum-dwellers intently listen as experts discuss their problems at a seminar, 'Voice of slums in post-flood Chennai' on Monday | P Jawahar

CHENNAI: Maragadham from a slum in Teynampet does not like to cry when there are people around, she makes it clear. She does, nevertheless. When her father died on December 1 last year after a prolonged illness, Maragadham and her family had to run with the body as the water swept in, taking with it many things they held dear, including their dignity.

"The body was at home for two days. I begged so many to help us bury him. If it hadn't been for my friend, who gave me Rs. 7000 without a second thought, I don't know what I would have done," she said at the 'Voice of slums in post-flood Chennai', organised by the Department of Service Learning (Outreach), Loyola College.

Representatives from 41 slums and low-income colonies in the city gathered to relive their experiences during the floods and how life has been ever since. 'Dignity' is largely overlooked in the discourse of slum-dwellers, according to activist and policy researcher Vanessa Peter. "The media's portrayal of slum-dwellers even during the floods was very disappointing," she said.

When members of the higher economic strata were aesthetically painted as they received the same relief materials, the poor were often shown crowding around the volunteers with outstretched arms, she said.

"The slums are being looked at as something that is detrimental to the general hygiene and safety of the community," she said. "This should change. Demand the dignity that you deserve." Vanessa also urged the gathering to demand an in-situ rehabilitation.

"Many people with whom we work have received subsistence allowance for only four months even though it has been eight months since they moved in," she said. The complaints over the

current rehabilitation facilities in Kannagi Nagar, Perumbakkam and Chemmenchery came in fast and frantic to the single representative of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) who was present at the meeting.

“The school that is being built in Perumbakkam is too far for the children to go on foot,” said a resident. “You give us beautician, tailoring and jewellery making courses but what about jobs?” asked another.

Though many of these questions went unanswered, the slum-dwellers were in no mood to stop. Spurred on by members of NGOs who were also present at the programme, they were determined to fight.

“Check if your slum has been officially recognised, ask for community pattas for government rehabilitation complexes, get sale deeds, remember that relief is your right,” said Vanessa. R Mani, senior journalist, who spoke to the gathering at the inaugural session, called for more effective measures that must be in place as part of flood preparedness.