

Desalination plant puts East Coast Road village between a rock and a hard place

A fishing village on East Coast Road finds itself stuck between a rock and a hard place, as development comes in the form of desalination plants; and the villagers claim the promises made to them have not been kept

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Dwindling yield: With the desalination plant regurgitating large quantities of salt back into the sea, it has become inhospitable for fish, resulting in a significant drop in the catch, say fishermen.

Large beach bungalows dot the landscape at Suleri Kattukuppam on Chennai's East Coast Road. A big green bungalow juts further out than its fellows, intruding on to the sandy beach fringing the Bay of Bengal. By way of contrast, the building abutting this

bungalow, once someone's home, now stands bruised, battered, and broken by the serial assaults of the ocean.

At the other end of this little enclave, protected by compound walls that tower over the matchbox-sized houses built by the Rotary Club for the villagers after the 2004 tsunami, stand the two large green tanks that are visible markers of the Nemmeli desalination plant.

The Nemmeli plant is intended to convert sea water into potable water sufficient to meet the requirements of an estimated 10 lakh people in Chennai, at a cost of about ₹30 per kilolitre.

"This plant has only ruined our lives," says M. Anand, a 38-year-old fisherman, a pair of shorts peeping out from under his lungi. He holds out a welcoming glass of water, and hastens to add: "This water is not from the plant." He says this, standing in the shadow of the desalination plant, and seemingly unconscious of the irony. "We buy our drinking water from the nearby village."

It's quite evident that they have to buy water, as a glass of water drawn from the borewell in his home, located close to the plant, is hard, saline, and undrinkable. "We can use this only to wash clothes and vessels," he says. "Before this plant came up here, the groundwater here used to taste like tender coconut water, it was so sweet," interjects Palani, a 50-year-old native.

Standing their ground

Though they live in the shadow of Nemmeli, the villagers are adamant that they do not want water from the plant. "Even if they give us that water, we won't drink it," an elderly man who has joined us says, his voice rising in anger. "Let them keep it."

Part of the reason is that they have heard rumours that "that water" causes health issues. But even when a local youth who works at the plant points out that the water is treated multiple times before being readied for consumption, the consensus remains that they want to have nothing to do with it.

“Even after the tsunami, if we had drilled a borewell on the sands near the old s *amuthaaya koodam* (community hall), the water would have tasted good,” says Palani, who is a fourth-generation inhabitant of the village. He, and others in the village, directly blame the desalination plant for ruining the groundwater in their area.

Many homes in the village buy water cans from outside, while some have installed a reverse osmosis water purifier to make the borewell water usable.

The sea, meanwhile, has worked its will on the old community hall, which now lies in rubble with just one pillar standing.

The government built a new one nearby – a semi-open building — where the fishermen gather in the afternoon to relax, play cards. A small television set stands unused on a side table, a bedsheet protecting it from dust.

This is where the fishermen bring in their catch every morning; their wives and other women from the village bid for buckets of fish, then go to Tiruporur, a few kilometres away, to sell their produce.

Dwindling catch

The catch is dwindling each year, the fishermen say, because the plant regurgitates large quantities of salt back into the sea, thus making it inhospitable for fish – and this is just one of the many problems they attribute to the Nemmeli plant.

Boat owner P. Jegan says the catch has gone down because of the increased salt content in the water that is being let out into the sea. “The temperature has also gone up because of this, within the first five kilometres, and the fish don't breed here any more due to this,” he adds.

However, a source in Metrowater said the fish catch dwindling is unlikely to be caused by the brine content in the water that is let out. “The water is let out through the dispersion method. It is not concentrated in any one place. Plus, the water is let out at the bottom of the sea. This doesn't affect fish,” the source said.

A desalination plant normally needs to draw in and let out 1.5 times the water required to make clean water. “So if you are making 100 MLD, it will let out 250 MLD,” the expert claimed.

The source further added that the plant has been functioning for the past few years without any problems. “In fact, when there were protests, a number of officials and scientists explained to the protestors how this plant functions. Since then, there has been no issue.” He went on to say that the temperature doesn’t rise in the sea because of the brine that is let out.

Back in 2011, when the plant was being set up, locals raised concerns over its impact on the environment. This led to several meetings with government officials.

Broken promises

Damodaran, then vice chairman of the Nemmeli panchayat, produces a copy of the letter signed by representatives of the villagers and co-signed by various officials of the government. The letter is effectively a promissory note from the government, assuring the villagers that when the plant comes up, locals will be given jobs at the plant and in other departments of the Metrowater board; that land will be provided to villagers whose livelihoods have been affected; that ration cards will be given to those families that didn’t have them.

“None of these have been fulfilled,” says Damodaran.

Interestingly, while the letter bears the signatures and designations of the executive engineer of Metrowater, the assistant director of the fisheries department, the revenue divisional officer, the deputy superintendent of police, Madurantagam, and the rural development officer, Chengalpet, it does not contain any kind of government seal, nor is it on stamp paper – two omissions that might impact on the legal validity of the said document.

While another 150 MLD plant is set to come up within the existing premises, a new 400 MLD plant is being planned just 600 metres from the current one. Suleri

Kattukkuppam's inhabitants feel they are being gradually squeezed into a box, with the two desalination plants bracketing their hamlet to the left and right, the sea in front of them, and the road behind.

The villagers watch these developments with growing despondency. In 2013, when they protested the opening of the 100 MLD plant, 60 locals were picked up by the police. Nineteen of them, including Anand, were sent to Puzhal jail for more than 30 days on charges of destruction of company property. The arrests were illegal, the residents claimed. "The court released all of us, and ruled in our favour," says Palani.

Anand is reluctant to talk about the time he spent inside jail. At the time, he was preparing to get his elder daughter admitted to a school at Kovalam, a few minutes drive from the village. His younger daughter was 8 months old then. When he was arrested, the family was left with no breadwinner, no income. His wife, mother and brother pitched in, and ensured the girl got through. Even after he was let out on conditional bail, he couldn't go to work for a month, Anand recalls.

It's a tight-knit community, but fissures appeared recently after a youth from the village was accused of murdering a man in another village. This incident led to the locals splitting into two factions, but elders brokered peace recently, pointing out that it was essential for the greater good of the village that they remain united, as nearly every family is dependent on the sea and on each other for their livelihood.

Boats of different colours – about 35 motorised fibre boats and 20 catamarans – are lined up along the beach. The locals use tractors to pull their boats high up onto the sand, since sea erosion has destroyed the once-naturally sloping shelf.

New plant

Erosion is only likely to get worse. While granting coastal regulation zone clearance earlier this year for the 400 MLD plant, the Expert Appraisal Committee of the Environment Ministry recommended that the plant be constructed further inland, as the project site is located in CRZ-III and CRZ-IV (inter-tidal zone) as per the Coastal Zone Management Plan.

This would entail the chopping down of a large number of casuarina trees, as had happened with the first plant. “When this second plant comes up, our future will become even more of a question mark,” says Jegan. “Already, we are not able to net enough fish. We have to go deep into the sea now, 15 km, perhaps even more. Earlier, we used to get fish within 5 km.”

The villagers say more than 50 varieties of fish used to be found in the vicinity, but now various species are disappearing. “We used to find prawns earlier in plenty, for about 8-9 months a year,” Damodaran points out. “After the plant was commissioned, the shrimp have vanished.”

While their traditional livelihood comes under increasing threat, the villagers see no alternatives emerging. “If they had given us the jobs they promised, we wouldn’t struggle so much,” says Anand, as he plays with his daughters. These days, he says, going out to sea is a lottery. If there is a good catch, he earns about ₹200-₹300; his dream is being able to earn around ₹15,000 a month, as he once used to.

“When the other plant comes up, if they give us permanent jobs, we will go and work there,” he says. “The government should at least keep its promise. If they give one government job for each family here, our future will be secure... because see what has happened to our goddess, the sea. It has been destroyed.”

Unkept promises continue to haunt him, and others. “The company is now employing just five people from our village, chosen by lottery, to do gardening work,” says Damodaran. “But there are a lot of graduates in this village. We were the ones who helped the company build the plant here, doing mechanical jobs, masonry work, carrying large pipes... what do we have to show for it? Nothing. The bare minimum we are asking for is to give us the promised land.”

An elderly man, listening to the conversation, butts in. “When they were setting up the plant, the government official said, for the benefit of all the people, you should even be ready to give your blood. They wanted our blood,” he says. “And they took it. But they gave us nothing in return.”

“So many promises,” says Damodaran. “They made so many promises that we were stupid enough to believe. Not even worth the paper they were written on...”

(*This essay is from a National Geographic Society and Out of Eden Walk journalism workshop*)