

From a Healthy Normal to a Deadly Normal Report of a Public Hearing on Industrial Disasters in Ennore



1 January, 2024. 10.45 a.m. to 1.30 p.m.
Venue: Ennore Vyaparigal Sangha Thirumana Mandapam
Organised by: Ennore Makkal Paathukaappu Kuzhu

Introduction

Since December 2023, Ennore has been in the news for all the wrong reasons -- floods, CPCL oil spill and a toxic gas leak from Coromandel International Ltd (CIL). After each such disaster, the government is quick to assure and the media to report that things have returned to normal. However, these sensational events and the preoccupation with the return of normalcy hides the violent everyday ecological depredations that impact health of local residents adversely.

The recent gas leak of 26 December 2023, has been traumatic for Ennore residents; many are still unable to sleep at night for fear of a repeat of that night's incident. Women have been vocal in calling for a healthy and secure living environment and have been underscoring the impossibility of co-existing with a toxic, explosion hazard at a stone's throw from their homes. Their long-standing demand has been for a normal that is healthy, and not the perverse normal that they are condemned to return to after every oil spill, gas leak, explosion or coal ash discharge.

Ennore communities feel that their pain and loss are not taken as seriously as that of others in other, more privileged parts of Chennai, and that government agencies are quick to downplay the depth of impact caused by everyday pollution and by extreme climate and pollution events. Their fears of having to live next to hazardous facilities and of the recurrence of a Bhopal-like incident have never been addressed. On the contrary, industrial zoning has been reduced to a reckless ritual where toxic, hazardous installations have been permitted to come up near residential areas, and vice versa.

About a week has passed since the disastrous gas leak (details below). Local residents lament the fact that nobody has visited them to enquire after their well-being. This has left a deep impact and is a cause of palpable resentment, as they sense that the government's response would have been different had their social status been different. The government's response to their attempts to draw attention to their fears and trauma has been heavy-handed. Instead of engaging with the recently traumatised residents with empathy, the government has chosen to criminalise the local community's calls for justice and a safe living environment – 18 residents are faced with criminal charges, including attempt to murder, for highlighting their plight through peaceful protest.

In order to make themselves heard and to place on record their experiences not merely of the gas leak and oil spill, but also of the perverted normal of everyday life in Ennore, the *Ennore Makkal Paathukaappu Kuzhu* (Ennore People's Protection Committee) – a campaign front bringing together representatives of all 32 villages/localities in the Ennore / Ernavur region – organised a Citizens' Public Hearing (PH) with the below-mentioned as members of the PH

Committee:

1. Justice (Retd) K. Kannan, Punjab & Haryana High Court – Chairperson
2. Adv. D. Nagasaila, Madras High Court
3. Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran, Academic
4. Kavitha Muralidharan, Journalist
5. Vaishnavi P., Labour Activist /Journalist

Site Visit

Two of us – Justice Kannan and Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran – were taken on a “Toxic Tour” of north Chennai and Ennore by K. Saravanan and Nityanand Jayaraman of Save Ennore Creek Campaign. The other panelists are familiar with this terrain.

From the port-induced erosion that has swallowed vast tracts of inhabited land in Thiruvottiyur - Ennore to the normalised siting of hazardous installations cheek-by-jowl with residential areas, the violence and discrimination inherent in industrialisation becomes apparent. In Ernavur, we saw how the government had re-zoned a plot of land from “Hazardous use” to “Primary Residential” to build tenements to house 38,000 persons from Economically Weaker Sections. The buildings are at a stone’s throw from the chimney stack of an under-construction coal-fired thermal power plant – a perfect recipe for disaster and conflict in the years to come if the plant is actually commissioned.

From the VNC Bridge spanning the Ennore estuary, we could faintly see two functioning power plant complexes through the haze caused by dense white smoke spewing out of the chimneys of the North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS) and the NTPC-owned Vallur power plant to the west. The smog was so dense that the pollution from the stack was barely visible. On transmission towers – we were told they were built illegally – erected squarely within the river, we saw more than 8 apparently distressed pelicans that were visibly coated in thick oil that weighed down on their flying propensities.

We drove along the Ash Pipeline bridge and saw vast tracts of wetland that are buried under coal ash – ranging in depth from 1 to 7 feet, according to a Joint Expert Committee report submitted to the Hon’ble National Green Tribunal (NGT). We were informed that the NGT’s July 2022 judgment directing TANGEDCO and the Government of Tamil Nadu to prepare and execute a DPR for remediation of coal ash-contaminated areas in a time-bound manner has not been complied with.

We also visited Seppakkam, an unfortunate village whose hapless residents have been condemned to live in the shadow of a towering, sprawling coal ash pond where decades of ash from NCTPS has been dumped. If the dyke breaches – and that is a possibility as a technical

team has warned that the structural integrity is weak – the magnitude of the disaster will be prodigious and devastating.

We also saw Coromandel's fertiliser facility, and the screened-off section on the seaward side of the road below which the ammonia pipeline that developed the disastrous leak runs. The facility has a 12,500 MT ammonia storage tank. The areas due west, southwest, northwest and north of the tank are densely populated.

The Public Hearing

The Public Hearing was conducted in an orderly fashion and ran from 11 a.m. to 1p.m. at the *Ennore Vyabarigal Sangam Thirumana Mandapam* which was reportedly offered free of cost as the Ennore merchants are also affected persons and part of the struggle for justice. More than 15 women spoke on various aspects of life in Ennore and about the incidents (gas leak and oil spill) of the past month. A media briefing was conducted at the end of the hearing, and media and the people gathered there were intimated that a report of the proceedings and our observations/ recommendations would be prepared shortly and sent to authorities concerned.



Lalitha, VOC Nagar



Monisha, Periyakuppam



Velankanni, Murugappa Nagar



Rizwana, VOC Nagar

Coromandel Gas Leak – Official version

The only available official version is the TNPCB proceedings of 27.12.2023. Key points from the proceedings are:

- CIL is a fertiliser facility that uses Ammonia to manufacture Ammonium Phosphate Potash Sulphate (APPS).
- CIL has a 12,500 MT ammonia storage tank onsite, and has separate Consents to Operate under Air and Water Act for storage tank and APPS manufacture.
- Ammonia for the plant is imported via Ennore Minor Port about 2.5 km due east of the plant, and conveyed in liquid form at -33 degree Celsius and under high pressure.
- At 11.45 p.m. on 26 December, 2023, the unit observed a drop in pressure in the ammonia pipeline indicating a possible leak of ammonia.
- TNPCB was intimated 1 hour later at around 12.45 a.m. by phone, and TNPCB officials arrived at 2.15 a.m.
- The company claims to have brought the leak under control within 20 minutes.
- Levels of Ammonia at the material gate [to the west of the source] was 28 ppm at the time of the leak. [***Note:** The material gate is crosswind, not downwind of the source.]
- Unit was alerted by police of distress among residents of Periakuppam, Chinnakuppam and “a few other villages.”
- TNPCB measured ammonia levels in ambient air at a number of locations at 3 a.m. to 3.40 a.m. (> 3 hours after the leak). Barring the material gate sample which was 3 ppm, as against 24-hour standard of 0.57 ppm, all other samples returned with 0 reading.
- Seawater sample returned with 49 mg/L ammonia against a marine effluent discharge standard of 5 mg/L [***Note:** Seawater had 10 times more ammonia than industrial wastewater is permitted to have].
- The unit stopped operation of APPS plant but continued to operate the sulphuric acid plant.
- TNPCB issued directions to be complied with before reopening of plant.

Coromandel Gas Leak – People’s Version

Coromandel, locally referred to interchangeably as Parry company, is a repeat offender, and the leak of 26 December may have been the worst to date but was not the first.

- Various people appear to have been alerted by friends or family, either over phone or by neighbours knocking at their doors around midnight and after.
- Assailed by the pungent odour of ammonia, they gathered their children and left in the clothes they were sleeping in with no sense of direction or destination. People appeared to have followed others before them and ended up fleeing to the south towards Burma Nagar (Annai Sivagami Nagar) using whatever means they had at their disposal.
- There was already a heavy crowd gathered at Burma Nagar which was proceeding further south. The odour at this location too was quite strong. Many vomited, and some fainted.
- At no point was there any warning or alarm from the company.

- No instructions were given as to what should be done. No ambulance or any form of transport had been arranged. It was the police that came about 45 minutes after the incident that did it by requisitioning ambulance and bus, and facilitated the admission of the serious cases in hospital.
- The shock of being rudely woken up at midnight and of having to run for one's life gathering one's loved ones was traumatic, and this day will be remembered as a Black Night (Karuppu Iravu).
- 55 residents were hospitalised and at least 11 had been in intensive care. Even after returning home, residents find it difficult to breathe normally.
- Many officials have come since but none has bothered to meet the people and enquire about their welfare. "They come. They go into the company. They do something covertly. They leave. We have no idea what they have done, whom they met or what they spoke about," one woman said.

"Just imagine. It is midnight, and you are in deep sleep. You get up and run. You don't know where to run. We ran without a destination. That night was a black night. This leak happened from a pipe that was under water. We could easily infer that much of the toxicity was absorbed by water by the sight of the fish that died and washed up ashore. If the leak had happened over dry land, we would have died like the fish."

-- Shajitha, Kattukuppam

Testimonies – the deadly normal

Woman after woman spoke about the Ennore of the yesteryears with deep fondness and nostalgia. They recounted memories of bathing and playing in the waters, of the bounty of sea and land, of the abundant and tasty groundwater in Chinnakuppam. "The Ennore I remember was a beautiful, resource-rich land, with marshlands, a refuge for all kinds of birds. Now we are surrounded by polluting industries, and there is pollution everywhere, even inside us," said Shajitha, a resident of KH Road, Kattukuppam.

Ennore's defining element is water – the Bay of Bengal to the east, and the backwaters of the Kosasthalai River sprawling to the west and northwards. Water binds the community. "Agriculture is slowly being killed on land. But Ennore depends on protein from the sea – sea agriculture. The fishers of this region toil hard to bring us fish that is the primary source of protein in this area. When they are hurt, so are we," said Rizwana, a medical student and resident of VOC Nagar.

Recounting the chronology of environmental degradation in the area, several speakers pointed to Madras Refineries Ltd (now CPCL) as a persistent source of oil pollution from the 1970s, the Ennore Foundries (Ashok Leyland) as a source of toxic black sandy dust, the power plants for their flyash and hot water.

Respiratory disorders, and their knock-on effects on other body organs including the heart, were a repeated concern. “The air is laced with sulphur. Metals like silver are quickly oxidised and turn black very soon. If that is the fate for hard metals, imagine what the air is doing to our lungs. I’m 40 years old. I have a 6-month old child. I took the child to the doctor and was told that the child’s lungs are not developed. How can that be? The baby’s lungs have been hurt because I breathed polluted air. In our neighbourhoods, nebulisers are mandatory for children and adults,” said Monisha, a young mother from Periakuppam.

Speakers pointed out that ill-health in Ennore was normalised, and that doctors confronted with complaints of respiratory or heart ailments dismissively told patients that such ailments are to be expected when they live in Ennore in the vicinity of polluting industries. Many lamented the bleak future facing their children. One young woman spoke ominously about her fears for the future. Vadivukarasi of Valluvar Nagar recounts: “When my baby was 15 days old, they kept it in an “ice box.” I asked them why, and they said it was because of respiratory problems. How can a 15-day old baby have respiratory problems, and then the problem will never go away. Some children may get better after 5 years of age as immunity develops. Others do not. There are so many that are on Derifrin tablet.”

The gas leak and oil spill of December 2023 are merely an extreme case of an otherwise routine occurrence. Fisherwomen from Kattukuppam talked about the persistent release of oil from CPCL into the Ennore river, and how that affects fish and fishers. There have been instances where oil discharge has been so heavy that fishers have blocked the Buckingham Canal with sand-bags. People from Thazhankuppam, VOC Nagar, Periakuppam and Chinnakuppam said similar things about the routine ammonia and sulphur pollution from Coromandel. They said the Pollution Control Board was dysfunctional and wondered if they had any relevance at all.

While most people spoke about the gas leak, and unanimously called for closure of the polluting unit, one woman who was badly affected by the oil spill also shared her story.

“We were already badly affected by floods after the flood waters entered our homes. To make things worse, this oil. My child has been badly affected because of the oil pollution, and has been suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting. I took my child to the hospital. That 12 kg child is now weighing only 7 kg. My child is everything.” Shobana, 3rd Street, Shakti Ganapathi Nagar, Ernavur.

Testimonies – Gas Leak

“The company says the gas leaked only for 2 minutes. But in 2 minutes if so much damage was done, if it had leaked for 10 minutes, our village would have been destroyed.” -- Kuppulakshmi, Nettukuppam

“It has been six days. Still nobody has come. They shame us saying we vomited because we were drunk. Tell me sir, can a child be drunk? Children and adults are traumatised by the incident and living in fear. But they have filed a case saying we tried to hit the staff. We can barely breathe. How would we have the strength to attack people? – Subathra, Periakuppam

“In all these years, we have faced many natural disasters – tsunami and floods. But even in the worst of the natural disasters, Ennore did not suffer. It is these man-made disasters – oil spill and gas leak – that are hurting us.” -- Shajitha, KH Road, Kattukuppam, Ennore

“The government must decide whether it wants us to live or the companies. If they want these companies to operate here, they should bomb us or release some deadly gas and finish us off. We do not want this company. This company should be closed down.”

“They have filed criminal cases against our men who regulated the spontaneous protest of people outside the factory. Let them arrest all of us, if they dare.”

“Let them not underestimate us. We are determined that the factory should not be allowed to reopen. If they think the Sterlite protest was big, this will become four times bigger.” – Ranjith (name changed), Ennore.

“People have spoken about respiratory problems. But they have not said that women in Ennore have difficulty in conceiving. They say that the embryo growth is compromised. I have been married for 4 years. I have spent 3.5 lakhs to bear a child. After much difficulty, I now have a child. On that night, I carried my 40-day child and ran from here to Minjur (15 km). To save this child that I have borne with such difficulty, I say that we don’t need this company here. We want a next generation. The company is not needed.” – Lalitha, VOC Nagar

“Even in Israel-Gaza and Ukraine, people are warned and are asked to get out of harm’s way. In Ennore, they let out the gases without warning.” -- Vadivukarasi, Valluvar Nagar.

“We are working hard, we are capable of living on our own. We only need a safe environment to live. People here will not have retirements, because we die before 60 years of age. Here the danger is 4 to 5 times the level in Bhopal. To find an alternative to fertilisers is not our job, we don’t need this fertiliser industry. We are united to protest for its closure.” Riazuddin, Ennore

Panel’s Observations

Seven things stand out in the analysis of the last month’s happenings based on the testimonies of the residents of Ennore and what has transpired through press media.

1. Ennore’s visibly abused environment speaks of a long history of neglect, discrimination and governmental apathy. While the oil spill and the gas leak have been the triggers of the recent wave of discontent, people’s testimonies provide abundant evidence of the deadly nature of the ‘normal’, everyday life they have been forced to endure for decades.
2. The oil spill and the gas leak, particularly the gas leak and the fear for life (*uyir bayam*) triggered by it, have deeply traumatised the local residents to the point that mental counselling may well be warranted for some of the more severely affected people, particularly children.
3. The response of the government, especially by filing cases against those who are protesting to get the government to acknowledge their fear for their lives, exposes the administration’s stark lack of empathy with the suffering people. This exposes the chasm

dividing the government from the sentiments of people and does not bode well for democracy.

4. Offsite emergency response plans are not in the public domain. They ought to be. Both CPCL and CIL failed to do even the minimum required to safeguard lives, property and the environment, and have instead invested in managing optics and downplaying the disaster.
5. Lack of transparency and failure to disclose the complete facts of what caused the leak and what steps were taken to arrest it has only heightened suspicions of a coverup and strengthened the belief that the polluters enjoy total immunity from any form of punitive action.
6. CIL and CPCL are both criminally liable for their abject negligence in both causing the gas leak and oil spill respectively, but also in their tardy response to it.
7. North Chennai is an exemplary case study in master-planning disasters. With so many hazardous industries located adjacent to primary residential areas, even minor industrial mishaps can have devastating human consequences. Every one of the 21 speakers insisted that the polluting Coromandel facility should be permanently closed.

The filing of cases against peaceful protestors is in stark contrast with the state's collegial relationship with the polluters CPCL and CIL. In both the latter cases, absolute liability is the legal norm that shall be attached to the polluters for causing harm to lives and the environment; curiously, the government has failed to initiate criminal action despite evidence of criminal negligence. The government's inability to appreciate the residents' fear of living alongside a dangerous facility is cause of deep resentment towards the government – a resentment that transcends party loyalties among residents.

Recommendations

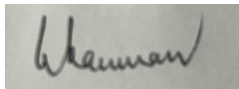
1. **Acknowledge hurt and loss:** The government should engage with the survivors of the gas leak and those traumatised by the incident, and express their sincerity by:
 - Immediately announcing an interim relief to affected persons. People have been clear that they do not want money, but the government should grant this unilaterally and recover it from the company.
 - Withdrawing the criminal cases against the 18 residents.
2. **Medical assessment/Medical assistance:** Conduct a comprehensive health checkup by an independent team of doctors to assess the short term and long term impact of the exposure for those who have been exposed to the gas on 26th night and provide treatment including counselling for trauma healing. The services of the counsellors should be made available to the community for whatever time period that is professionally assessed as required by the counsellors. The cost of the treatment should be borne by the polluter.
3. **Regional Health survey:** Given the widespread ill health due to environmental pollution, the state government should carry out a comprehensive health survey among affected

communities.

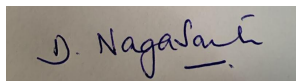
4. **Credible action against polluters:** File criminal cases against CPCL and CIL for reckless negligence leading to harm to human health and environment.
5. **Transparency:**
 - Make public the offsite emergency preparedness plan submitted by CPCL and CIL.
 - Immediately publish the government's inspection report on the gas leak.
6. **Shut down Coromandel International Ltd:** Respect people's sentiments and fears; abate the nuisance and do not permit the Coromandel factory to reopen given the proximity of the hazardous installation to densely populated neighbourhoods.
7. **Implement the law:** The gross and visible pollution in Ennore indicates that environmental laws are not implemented sincerely. This may be due to staff shortage and/or lack of accountability of staff at TNPCB and other regulatory agencies. Be that as it may, non-compliance of the law is unacceptable and legal enforcement by regulators should be ensured.
8. **Comply with NGT order on wetland restoration:** Take urgent and credible action on the National Green Tribunal's July 2022 order in OA 8 of 2016 directing the government of Tamil Nadu to notify the full extent of the Ennore backwaters as a special wetland and take measures to holistically rehabilitate and rejuvenate it.

Signed:

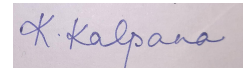
Justice (Retd) K. Kannan



Adv. D. Nagasaila



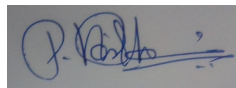
Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran



Kavitha Muralidharan



P. Vaishnavi



Photos of the recent Ammonia Gas leak in Ennore









Gas leak accident patient list

S.No.	Name	Age	Sex	Bed no.	Chief complaint	Diagnosis	Plan of action
1	Kalaiselvi	48	F	E3	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
2	Vachala	46	F	E5	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
3	Salacha	45	F	E6	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
4	Rajakumari	45	F	E10	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
5	Karupayee	75	F	E11	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
6	Velayee	56	F	E12	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
7	Selvi	50	F	E14	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
8	Radha	55	F	E15	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
9	Saraswathi	55	F	E16	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
10	Nalli	45	F	E19	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
11	Sankaradevi	37	F	E20	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
12	Nayagam	55	F	E21	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
13	Kasi	64	F	E22	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
14	Venilla	35	F	E23	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
15	Selvi	52	F	E25	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
16	Elamathi	42	F	E28	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
17	Masilamani	70	M	E32	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
18	Govindham	47	M	E33	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
19	Suriya	26	M	E34	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
20	Selvamani	50	M	E block	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
21	Suba	32	F	Went home	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
22	Vadivel	43	M	107	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
23	Vijayamoorthi	35	F	108	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
24	Vanitha	38	F	110	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
25	Kavitha	42	F	207	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
26	Kumar	54	M	P2	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
27	Punitha	70	F	P1	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
28	Vijaya	55	F	307	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
29	Moorthi	56	M	304	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
30	Santhanam	58	M	CT-ICU	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	Stable
	Elachi	60	F	CT-ICU	Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
					Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2
					Breathlessness, giddiness, throat irritation, eye irritation	NH3 Poisoning	O2



இறந்து கரை ஒதுங்கும்
மீன்கள்.

இடம் தாழங்குப்பம்
கடற்கரை

27.12.23 இரவு 10.30

Photos of the recent Oil spill in Ennore















Scenes of the on-going protest



