

# Estuarine and Marine Ecology: People's response to threats from proposed elevated expressway and waste dumping<sup>1</sup>

Siddharth Sareen

## Description

Chennai is the metropolitan capital of Tamil Nadu, one of four major South Indian states. The area in question is the Chennai coastline, stretching from one end of the East Coast Road at Thiruvanmiyur, south of the city, to the northern end of the Marina beach. The conflict discussed is concerned with two issues, both centred around Besant Nagar, an uptown residential locality in south-east Chennai, and the favourite beachfront for the city's young and old alike, popularly known as Elliot's Beach. This is among the world's longest continuous strips of beach, and just north of Elliot's Beach, is met by the Adyar river at its estuarine mouth. While the Adyar river today, a shadow of its former self with a dirty trickle of water remaining, resembles a drain more than anything else, it is surrounded on both sides by the thick wooded campus of the Theosophical Society, which among other things, houses one of the world's oldest banyan trees.

This estuary is home to much rich biodiversity, despite development projects such as an Information Technology park in the area, and the entire coastline itself is one of the places where the Olive Ridley turtle, a vulnerable species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, comes to nest annually. At the approach to the estuary stands the remnant of Broken Bridge, which once connected Elliot's Beach with Foreshore Estate further north along Santhome beach. The stretch in question includes at least three religious shrines, hundreds of fishermen and their traditional community dwellings for many generations now. The sea is not only a source of livelihood but is sacred to these people.

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<sup>1</sup> as of Apr 2010

## Map



<http://www.mapsofindia.com>



<http://www.chennaiguide.com>

## The conflict

This entire stretch of beach is littered with garbage, only part of it coming from the 'kuppams', or fishing community habitation along the beach. Most of it is brought and dumped from elsewhere, notably by a private contractor hired by Sangeetha, a restaurant chain, who does so on a weekly basis. The estuary area in particular is extremely sensitive and ecologically valuable and a number of volunteers have come forward from the city youth and the local community to protest this abuse of their public space.

Another related development is a proposed elevated expressway to be built along the entire length of beachfront from Thiruvanmiyur at the south end, as an extension of the East Coast Road, right up to the northern end of the Marina beach. This has been pushed by the Chennai Corporation with feasibility studies conducted by Wilbur Smith Associates, a consultant whose services have been regularly used by the government on past occasions as well. These studies are controversial, have been found to suffer from inaccuracies and unsubstantiated claims, and even an outright lie to the effect that public hearings and a consultation meeting were held despite there being no documented records of the same maintained. A coastal protection group comprised mainly of residents from the beachside localities has come out in protest against such development, claiming it will ruin the sea view, not address the transportation objective of reducing congestion in the long run, and is unsustainable ecologically for the marine and estuarine life (including the Olive Ridley sea turtle), socially for the number of displaced and the livelihoods lost, and economically for the enormous expenditure which will cater only to an elite minority, primarily of private motorised vehicle users. The final report is now under consideration, and if passed, will result in the project commencing.

## **Current status**

[Author's note: The details in this article are from April 2010. The elevated expressway project was scrapped in Sept 2011.]

For the past six months, youth volunteers have carried out a series of beach clean-ups and celebrations of responsible use of the public space, the most significant two with all-round community participation and turnouts in the hundreds happening in January 2010. Subsequent to this, youth volunteers get together every Sunday afternoon to clean up this stretch of beach, but the dumping continues.

As for the proposed elevated expressway, there has been a series of events organised around it, ranging from music concerts to awareness drives, as well as consultations and lobbying. The protestors include fishing community representatives, residents' welfare association members across localities, youth and other stakeholders. Things are likely to come to a head if work commences despite such active opposition, especially as several chinks in the government armour have appeared, meaning they do not quite have their tracks cleared. However, it seems likely that it is only a matter of time before the Corporation will deem it the right opportunity politically to begin work on the expressway. Whether the environmental impact assessment report clears the project, and how the conflict plays out in court if it comes up as a case, will determine to a large extent how this situation evolves in the future.

## **Highest and lowest points**

The conflict relating with keeping the beach clean had a peak on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2010, with a trough immediately thereafter. Volunteers built a monument out of the waste they had collected, only to find an equal amount dumped on the same stretch of beach that very week. The feeling is generally that persistence pays, but the vibe of community participation and bonding around the issue has been strongest during events organised around performing arts with cultural overtones and thematic elements interwoven.

Coming to the proposed elevated expressway, there has been a keen following of each development. A seminar at the Madras Institute of Development Studies on a related theme (examining the Cooum river), as well as an 'unsponsored by corporations' concert banning the elevated expressway, have been high points. The trough is yet to come, although a final feasibility report that does not respond at all to alternatives recommended was a predictable disappointment.

In terms of conflict resolution, both sides are not diametrically opposed as much as the one abusing open-access resources, or intending to, is not incentivised to reduce the negative externalities resulting from its actions, while the volunteers are attempting to coerce it to see reason. The outline of an industry-state complex emerges, either in a complicit manner (as in the case of the proposed elevated expressway) or through lack of regulation (waste dumping practices).

## **Chronology of main events**

The milestones have already been sequentially mentioned. The protest against the proposed elevated expressway has been on for a year now, whereas the beach clean-up is

roughly half as old. However, as community watchdog attempts and environment monitoring, these are continuous efforts, and tend to repeat in cycles over time.

## **The opposing stands**

Chennai Corporation: wants an elevated expressway, to bring more business into the state capital and possibly get kickbacks from commissioning an expensive infrastructure project, and has hired Wilbur Smith Associates to do a feasibility study that will be favourable to attaining this result. They have hired on contract the firm 'Neel Metal Fenalca' for waste management and disposal across the city, and should by rights regulate the dumping of garbage by other hired contractors, which is an illegal activity.

Dumpers/Developers: want to get rid of their waste (or make some quick money off a contract by dumping it cheaply) without having to bear the negative cost of the externality. Developers want to land a contract for building the proposed elevated expressway, in order to increase their profits, and are probably a significant private lobby backing the project to help it get approved.

Volunteers: want to prevent abuse of open access resources and public space, trying to coerce dumpers into bearing the costs of an externality they have caused and taking care of it in a socially and environmentally responsible manner by shouldering a slight economic cost, which would be comparatively less than if the polluter pays principle was enforced for the illegal dumping. They wish to prevent the elevated expressway, which does not give higher return on investment once the environmental and social costs are factored in, and are pushing for investment in public and non-motorised transportation infrastructure, which pays off in all ways in the long run. They are doing their best to mobilise the community, the regulatory authorities and not allow private players to get away with rampant abuse of the system, through community watchdog and environment monitoring efforts.

These are repeating themes in cities, and at this point the potential scenarios are so many that costing them is a exercise with huge scope. Dumping waste is an illegal activity and hence should not be done in any case, since the fine, if enforced, would make it economically unattractive for the firm. The proposed elevated expressway is a more complex issue, but the simple part is that by factoring in the environmental and social costs, it is apparent that it is simply not worth any investment, especially as it will not solve congestion problems in the long run.

## **Scope for dialogue**

The proposed elevated expressway should be scrapped. The same private players can be engaged in a more worthwhile investment plan regarding scaling up of public and non-motorised transportation services and infrastructure by the Chennai Corporation. Waste dumping should be stopped by enforcing punitive measures instituted under law, and an understanding should be arrived at with the dumpers that they are to arrange for a disposal mechanism with Neel Metal Fenalca, whose eventual disposal practices should be carefully regulated and monitored to ensure the process is carried out in a sustainable manner.

New legal, social and institutional instruments would include conflict resolution mechanisms that bring on board all the entities concerned and provide a common platform for engagement, resulting in a legally-binding, mutual-understanding-based outcome that sees them all working in tandem to achieve an optimal scenario.

## Key institutions and people

Nityanand Jayaraman, Corporate Accountability Desk – 9444082401  
Karen Coelho, Madras Institute of Development Studies - 9444954401

## Publications and websites

2009 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change: <http://www.earthsystemgovernance.org/ac2009/index.php?page=papers> (Sareen)

2009 ISA-RC21 Sao Paulo Conference Inequality, Inclusion and the Sense of Belonging (Session 8, conference website now offline, contact author on [sidsareen@gmail.com](mailto:sidsareen@gmail.com))

[www.letsrob.org](http://www.letsrob.org)

The Coastal Protection Group has a members-only list-serve accessible to those who are actively part of the campaign, as it contains some classified information.

## Details of author(s)

Name: Siddharth Sareen  
Institute, if any: Indian Institute of Technology Madras  
Address: Varanasi, India  
Telephone/Mobile number: 8650949749  
Fax  
Email: [sidsareen@gmail.com](mailto:sidsareen@gmail.com)  
Website: <http://zanzi.wordpress.com>

Brief description of association: I lived in Chennai for five years and have been actively involved with various civil society initiatives. I was resident in the neighbourhood localities of Besant Nagar and Adyar, and have been associated with both these issues right from the outset, although with varying degrees of involvement over time, according to the extent time permitted. The details in this article are from April 2010. The elevated expressway project was scrapped in Sept 2011.

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