

TAMIL NADU

When the going gets tough, Chennai's volunteers get going

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While the nature and scale of the disasters these past two Decembers might have been different, one thing remained the same: the quick rallying of individuals and civil society organisations in helping out.

Whether it was forming groups to pass on helpline numbers of government authorities or going out to the streets to pitch in, volunteers have been at the forefront of efforts to help their city get back to normality.

Last year, during the devastating floods, there was a lot more relief work required, said Aruna Subramaniam, trustee, Bhoomika Trust. "We had 10,000 volunteers pass through our community kitchens in 10 days, where 50,000 packets of food a day were being produced. The volunteers' ages ranged from 10 to 75. This year though, the nature of work has been different and we couldn't have the same sort of general call for volunteers. We have been working far more closely with the government, and in collaboration with Chennai Volunteers and Loyola College students. 15 teams have gone out to clear debris and branches from the streets and load it on to the Corporation's vehicles," she said.

A large-scale volunteer team will be mobilised for tree plantation, she said.

This year, the civic body and State government authorities were completely prepared and were coordinating the efforts when it came to volunteer work, said Rinku Mecheri of Chennai Volunteers. "It is more decentralised this year, and the work is happening only where it is required. Also, volunteers have to be adult, alert and responsible for themselves," she said.

Selva Ganapathy, a volunteer with AID India, also said they had been coordinating more with the Corporation this year. "This year's work is more physical and there are more public spaces affected. Since colleges and workplaces opened sooner too, not as many people have been able to come," he said. The organisation has been distributing aid material in areas including Nochikuppam and Nadukuppam and is planning to conduct a survey of damage in slums and provide roofing where needed.

On Sunday, in coordination with the Corporation, their volunteers will be removing debris from zones 12 and 13.

Organisations apart, scores of residents have poured out into the streets and public spaces to help clear areas. Groups of residents are also coming together to plant trees in their localities.

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