

Of men and cyclones

The 'super-cyclone' that hit the coastal Indian State of Orissa has left in its wake untold miseries — and lessons

The dead were the luckiest of all. This is the recurrent feeling one gets as one walks past the huddled figures of men, women and children who survived the 'Mother of All Cyclones', as one commentator labelled it. Most dead bodies were 'disposed of', yet you could sense their presence, in the constant refrain from the survivors: "Why did we survive?" They do not mourn the dead, they mourn the living.

That was the most traumatic effect of the 'super-cyclone' that hit the coast of Orissa, India on 29 October: not the loss of livelihoods, food, shelter, clothing or even close relations — it was the loss of the will to live, perhaps a cumulative effect of all the other losses.

The official statistics provide reassuringly low figures and it is difficult to find two sources agreeing on any number, even after allowing for wide margins. Under the circumstances, suffice to say that Orissa, 'the domicile of gods', as a tourist brochure puts it, found itself turned into a purgatory when actually dealing with gods.

The eight coastal districts which have been affected by the cyclone were the most productive by any standard, and are rightly regarded as the 'rice bowl of Orissa'. The super-cyclone has turned everyone's attention away from another cyclone that had preceded it a couple of weeks ago. It did enough damage of its own to seriously affect dozens of villages in Ganjam district.

In fact, the counting of the dead from the previous cyclone had not yet been completed before the second one struck. The first cyclone took a toll of 1,000 human lives and 50,000 livestock, besides washing away an entire crop of paddy and

other crops. Between them, the two cyclones have laid waste the entire coast of Orissa.

From a fisheries perspective, the Bay of Bengal off the Northern Orissa coast is the most productive on the east coast of India. A wide variety of traditional fishing crafts and an eclectic mixture of fishing communities characterized the marine and estuarine fisheries in Orissa. Bengali fishermen dominated the northern parts of the coastline, migrant-settlers from Bangladesh fished the waters to the north of Paradeep, fishers from Andhra Pradesh dominated the Paradeep-Puri belt, and Telugu-speaking Orissa fisherfolk accounted for the southern parts. The Oriya people were not much interested in eating sea fish ("Too salty!" they would explain), were not seafaring people either, and until recently, were not bothered if people from other regions pitched tents en masse right in the middle of towns like Puri, Paradeep and Astaranga. The Mahanadi's deltaic region was lush with green vegetation, some of the most beautiful mangrove forests, mostly untouched by human activity, and numerous creeks lined by magnificent trees on both sides, which carried fishermen from villages like Jambo and Kharinasi all the way to the river mouth. Now, not a single tree remains, nor, for that matter, do large sections of the villages themselves. Mountains of mud have covered the villages and the neighbouring agricultural fields.

Bustling town

Before the cyclone, Paradeep was a bustling, — and not a very exciting — industrial town, with a PPL (Paradeep Phosphates Ltd.) and a PPT (Paradeep Port Trust) (pronounced ppi-ppi-yell and ppi-ppi-tee locally) which accounted for most of the employment in the area.

Paradeep is also the biggest fishing port in Orissa. Along with Chandipur-on-Sea in Balasore district, it is the base for all mechanized boats in Orissa (and often an emergency base for trawlers from Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, in times of cyclones).

Besides, a large number of fishermen from Andhra Pradesh migrate to Paradeep or Puri annually in September and stay there fishing until January. These fishermen often take their families along with them, and live in makeshift tents on the beaches, and are accepted as a part of the milieu.

Singiri Narayana, who was from Subbampeta, near Kakinada, was one such fisherman who got caught in the cyclone with his family. He went to Orissa in September and the fishing was not good for the next two months. He owned an FRP (fibre-reinforced plastic) boat, on which there was an outstanding loan of over Rs.100,000. The traders in Paradeep advance huge amounts of money to the fishermen in return for their catches, and Narayana had obtained Rs. 50,000 from a trader. The fishing operations were just sufficient to buy fuel for the next trip and to pay wages to the crew, and Narayana had begun to despair about repayments.

On Thursday, 28 October, the fishermen could sense that a cyclone was brewing, and berthed their boats in the new fishing harbour, which, though constructed nearly five years ago, became functional only this year. Cyclones, one must remember, are a part and parcel of life in this part of the world, and are often no more than a nuisance. Normally, three or four cyclones hit the Orissa coast in a year. The real big ones often manage to go past Orissa and hit Bangladesh. Narayana had been caught in a few cyclones while fishing at sea, and though scary, they were not something that he dreaded. He made suitable arrangements to anchor the boat safely in the harbour and returned to Sandakhud, the fishing village of Paradeep, where he lived in a rented house with his wife and four children.

“Even if there had been a warning on the radio, it would not have been much help because it would be in Oriya,” he says. There was a cyclone warning out anyway.

The official cyclone warning wing did notice a storm brewing and sent out a warning notice to all districts. It is said that the devices for measuring the wind speed malfunctioned, which resulted in the department not being able to assess the intensity of the cyclone. Whatever happened, it was treated as just another cyclone. The district administrations had been alerted as a matter of course, and they apparently did whatever they were expected to do. That the cyclone ultimately destroyed Bhubaneswar, which was a full 60 km away from the sea, indicates that it would have been practically impossible to have evacuated the entire population. And the fisherfolk themselves were quite clear that they would not have been evacuated because cyclones were a ‘common occurrence’, and they stood to lose more by going away than by staying on. The disaster was almost inevitable.

Kodanda, a boy of 15, was one of the crew members who remained behind on his boat to keep watch. The fishing boat is the most important possession of a fisherman, and under no circumstances would he sleep undisturbed without knowing his boat was safe. As Kasulu, another migrant fisherman from Uppada, put it, “Our most important concern during the cyclone was the boats and how they fared.” The first thing the fishermen attempted to do immediately after the cyclone subsided was to rush to the fishing harbour.

By the morning of Friday, 29 October, the winds and the rain started — and continued for the next 48 hours without slowing down once. The house tops were the first to go, and houses started crumbling before the very eyes of the people. Large trees were uprooted and carried away. The gales were so forceful that a crew member on Narayana’s boat still nurses the wounds he received when he was carried away by the gales and flung on to the bushes nearby. Things started getting worse by the afternoon. The waves were breaking almost on top of the houses — and, within a few hours, not much of the village remained.

Worst effects

Meanwhile, Kodanda was experiencing the worst effects of the cyclone: the boat repeatedly rose high up into the air and

fell back with a crash. It was obvious that it would not survive any more impacts and would destroy whoever was on it.

Kodanda prepared to jump into the water to reach the shore. Ramana, who was keeping vigil on the next boat, jumped into the water and was immediately hurled against the rocks and crushed to death. Kodanda was luckier, and he reached the shore with much difficulty. From the harbour, it was about 5 km to the town, and walking on all fours, it took him about 12 hours to reach the town.

Narayana and family, whose house was destroyed after the first few hours of the cyclone, moved into the nearby temple, which provided sanctuary to hundreds of people. There was not enough space to sit, and everyone was forced to stand for the entire duration they spent in the temple. The kids started crying from hunger. Intense cold added to the general misery.

Meanwhile, water started streaming up, digging channels by the sheer force of its velocity, and pincer-like, encircled the village and destroyed the smaller hamlets on either side of it. Not only have these hamlets vanished altogether, most of the inhabitants too were carried away. "We could see people being washed away, and apart from shouting, there was nothing we could do," Narayana recounts. Sandakhud was lucky as it was located on

an elevated spot (a fact that you would not have noticed at other times), and remained standing like an island, while, all around, the cyclone wreaked its destruction.

Bishnu Pattnaik, an elderly entrepreneur whose small but efficient Oriental Dry Fish Industries was not only a profitable venture, but one which provided inspiration for many other such units to come up in Orissa and elsewhere, had entered into an agreement with an NGO in Cuttack to conduct training for fisherwomen on improved processing methods. He had refurbished the production unit at Sandakhud at a cost of Rs. 50,000 and was returning to Cuttack, when he got stuck in the cyclone, and barely survived the fury of the storm. Now, an empty patch of land remains where Oriental Dry Fish Industries used to be, because it was located right on the beach and must have been the first to go in the tidal wave.

Pangs of hunger

When the cyclone finally relented around the afternoon of Sunday, hunger continued to be the biggest problem: none of the fisherfolk — including the children — had eaten for three days, and there was nothing to eat. People were seen rummaging through what were once their homes to find anything to eat. They found powdered maize in one of the godowns, intended for export from Paradeep Port,

and grabbed whatever they could to eat. In two days, the army rescue boats appeared on the scene, and started relief operations.

Many other villages, in the neighbouring districts were not so lucky. It would be a week or more before any help reached people in Astaranga or Kakatpur blocks of Puri district and doubtless many other districts. Food supplies were airdropped for nearly a month before land routes could be established to several villages. It will be quite a while before electricity is restored in many areas.

The impact of the cyclone was quite widespread — starting just north of Puri, it extended up to the northern reaches of Balasore district, about 200 km of coastline. And it travelled inland up to Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and Baripada, which were quite some distance from the sea. The wind velocities were estimated to have been in excess of 350 km/hour. In all, the cyclone affected eight coastal districts very badly. Erasama block in Jagatsinghpur district, Mahakalpara block in Kendrapara, and Astaranga in Puri are the worst affected.

There were more horrors. And more death (official death toll: 10,000): dead bodies floating by in the creeks, bloated bodies flowing down the Mahanadi river and its various tributaries — a commonplace

incident at Nayagarh fish landing centre, which was itself totally devastated. Four dead bodies lay in Paradeep fishing harbour for three days before somebody noticed them and had them cremated. Hundreds of thousands of dead cattle lay everywhere (official toll: over 400,000). For a few weeks after the cyclone, the dead bodies from everywhere were brought to a central place, piled up, doused in petrol, and funeral pyres lit.

Hundreds fishing boats were lost or damaged, often beyond repair. To Narayana's dismay, he found no traces of his boat. His relatives in Andhra Pradesh managed to reach him after a week, and they helped him get back to Andhra Pradesh — completely washed-out, literally as well as figuratively.

Back in Orissa, people continue to hesitatingly explore their villages, which have turned into mounds of mud. They still huddle together as much as they can, and venture out only in groups. And they tread very carefully indeed: the villages they were born and lived in all their lives do not now exist as they knew them. And there is the constant fear of finding something new, like a dead body: bloated, blackened, and partially eaten — hardly human, or perhaps too human.

Dirty water

Nobody could bring themselves to drink the river water because of the bodies.

Cholera had broken out in many villages in Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur districts. To add to the troubles, winter had set in with a vengeance.

Many people were left with nothing more than the clothes they wore at the time of the cyclone — some lacked even that. Many villages are still inaccessible. Sahana in Astaranga block was reached more than a week after the cyclone. Not a single house remained standing in the village. Some villages in Mahakalpara block no longer exist. What could have happened to the people there is anybody's guess.

Chandrabhaga, near Konark, has another tale to tell: the fishing community consists almost entirely of migrants from Andhra Pradesh, who have lived here for a long time, but they do not have any land rights. The local government wants to develop the beach here into a tourist spot, and have repeatedly evicted the community from their homes and destroyed the dwellings. A couple of years ago, the villagers were given some land to build on and the village shifted its location only recently. The cyclone came just as things were settling into a routine, sweeping away all the houses, and the fishers are again homeless.

The famous beach near Konark, once lined by tall casuarina plantations, is totally denuded of all vegetation, and the Konark lighthouse, which was normally hidden behind thick groves of casuarina, stands naked in the middle of a desert.

The spontaneous gestures of goodwill and co-operation that poured forth from different corners of the country were of great help. Many international and national organizations quickly reached the State and started rehabilitation programmes. Many NGOs banded together and formed task forces to co-ordinate relief efforts. Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Khurda, Balasore and Bhadrak railway stations were besieged by huge bundles of clothes, food and other essential items. And assistance came from the fisherfolk in other States also. NGO workers in Andhra Pradesh reported that even poor households contributed something. Clothes, rice and cooking utensils were donated by many poor

households in the villages. The response from the urban elite was more informed and, hence, more muted.

The administrative machinery is said to have failed, but it was clear that neither the government nor the fishers fully comprehended the magnitude of the impending cyclone. The State's disaster relief wing and the district administrations were prepared to deal with the situation basing their calculations on past experiences. But this cyclone was not like any of the previous ones (the last cyclone of similar intensity can be traced back to 1942, and resulted in the Great Orissa Famine in 1944). Its impact was so vast and the destruction it wrought so complete that everybody was totally taken aback, and it took some time to get their bearings right.

Unfortunately, the people who made up the 'machinery' were themselves affected by the cyclone—rarely did one come across government employees who did not have their families, relations and/or friends caught in the cyclone. Given a similar situation, the consequences would not have been much different in any other State. At the best of times, the inaccessibility of the fishing villages in Orissa is legendary. The basic facilities that the government has at any level are far from adequate to cope with a disaster this huge. The total disruption of roads and communication systems—continuing to this day in many affected areas—made it even more difficult to access many areas. Under these circumstances, discussions with local people indicate, the administration did reasonably well. As for politicians, I should quote a senior leader: "The state elections should be held as scheduled, because there is no provision in the Constitution (of India) to postpone them because of a natural disaster. The people of Orissa want elections right away."

Opposite effect

The moral high ground appropriated by all and sundry at the expense of the 'government machinery' has achieved the exact opposite of what it was intended to do: it helped engender apathy among those who are really concerned and wanted to do something, and the fisherfolk are worse off for it. Stories about

looting of relief materials also helped assuage troubled consciences, as some people decided that there was no point in helping looters.

Reports indicate that the actual looting was no more than a fraction of the assistance received. Maiti, a fisherman-turned-'looter' from Nayagarh, was quite honest: "My kids were starving and so was I. In my position, you would have done the same."

However, things improved quite fast, and the more urgent needs of the people began to be met satisfactorily. Cold and lack of suitable clothing continue to remain problems, but there are indications that most of the people would receive assistance one way or the other.

A few weeks after the cyclone, when those of the boats that were still operational attempted to go fishing, the government declared a ban on all fish sales in the State. The ban, which is in force at the time of writing this article, has crippled the fishing communities yet again. With everything they owned gone with the wind, and their only source of livelihood banned, they are reduced to depending on the generosity of the external agencies for survival. Even if the ban were to be lifted, thousands of fisherfolk would still have to rebuild their livelihoods, and that would take a long time and a lot of money.

Life is resilient, if nothing else. And the fisherman is the best symbol of that. Even as these lines are being written, word has come from Orissa—from Paradeep, to be exact—that fishing operations have started once again, and very good catches were reportedly landing. The Uppada fishermen have got down to business: dozens of boats are being readied for the long journey ahead. They intend to take additional rations, just in case. The fish caught will generally be sold out of the State, so the ban will not affect them. No, they will not take their families this time.

And so it goes on. Life.

This report is by Venkatesh Salagrama of Integrated Coastal Management, an independent NGO based in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, India