

HAM RADIOS TO AID IN CYCLONE RELIEF

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Learning the ropes: The HAM operators use high frequency signals to connect with other operators. Special Arrangement

In the last week of May, hours before Cyclone Yaas made landfall in northern coastal Odisha and battered coastal West Bengal, Ambarish Nag Biswas, secretary of the West Bengal Radio Club (Amateurs Club), got a call from a senior bureaucrat about deployment of some HAM radio operatives in Purba Medinipur district, where the most damage was expected.

Mr. Biswas said it was difficult for the operators who had already positioned themselves in different areas to move to Purba Medinipur.

Communication turns out to be a major challenge during the cyclones and particularly in the Sunderbans with more than 50 inhabited islands located in remote areas — some of them at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal. They remain cut off often for days.

Barrage of cyclones

The State had in the past three years faced four tropical cyclones, Fani (May 2019) , Bulbul (November 2019), Amphan (May 2020) and Yaas (May 2021) and on all occasions the administration had to wait for connection to be restored to assess damage and send relief.

A few months after Yaas, Mr. Nag Biswas got a call from the district administration of the South 24 Parganas to train local youth from the Sunderbans in operating Ham Radio sets. This was to augment the community-based disaster preparedness of the region.

Training locals

“To establish a dedicated wireless communication system at vulnerable areas under the South 24 Parganas district during different disasters, you are requested to train following civil defence volunteers for smooth and effective conduct of the above system,” read a letter dated July 13 by Office of the Controller of the Civil Defence, South 24 Parganas, addressed to Mr. Nag Biswas.

Accordingly, training of 60 volunteers mostly residing in the Sunderbans has started earlier this month.

Dipak Giri, 24, of Patharpratima and Gautam Dinda, 26, of Sagar Island are among those who are undergoing the training. Both recalled the challenges faced in disaster management during cyclone Yaas.

“There was no connectivity in Patharpratima for almost seven days after cyclone Yaas and large parts of the region were inundated due to the ingress of saline water ” Dipak Giri said.

Communication crucial

Gautam Dinda from Sagar Islands, who is also undergoing training, said communication becomes critical in rescuing people in times of cyclone.

“When we are deployed at a flood rescue centre, someone might suddenly fall ill or we may run

out of drinking water. Sometimes the flood rescue centres are also flooded,” Mr. Dinda said.

“For three to four days after the cyclone, there was no connectivity in Sagar and there was nothing we could communicate,” he added.

The administrations of other coastal districts like the North 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur are also in talks with HAM Radio operators to train youth.

Licensed operators

Pashupati Mandal, an expert of HAM Radio technology who is training amateurs operators, said: “After weeks of training, the volunteers have to take an exam by the Ministry of Communication following which one can get the licence to operate the amateur radio device.”

“As this moment, we have about 350 licensed Ham Radio operators under the West Bengal Radio Club,” said Dr. Mandal, principal of the Indian Academy of Communication and Disaster Management.

The HAM operators employ high frequency signals to connect with other operators. The technology comes handy when mobile connectivity is down.

So far, the State government has been engaging HAM operators at the annual Gangasagar pilgrimage on Sagar Island and natural disasters.

The empowerment of local youth to operate the technology will help the State’s disaster preparedness and management, he said.

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