

CYCLONE FANI: WHAT INDIA CAN LEARN FROM ODISHA

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

Twenty years after the vicious Super Cyclone ripped through Odisha (then Orissa), killing more than 10,000 people and 200,000 animals, and destroyed physical infrastructure worth crores (state government estimates), Cyclone Fani, equivalent to a Category 4 hurricane (on the Saffir-Simpson Scale), made landfall at the temple town of Puri on May 3, causing damages in Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Puri, and Khordha districts, killing 38 people in a state of 46 million.

While the destruction of physical properties cannot be contained when a storm of such gigantic proportion crosses a densely-populated landmass, what is striking this time around is the low number of human casualties. The Odisha government which has earned international praise for its magnificent efforts was successful in doing this because -- unlike many other states -- it has not only learned from the 1999 experience but also built a disaster mechanism system based on that.

In the last 20 years, it built 879 multi-purpose cyclone shelters (there were only 23 in 1999) and embankments to stop the saline ingress in case of a storm surge, trained 400 community volunteers, and sanctioned satellite phones for district collectors and set up a digital mobile radio system to ensure seamless connectivity between field officials and the nodal authority.

Once the India Meteorological Department (IMD) sent out an alert about Cyclone Fani five days before the landfall and its exact location, thanks to improved forecasting facilities, the state government evacuated at least 1.2 million people, sent out bulk SMS alerts to coastal communities and fisherfolk, made provisions for medicine, food and drinking water, and even closed down hotels in Puri to ensure that tourists leave the popular destination for safer areas. The central ministries and departments (the National Disaster Management Authority, the National Disaster Management Force, the Indian Navy, and the Indian Air Force) responded in equal measure with personnel and relief material, but central support notwithstanding, the state must be credited for the successful and timely mobilisation of resources.

All Indian states, coastal or otherwise, must take a leaf out of Odisha's book and put in place a responsive disaster management system so that they are not caught unawares when a calamity strikes. For example, as the author of *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh, tweeted recently, India's west coast has to learn from Odisha and start putting evacuation plans in place because increased cyclonic activity in the Arabian Sea is one of the predicted effects of climate change, which is not just affecting the intensity and frequency of disasters across the world but also making them erratic.

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