

CYCLONE GAJA: BEING PREPARED AGAINST EXTREME EVENTS

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[Tamil Nadu was more prepared](#) than before to deal with Cyclone Gaja when it made [landfall between Nagapattinam and Vedaranyam](#) on November 16, but it still took a [toll of at least 45 lives](#). The severe cyclonic storm damaged infrastructure, property and agriculture. Even so, the effort to professionalise disaster management through a dedicated national and State organisation initiated more than 15 years ago appears to be paying off, with bureaucracies acquiring higher efficiency in providing early warning and in mitigating the impact of cyclones. The National Cyclone Risk Mitigation Project started by the Ministry of Home Affairs has been working to reduce the impact of such catastrophic events on Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, classified as States with higher vulnerability; most western coastal States are in the next category. However, there is a lot to be done to upgrade infrastructure and housing in coastal districts to meet higher standards of resilience in an era of extreme weather events. The lead taken by the State Disaster Management Authority in issuing a stream of alerts ahead of Gaja helped coastal residents move to camps and adopt safety measures. The active measures taken by the State after the cyclone, notably to clear roads, remove fallen trees and repair power infrastructure and communications, helped restore some stability. In its destructive exit path, the cyclone has affected some southern districts, felling tens of thousands of trees and also 30,000 electricity poles along the coast. It also hit residents in some central Kerala districts.

Tamil Nadu's political parties have acted in a mature manner and kept partisan criticism from getting in the way of relief and rehabilitation after Gaja. This is in contrast to some earlier instances, such as the Chennai flood of 2015, when the distribution of relief became politicised. Today, if any pressure on the government machinery is necessary, it is to secure without delay the financial relief of 10 lakh that has been promised for families of the dead, compensation for lost crops, trees and livestock, provision of emergency health intervention and rehabilitation assistance to rebuild lives. The larger question, of course, is whether the coastal States have equipped themselves for an even bigger event, such as the super cyclone that hit Odisha in 1999 that killed about 10,000 people. Even with far fewer casualties, Cyclone Phailin in 2013 required reconstruction estimated at \$1.5 billion. India's coastline experiences a lower frequency of tropical cyclones compared to many other regions, but the loss of life and destruction is much higher. Coastal States must, therefore, focus on reducing the hazard through policies that expand resilient housing, build better storm shelters and create financial mechanisms for insurance and compensation.

Firm intervention is needed to end the unsavoury controversy in the CBI

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