

TRAIL OF DESTRUCTION: ON DAMAGES CAUSED BY CYCLONE GAJA

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It is now becoming clear that [Cyclone Gaja](#) is a major disaster, and its economic impact in Tamil Nadu is comparable to that of the tsunami of 2004. The devastation suffered by tens of thousands of people in several districts of the State has been severe, going well beyond the annual storm season losses. In the initial days after November 16, when the cyclone struck, the State heaved a sigh of relief since the death toll was relatively low. But it is now clear that the suffering, the loss, and the displacement in large parts of Tiruvarur, Nagapattinam, Thanjavur and Pudukottai districts is of an enormous magnitude. [Communities in the affected areas](#) are distraught as houses have collapsed, farms lie ruined, water sources are contaminated and electricity supply remains disrupted. Many areas remain inaccessible because fallen trees have blocked roads. In its report to the Centre, the Tamil Nadu government has estimated the number of people rendered homeless at 3.7 lakh, and houses destroyed at 3.4 lakh. The cyclone has crippled agriculture and livelihoods in a fertile region, felling thousands of productive trees and killing livestock. Between 60% and 80% of the coconut trees in the region have fallen, hobbling Tamil Nadu's farmers, who contribute a quarter of India's coconuts with the highest unit yield. Unlike paddy or many other crops, bringing coconut plantations back to life will take years.

The top priority for the [Tamil Nadu government](#) should be to restore administrative systems and service delivery in the affected areas. Only with physical access, electricity connections and public health facilities can effective relief work be undertaken. Solar power can get public facilities running overnight. It is equally important to assure the large number of stricken farmers that there will be a moratorium on any agricultural loans that they have taken, while a fair compensation scheme is prepared. Many of them have invested in trees and livestock expecting long-term returns, but have been rendered paupers overnight. The Tamil Nadu government has given the Centre a memorandum seeking nearly 15,000 crore for restoration, rehabilitation and mitigation, besides 1,431 crore for immediate relief work. The State's requirements should be met in full. It is also worth pointing out that farm insurance under the Centre's Fasal Bima Yojana covers only food crops, oilseeds and annual horticultural crops, making extraordinary compensation for farmers important. The average citizen is also keen on contributing money and material to the relief effort, as the experience with the Kerala floods shows. What she wants to see is administrative efficiency in rebuilding the shattered districts. Officials should not wait for people to launch protests before coming up with a response. Cyclone Gaja has wrought terrible devastation, and the relief programme must match it in scale.

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