

Aila cyclone devastates coastal West Bengal - A national calamity Cyclone Hit Area has a large population of SCs (Dalits) and Muslims

Report of the National Dalit Watch-NCDHR team

(Aila cyclone hit coastal West Bengal on the 25th May 2009 causing untold devastation, particularly in the Sunderbans. Prasad Chacko and Ashim Boral from National Dalit Watch-NCDHR along with the team from DRCSC (Development Research Communication and Services Centre) a partner of Christian Aid, visited the area to observe the nature of disaster and steps being taken for relief and rehabilitation by the state and Civil Society. The team from NCDHR had a specific mandate to look into issues of inclusion of Dalit and other marginalized communities. We visited the Sunderbans area of the North and South 24 Parganas districts. Christian Aid coordinated the visit with its partner DRCSC. National Dalit Watch would like to thank DRCSC, Christian Aid and Cordaid for the support and in facilitating this visit.)

The enormity of the disaster huge, but underreported by the media

The enormity of the disaster is what struck all of us as we moved from village to village, from island to island over the two days that we spent in the affected areas of the North and South 24 Parganas districts. I had joined the DRCSC team on the 28th and the 29th of May for a short visit to the cyclone affected areas in these districts. Given the limited time and the difficulty in accessing the villages we covered only about 4 villages in 3 blocks; but the long journey by road and by boat across three affected blocks left a lasting impact on all of us. After having seen the Gujarat earthquake and the Tsunami it was a sense of *déjà vu*; tragic and disturbing as always. The same gruesome deaths; the rotting carcasses; the hunger; the disease; the desperation; the hopelessness; a complete breakdown of all coping mechanisms....is it not possible to make some progress into a more civilized and sensitive society with states and institutions that care for the citizens? The same questions being repeated over and over again: Would we ever learn from the disasters that we have faced? When would our states ever display preparedness to respond with sensitivity to human suffering and human dignity? Would the state and civil society ever recognize the fact that response during disasters is to a great extent determined by the priority that is given to the rights and entitlements of the citizens.

I would not go into data here; nor even give the names of the villages or the persons we met. The scenario was heart rending, which will certainly not be captured in the few words written in the following account; nor the pictures that are there in the attachment.

Observations

1. **Insufficient cyclone warning:** Our first visit to a village of Basanti block was an eye opener; over 1200 people who had taken refuge in a school being run by a local NGO (Champa Mahila Society), a partner of DRCSC. The people complained that they were not at all warned of the advancing cyclone. They had to run for their lives with the advancing waves and water gushing into their houses. The only option was to huddle in relatively higher areas in their

settlements and hope that the waves did not reach there also. There was only one death in this village.

2. **Abysmal relief:** The only aid they got was 500 gms of beaten rice per family per day for 3 days since they were displaced by the cyclone. Houses broken down, belongings lost, paddy fields and ponds inundated by saline water, livestock dead by the hundreds. Mercifully, the Pradhan and the GP decided to use their stock of grain the village school that was stored for the mid-day meal programme. But that could see them through only for a couple of days.
3. **Scarcity of drinking water:** We could not decide whether the single functioning tube well near the relief camp, serving 1000 odd people was a blessing or a symbol of the lack of sensitivity of the administration. We were to see worse things the next day.
4. **Children forced to beg for food:** During our journey by road to Sandeshkhali it was shocking to see scores of children jumping in front of vehicles to beg for food. We could see some travellers giving biscuit packets and water bottles to these hapless children. In every junction small tents from where appeals for help were being made continuously over the loudspeakers. Anxious crowds of survivors, suffering written all over their faces would be waiting helplessly for some vehicle of the government or NGOs to come in with water and food.
5. **Desperation giving way to anger:** In some places anxiety gave way to anger; anger erupted into sporadic violence. There were instances of vehicles being looted and government officials being assaulted, politicians being heckled. It was clear that on the 5th day after the fateful day of the fatal fury of Aila, whatever response in terms of humanitarian relief that may have reached the people was highly insufficient. Many people all along the way that we talked to had only the same story to say; they had survived only on 500 gms of beaten rice per family that was given may be once or twice. And this was the state of the survivors who had taken refuge along the highway. We wondered what would be the state of those who were still stranded on the numerous islands in the Sundarban delta. We were on our way to see that first hand.
6. **Complete breakdown of human dignity:** It was a boat journey which we would never forget. What otherwise could have been a picnic in normal times. People waving desperately to us when we were passing by their small devastated islands (or small portions of the embankments which once 'protected' their settlements on the islands; screaming for drinking water and food. We had to move on helplessly looking away....feeling guilty of this complete break down of human dignity
7. **Precarious survival:** Everywhere along the broken banks of the river we could see the people fishing frantically and desperately the whole day, with their small fishing nets that they use near the shores. That was perhaps the only hope for food; One of the workers of a local NGO 'Sanirbahar' mentioned that people are in desperation even collecting the dead fish that were deposited on the mud banks and mangrove thickets along the river; large numbers of fresh water fish were killed due to the excessive ingress of saline water during the tidal ingress that accompanied the cyclone.
8. **The corpses of 5 human beings that we saw floating around** – a grim reminder of the fatal fury of the cyclone. A mother and child locked in an eternal embrace of love – manifested tragically even in death. A kind soul had tied their mortal remains to a mangrove bush in the hope that may be their

dear ones would be able to perform their last rites one of these days when they found the mother and child.

9. **Putrefying Carcasses:** Carcasses of cattle floating all around; the unbearable stench even on the vast expanse of the river in its last lap... The livestock loss seems to be extremely high. The public health implications in the coming days would be daunting. It has been 5 days of putrefaction of these carcasses all around...
10. **Victims turning violent:** It has been 5 days since Aila struck; but no food, water and medical services had reached the islands. Some of the GPs had managed to get a measly amount of 'Cheera', some of them started getting bleaching powder; but the large mass of population still hungry. There was anger, slowly giving way to desperation; there was violence in some areas, government officials assaulted and looting of vehicles passing by – more by the mass of affected people who have taken shelter on the highway. But the inhabitants of these far flung delta islands had no way but to wait stoically, their strength giving away, with increasing morbidity, and the frightening scenario of epidemics already looming large. Diarrhoea has already broken out; and what is to follow is only anybody's guess.
11. **The excluded in the society are the worst victims:** What can we say about the golden rules that we always talk about during disasters: inclusion of the vulnerable sections of the population – women, children, aged, disabled – it is beyond words. Nothing has started so that they can be included and differentially cared for. The women are visible, still doing the work of running to every vehicle or boat in the hope of getting some water or washing pieces of linen that they have been able to retrieve. The children could be seen running to pick up packets of snacks being 'thrown' by 'charitable' passers-by; the disabled not visible at all
12. **Psycho-social care- a dire need:** Those who lost their dear ones have not been yet able to grieve; they still go through the motions needed for survival. The psycho-social impact of the aftermath of this disaster is unfathomable.

A systemic exclusion that determines the nature and quality of disaster response

1. **Majority of the affected population is SC and Muslims;** Although the visit was too short to reach firm conclusions, we could not find any evidence of discrimination in (though extremely miniscule) relief measures within the villages and settlements we visited. People seemed to be living together wherever they had taken refuge. Later on it was clear why: as per information received, the largest population in the affected areas of the Sunderbans in N&S 24 Parganas is that of SC and (Dalit) Muslims. So the scope of internal discrimination amongst them was minimal, coming from the same social strata and caste identity.
2. **Possibility of systemic exclusion:** But this also throws up a very pertinent question regarding the reasons behind the criminally lackadaisical response of the state and civil society in this region. While I would clinically say that this 'needs to be looked into and assessed', our experience tells us that disaster response of the government as well as civil society is socially determined. The urgency and priorities are determined by the social position of the victims; only if we recognize this would we be able to respond in an accurate and strategic manner. This can be done only through a process of exposing the

hidden exclusionary processes that determine the quality of response of government and civil society organizations. This would also determine the agenda of a people-centred advocacy.

3. **Developing a perspective and focus on inclusion:** Monitoring relief and rehabilitation, or even disaster preparedness can be effective only when this perspective is integrated into the strategic plan of the disaster response of civil society organizations, INGOs and NGOs. Otherwise, as always, we would complete our humanitarian aid programme for relief and rehabilitation, even extend it for years, and still not achieve our cherished goals. The goals of non-discriminatory, inclusive disaster response; and disaster preparedness through the convergence of the rights-based approach and vulnerability reduction efforts during disaster response periods and also the periods between disasters.
4. **Urgent, coordinated interventions needed to scale up disaster relief in the area:** The scale of this disaster is so huge that it is impossible for any NGO to manage these relief and rehabilitation operations. But it is equally difficult for the government to do so considering the total lack of disaster preparedness and inability to manage the response professionally as has been observed over the past 5 days. This warrants perhaps an unprecedented cooperation among the government, the NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies. Senior NGO leaders should be engaged in advocating this with a sense of immediacy.
5. **Enhancing the media's sensitivity towards issues of inclusion :** The media has been reporting only the statistical trivia of this disaster; it was distressing that no report on the humanitarian crisis was being pursued by the journalists, leave alone the question of inclusion. Even the photographs were revealing; only aerial survey photos and not of the affected human beings. There is a need to challenge and sensitize the media on this count.
6. **Conspiracies to displace people:** Every disaster is followed by rumours of that the region / location is unsafe for human habitation; this is aimed at forcing the people into leaving their settlements, thereby opening up possibilities of taking over huge tracts of land being taken over for commercial and 'developmental' purposes, and there could be an alibi of saving the ecosystem of Sunderban in this case. We have to be alert on this count.
7. **Counter efforts to take advantage of the insecurity of survivors:** What is always hidden from view is the fact that the crisis and the suffering that the people go through is more on account of the almost deliberate lackadaisical disaster response; and the uncertainty arising out of a lack of reassurance of any assistance in rebuilding their lives. The plight of the people is seen as a natural consequence of the disaster is used to fuel the feeling that the area is no longer safe to live in.
8. **Need for an orientation to the activists on inclusion and pro-people rehabilitation:** The activists involved in responding to this disaster should be alert regarding the possibility of such conspiracies and prepare to counter them. During the earthquake people were encouraged to be relocated; during the tsunami too. But the people by and large did not fall for this since wiser counsel prevailed.

The relief and rehabilitation interventions

9. **Immediate release of funds and flexibility to act urgently:** The kind of interventions required is fairly well established and does not require any

description at this stage. DRCSC has already updated their partners and civil society about their preliminary assessment of needs, and already in the process of sending proposals to donor agencies. What is required is immediate release of funds and the flexibility to urgently.

10. **Need for a task force to track inclusion in relief and rehabilitation:** I strongly recommend that once the immediate relief measures are on track, all the organizations involved should integrate the perspective of inclusion and the rights-based approach to disaster response and disaster preparedness / risk reduction. NCDHR could play a role in building this perspective and enabling all the stakeholders / actors to monitor disaster response from this perspective and build capabilities for a people-driven advocacy.
11. **Need to strategise and strengthen peoples committees for entitlements:** As organizations committed to empowerment of the people, along with immediate relief we should enable the people to set up their own committees in every settlement in order to negotiate with the government. The sustainability of the rehabilitation process is intricately linked to the master plan of the government to enhance the security of the area and the measures taken accordingly.
12. **People's perspectives in rehabilitation:** Rebuilding of houses of course is a priority; but what kind of houses? It is very important to have a design that suits the local conditions but still resistant to cyclones and floods. But any model would be sustainable and give a sense of security to the people only if there are flood and cyclone shelters accessible at each locality. Adequate number of well equipped flood/cyclone shelters and well built school-buildings that could take care of the entire population of a locality is still a far cry; this should be given priority in our agenda for advocacy.
13. **Entitlements pertaining to livelihoods:** People have lost the mainstay of their livelihood, their paddy fields have been inundated and salinated. Livestock have perished in thousands. To reclaim their fields would be a very complicated exercise. And to restore their livestock. This will require substantial investment from the government.
14. **NREGS as a key strategy:** NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) can be used as a potent entitlement during rehabilitation phase and livelihood restoration phase, if given enough flexibility and planned in an appropriate manner along with the affected people.

Climate change and the Sunderbans

15. **Climate change and Sunderbans:** It is essential to look at the Sunderbans as an ecologically endangered area in the medium term from the perspective of climate change. The Master plan prepared cannot be just engineering-based with embankments as the main solution. The future of the people, their livelihoods, the prognosis as far as the rising sea levels are concerned, the resettlement of people if required a few years from now – all these factors need to be considered sensitively in consultation with the people themselves, the Panchayats in the area and the experts.
16. **Pro-poor strategies in climate change:** It cannot be debated that climate change will hit the poor and the marginalized communities in the medium term, making them victims of all catastrophes triggered by global warming. It is high time that civil society and governments are forced to look at this serious crisis from the vantage point of the poor; and not find fraudulent

solutions which are driven by carbon trading and the likes. These are solutions which reside with the affluent, with those whose consumptive lifestyles have resulted in this crisis. Let there emerge a solution that is people-centred and people-driven.

Prasad Chacko
National Coordinator
National Dalit Watch