

**Prejudice In Times Of Natural Disasters: An Assessment Of Caste
Discrimination During Cyclone Fani In Odisha**

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Abstract

In the 21st century, where man is making expeditions to the moon and even planets, some people have not been able to rise above the irrational notions of purity and pollution based on the Indian traditional system of caste. Untouchability is still prevalent in parts of the country and people continue to ostracize fellow human beings based on their caste. It is indeed shocking that even at the wake of a disaster; people do not forget to discriminate the lower caste groups. In developing Odisha casteism has its own flavour. The severe cyclonic storms have not been able to change people's perception towards untouchability and discrimination. The present study is an attempt to map the aftermath of Cyclone Fani and also to understand the experiences of the locals regarding the same. While numerous reports have focused on the physical damage and on traumatic condition of the people, the caste based discriminatory practices have found a place in this paper.

Keywords

Caste, untouchability, discrimination, cyclone

Introduction

Thirteen coastal districts, three hundred miles of long coastline and over forty-one million people is what constitutes Odisha. [1] The geographic location makes the Bay of Bengal coastline prone to severe tropical cyclones which cause widespread destruction often accompanied by storm surges, high winds and extreme rainfall that results in the riverine flooding. [2] As many as 26 of the 35 deadliest tropical cyclones in history have been the Bay of Bengal storms while Odisha has battled over 98 cyclonic storms since 1981 till date. [3] While the east coast of India is one of the most cyclone-prone areas in the world, Odisha is twice as vulnerable as compared to the other eastern States. [4] The latest report of the State Government on 'Vulnerability to Cyclone' reveals that while Odisha is only 17 per cent of the Indian east coast, it has been affected by nearly 35 per cent of all cyclone and Severe Cyclones that have crossed the east coast. [4] As per the Wind and Cyclone Hard Zones Map of Odisha, out of the State's 30 districts, 14 are categorized as "High Damage Risk Zones" either partially or fully. [4]

The “Cydonic” History of Odisha

Odisha has a long tryst with cyclones since decades. The first major Super Cyclone struck Odisha in October 1737 and then in September 1885 which claimed around 5000 lives. It was the year of 1831 in which Odisha witnessed a “very severe cyclone” in Balasore in which 50,000 lives were lost. [4] On November 1-2, 1864, another Very Severe Cyclone crossed Andhra Pradesh near Machilipatnam having its impact on Odisha. And on October 14-16, 1942, a Very Severe Cyclone crossed West Bengal which impacted Odisha. Post independent Odisha witnessed its first major cyclone in 1971 near Paradeep which reported 10,000 casualties. [5]. Odisha was impacted by another Cyclone on November 14-20, 1977 which crossed Andhra Pradesh near Nizampatnam. Yet another Cyclone impacted Odisha which crossed Andhra Pradesh near Machilipatnam on May 4-11, 1990. After a silence of 9 long years came the Super Cyclone of October 1999 which took the death toll to over 10,000. The loss was not only financial but also psychological. An already poor state was made even poorer that very day. The 1999 super cyclone exposed weaknesses in the state’s preparedness to face natural disasters and also its measures to mitigate their effects. It compelled both the state and central governments to rethink their policies on disaster management and take steps to prevent such tragedies in the future [6]. After the 1999 super cyclone, the state government started taking measures like the installation of modern communication systems, construction of cyclone shelters, and other improved infrastructure including pucca houses for the poor in the cyclone prone areas to reduce the physical vulnerability of the coastal districts to cyclonic winds and tidal surges. However, with the increase in population in the coastal areas, and depletion of mangroves and shelter belts, the state continues to be vulnerable to cyclones. [7] On October 12-14, 2013, Very Severe Cyclone “Phailin” crossed the Odisha coast near Gopalpur. On October 12-14, 2014, Very Severe Cyclone “Hudhud” crossed Andhra Pradesh at Visakhapatnam and impacted south Odisha. [4] And when it was thought that all was right, on October 2018 cyclone “Titli” made landfall in the state and claimed 77 lives. [5] The loss was minimized by the State’s effective preparedness.

“Fani”- The *Extremely Severe Cyclonic Storm*

The extremely severe cyclonic storm “FANI” or “Foni” made landfall on Odisha coast on 3rd May 2019 between Gopalpur and Chandbali around Puri district with the wind speed of 200 kmph, storm surge of 1.5 meters with heavy to very heavy rainfall resulting in extensive damage in 4 districts. [4] 14 districts of Odisha especially Puri, Cuttack, Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur and over 16.53 Million people (nearly 36 percent of the total population of Odisha) were affected. [4]. The damage was quite large scale-both physically and mentally. It left many homeless. People had to suffer terribly without water supply and electricity. Mobile towers were also damaged hence communication became a major problem. The assessed loss and damage was declared to be Rs. 24,176 crores. Though the emotional loss suffered was irreparable still due to the timely preparedness by the State Government and intervention of the Central Government, a major catastrophe was averted.

Natural disasters are not bound by regional or national boundaries, nor are they ‘caste’ prejudiced, yet the Dalits are found to be the worst victims of any grave emergency. It is therefore important to understand the background of Dalit marginalisation from the social exclusion perspective. Untouchables are the people who today call themselves ‘Dalits’, who are not only prevented by their caste from marrying anyone born into a ‘varna’, but must not allow themselves to be touched by such a person (hence the term ‘Untouchables’). These people are considered spiritually and physically unclean, and in the caste system must live in a separate colony, must use separate water and eating facilities, must never come in contact with caste Hindus, must call out an identifying greeting to ensure everyone knows they are ‘untouchable’ and must perform the tasks considered too unclean for caste Hindus to do. These jobs included removing carcasses of dead animals, working with leather, performing midwifery duties, cleaning toilets, giving news of death and working with particular metals. In totality, it is these given pre-existing conditions of vulnerabilities posed by untouchability practices and

discrimination based on caste that gets magnified and multiplied into various forms of systemic and societal exclusion of Dalits in emergency situation, in disasters.^a

Caste based discrimination (CBD) is internationally recognized as discrimination based on work and descent^b, as typically associated with the notion of purity and pollution and practices of untouchability. This kind of discrimination leads to multiple marginalisation of Dalits suffering with their identity and origin-based discrimination, resulting in systemic exclusion in social, economic and political spheres, including humanitarian assistance, through discrimination by default. The economic factor is most apparent as many poor people are forced to live on marginal lands, such as floodplains, coastal towns and unstable hillsides. The present study is an attempt to map the aftermath of Cyclone “Fani” and understand caste discrimination in times of severe disaster.

Methodology

The present study is field based and exploratory in nature and involves two neighbouring villages named Biripadiya and Baligodi under the Panchayat of Pratap Ramchandrapur of Puri District. There are 30 families in Biripadiya while Baligodi gives shelter to about 20 families. Upper caste population dominate the Baligodi village while the lower caste occupies Biripadiya village. The study area was chosen purposively based on newspaper reports which claimed rampant caste discrimination during period of extreme crisis. 25 families out of 85 were denied entry to the cyclone shelters located within a radius of approximately four km by 'upper caste' people in Biripadiya village. [9]. Even at the wake of a tragedy, caste discrimination does not seem to mellow down. The present study was conducted in the month of May 2019 and the findings are first hand experiences of the silence left after the storm.

^aPaul, Lee Macqueen. 2011. Addressing caste discrimination in Humanitarian Response . Delhi: National Dalit Watch-NCDHR(SWADHIKAR).

^b UN Draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent, clause 2

Findings

Discrimination by default' is as much an issue as discrimination by norm and intent and is prevalent both within civil society and administration. Even in cases where there is no intentional bias against Dalit communities, the lack of knowledge about their vulnerabilities, not mapping these communities in the context of the disaster and prevalent norms of operations result in the administration not taking the cause of Dalit and other marginalized communities in times of disaster. [10]

The Post "Fani" scenario scene was ineffable. Houses were either blown away or washed away by the winds and the rains. Even after the cyclone, there were several thunderstorms or Kaal Baisakhi which wrought further havoc. The poor villagers who were trying to survive by making bamboo houses with tarpaulin roofs but these storms had blown them out of proportion. Instead of helping fellow villagers at this time of crisis, their own brethren were adding to their woes. It was indeed saddening to note that when people should have fought against Fani in unison, all they could practice was untouchability. The notions of purity and pollution have ripped the souls of the upper castes and battered humanity to an extent that even the dangerous Fani could not wash those pollutants away from their minds. On the 6th of May, when one such storm approached, the womenfolk of Biripadiya decided to take shelter in Baligodi school and found one of the rooms open. Hence, they came back to take their belongings and upon returning found the room to be locked. It started raining and to save their belongings, they had to break open the lock and barge in. But before they could do so, they were pelted with stones by the "upper caste"-the residents of Baligodi. Addressing them as untouchables, the villagers attacked these women with wooden planks and two women named Sujata Kahala (name changed) and Saraswati Malik (name changed) were injured. Helpless, they had to take shelter under a banyan tree on the road. Similar evidences are also found in Tamil Nadu where the Cyclone "Gaja" made a landfall in 2018. [12] Dalits are often discouraged from accessing water, food and

accommodation due to ingrained, discriminatory societal norms that lead to a separation of common water sources, common dining and common shelter areas according to caste status.^c

Why do people prefer multipurpose cyclone shelters soon after a warning is given? These structures promise security of life and provisions for food and basic facilities, even for days, till relief and restoration work begins visibly. These multipurpose shelters are said to have saved millions of lives during disasters. But they seem to have been of little use to the most vulnerable sections of the society. The Dalits do not want to believe that these shelters are meant only for the powerful. The government is building temples for the upper castes but why not a cyclone shelter for the others, asks Kalu Gochayat (name changed), a young Dalit. [8]Pre-existing conditions of vulnerability and caste-discrimination get magnified and multiplied as systemic and social exclusion during disasters, noted a 2011 study conducted by National Dalit Watch (NDW), which documented caste-based discrimination at relief camps and while accessing aid.

Biripadiya village does not have a lake or pond. The nearest source of water for them is the pond in Baligodi. However, they are not allowed to share water from the pond with the Baligodi. Upon orders from the Sarpanch and Ward members, they agreed upon letting them use the water but at a separate time either before or after the latter uses the pond. It is a clear case of untenability. The Biripadiya villagers are treated as 'unseeables' by the residents of Baligodi for which the latter do not want to meet the lower caste people of Biripadiya. But what is shocking is that during the time of a calamity, they were equally apathetic towards the sufferings of these poor people. They did not allow them to use the water from the pond citing the reason as the water getting polluted by the touch of these Dalits. The Sarpanch thus decided to provide water tankers to these people on a daily basis. Dalit communities are prevented from receiving emergency aid or accessing shelters or kitchens due to perceived 'untouchability' and the internalised social norms or fears of violence.[11]Even when the PWD water was supplied in the morning from 6:00 am to 9:00 am, it was the upper caste people who filled their buckets first. The Dalits were allowed only last 20 minutes or so which was insufficient to meet the water needs of 30 families.

^cEquality in Aid Report 2013, International Dalit Solidarity Network
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The indifference of the people of Baligodi does not stop there. They were so blinded by these irrational notions of purity and pollution that they even refused to be treated by the same doctor and did not let any kind of medical assistance to the Biripadiya people. They did not let the doctors go to Biripadiya nor did they let the medicines be distributed to the villagers. MN Srinivas, Kathleen Gough and Andre Bettile found while studying the Cauvery Delta: Those from the Scheduled Castes live in clusters of densely packed, small houses outside the main village while upper and intermediary castes--that often own fertile farms--live in spacious homes close to main roads. As a result, during time of emergency, relief materials, medicines, water etc. is easily availed by them than people living far away. Similar experiences were also accounted in Tamil Nadu wherein the vans bringing the relief material into the villages had to be guarded and escorted because the more powerful communities living enroute would stop the vehicles and take the materials [12]. Testimonies of the testimonies of Dalit victims of the tsunami all along the Indian coast of Tamil Nadu show remarkable consistency, pointing to a systematic and predictable type of discrimination where the discrimination was present at all phases of the recovery process, from the denial of rice, the refusal to share emergency shelters, the removal of bodies, and the relief materials provided, through to the compensation and provision of livelihood assistance and housing [13]

The worst form of caste discrimination is untouchability. It is the most inhuman practice, wherein a fellow human being is treated so inferior and unclean that touching him/her meant dirtying one's hands which demanded rites of purification in order to restore purity of the body. When the Dalits go to the grocery shop in Baligodi, the shopkeeper does not let them touch him. He does not take money directly from their hands for that would pollute them. Hence, these villagers are asked to keep the money on a container or give the shopkeeper the same from a raised position without touching his hands. If they happen to touch the Dalits, they take bath as a mark of purification.

It is said that knowledge illuminates the minds and drives out the darkness of ignorance. But if the very temple of education is corrupt and prejudiced, would education serve its purpose? What is it that the imparters of knowledge would teach the kids? Untouchability? Caste-based discrimination? It was indeed shocking to know that the schools practiced untouchability even

within the four walls of the classroom. The students sit according to their caste groups. The upper caste students like the Pradhans occupy the front benches and the lower caste groups like the Telis, Domo, Gudiya etc. sit at the back, else they are made to sit in separate rows to avoid physical contact.

In fact, the teachers and parents warn the students against physical contact beyond their own caste groups. One of the students narrated an incident wherein he was punished and beaten up by the teacher for a mistake he had not committed. A boy from the privileged caste beat up his classmate and the latter injured his head. However, instead of punishing the culprit, the teacher forcefully blamed a Dalit boy who was not involved in the scene at all. He was unnecessarily punished. Reminiscing this incident, 12-year old Sonu Kahala (name changed) commented as such: *“We share a good bond among ourselves. It is the teachers who create differences and rifts among us deliberately to keep us separate. But the main culprits are the parents. Our friends from the upper castes fear their parents because they would be beaten up if seen with the Dalits. The Brahmin boys complain that they would be asked to change the holy thread that they put around their necks as the touch of a Dalit pollutes it and it no longer remains sacred. These boys are not allowed to share their tiffin boxes with us. If we happen to touch their lunch boxes, they would not consume the food. They are advised to throw it. Hence, to avoid all such conflicts, we mutually consent to maintain a safe distance and avoid physical contact.”* It is an alarming situation as they are passing on such illogical and outdated thoughts and barbarous practices on to the future generations making their future equally bleak.

On deeper probe, it was found that the teachers were not entirely at fault. Behind the face of the teachers hid the brains of the parents who brainwashed and even threatened the teachers to ensure that distance is maintained the privileged and the under privileged caste groups else failing which they would have to wash their hands off their job. If this was not enough, the Dalit students are not allowed to sit for the Matriculation Board exam, the reason being the lack of a caste certificate. As per rules, caste certificate cannot be issued if they do not have a land Patta. As it is, these poor villagers do not have lands of their own, so how are they supposed to produce Pattas! This forces them to drop out of school.

The younger generations from the Dalit community are not prepared to accept such humiliation any longer. They want to know from their teachers why they are discriminated in schools. Why are they asked to sit at a distance in the classroom? Their teachers have no answers. The young Dalits demand justice. Odisha's multipurpose cyclone shelters after witnessing caste discrimination on a larger scale seem to be unwittingly facilitating reassertion of Dalit rights and the right to live with dignity. But, before another cyclone hits, the government should realistically assess the social use of its multipurpose cyclone shelters and prevent its takeover by the socially powerful caste elements in vulnerable areas. [8]

CONCLUSION

Within the Indian social fabric, the age-old doctrine of exclusion legitimized and sanctified by the Brahmanical ideology culminating in such behaviour is a 'routine matter'. There is a need to understand that incidents of such nature demonstrate how this ideology of purity and pollution has permeated deep down the social fabric of our society. Discrimination on the basis of caste, even while faced with a calamity, is a logical outcome of the common sense which gets built up in such an ambience. [9] .

The question now arises: is this age-old inhuman practice ever going to end? If education is not able to drive out these ills from the society, then what will? Even at the times of crisis, if fellow human beings cannot stand by each other and support each other, should they even be called humans? What should humans without basic humanity be called? Without the milk of kindness running in their hearts, should not these human beings be called beasts?

The fact is that a majority of people who are yet to shed their *varna* mindset do not want to concede this simple fact. They do not want to recognize that the doctrine of exclusion is an all-pervasive phenomenon simply because they themselves are 'beneficiaries of the caste-based order.' They have an interest in (to quote the *Report on Prevention of Atrocities against SCs and STs*) perpetuating "[t]he existing unequal social relations" and have "[f]rustrated attempts to democratize the society because through the customary arrangements the dominant castes are assured of 'access to cheap labour' ; 'social control over people'; 'privileged position with regard to development resources'. Obviously, they are not bothered with clear exposure of the deep

contradictions in social values which are for everyone to see, wherein while they are ready “to enjoy all rights and privileges which a democratic liberal society has given them”, but deny the “same very rights and privileges to the SCs.”

Disaster management organisations and the state and local governments need to go deeper to tease out the very complex sociological elements of Indian society and bring that to the heart of everyday disaster management practices to promote disaster-resilient sustainable development in the villages and district towns of India. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, adopted by UN member states, sets out seven clear targets and four priorities to prevent new disaster risks and reduce existing ones. It prioritises disaster governance at multiple levels and emphasises the need to understand disaster risk in all its dimensions. But aspects of Indian society, such as caste, which are fundamental to understanding how experiences during disasters differ, are not mentioned in any international framework or policy. When everyone seems to be impacted, how do you assess who’s the most deserving?”. That is a question when asked multiple government and non-government stakeholders and finds that often, relief is not prioritised on the basis of pre-existing vulnerability such as caste. While such universal coverage allows for faster relief and wider coverage, it can often overlook differential vulnerability and the need to give more assistance to those who are hit harder or recover more slowly.

While disaster management doesn’t discriminate between minorities or majorities, rich or poor; still Odisha’s mandatory quota of 50 kg of rice and Rs 2,000, for example, was provided to everyone in affected districts. Caste was not overtly included in these calculations but policies did indirectly take into consideration the needs of those of marginalised castes. But neglecting the caste structures and its impact on disaster relief invariably leads to discrimination and exclusion of Dalits, as mentioned in the NDW 2011 report.

The pre-existing conditions of vulnerabilities posed by ‘untouchability’ practices and discrimination are magnified into various forms of systemic and societal exclusion of Dalits in emergency situations. As pointed out in the case study by National Dalit Watch – National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, neglect in understanding the caste structures and how they work in disaster situations invariably result in discrimination and exclusion of Dalits and other

marginalised communities in disaster response. Even in cases where there is no intentional bias against Dalit communities, the lack of knowledge about their pre-existing vulnerabilities, and the lack of targeting these communities or including them in response assessment and management result in prevailing, often discriminatory, norms of operations taking over.

Governments and non-state actors involved in humanitarian response should take different measures to tackle exclusion and discrimination in humanitarian programmes. Strategies and tools should be developed in the planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes, including participatory capacity assessment and vulnerability mapping, inclusion monitoring and social equity auditing. All actors should be trained in tackling caste-based discrimination and measures should be adopted to address and challenge 'untouchability' practices in disaster response.

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