

Life in eternal tears

A Report on

Aila in Sundarban



Aila, the cyclone which devastated the swampy land of Sundarban and other parts of West Bengal left people in great suffering by destroying their habitat, agriculture and keeping them in an unsafe landscape where very less relief and rehabilitation activities have taken place so far. CNISBSS has been involved in relief work in the initial days and now mobilizes people for their right to relief and proper rehabilitation...

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A seven member team consisting of representatives from people's organization, DBSS, and SBSS (Ajay Sarkar, Jomijohn, Animash Mandal, Aurobindo, Indu, Vikram and John) visited the Aila affected areas on 5 July. They went to Pachim Samnamaskar, a village located in Gosafa Island to see the situation and the status of relief and rehabilitation. This is one of the villages where DBSS accompanied by SBSS distributed relief materials in the aftermath of the disaster.

Aila and its Impact...



More than the rain the tide and wind wreaked huge damage in the southern part of West Bengal when the Cyclone Aila struck the coastal area of the state. More than 130 people died. A total of 67 lakh people have been affected and nearly nine lakh houses were destroyed. Over 3.78 lakh people took shelter in 765 relief camps. Agriculture and horticulture sectors are pegged at around Rs 500 crore apart from other damages.

CNISBSS intervenes...



CNISBSS selected three villages (Dolki, Purba Sabnamaskar and Phakiralay). These villages were selected by the Sundarban Social Development Centre- a people's organization which is located in Lasmikantapur, close to Gosfa block. After assessing the situation, the representatives from the people's organization decided to distribute Bread, Laddu, Candle, Mortein, Zeoline, Batasa, D. Water, Phenyl, and ORS. With very limited resources they had to generate their own resources to reduce the suffering mass in the cut off lands... people themselves collected drinking water, medicine etc along with the support from SBSS

Meeting with People...

We reached Pachim Sabnamaskar around 1pm. The village was quiet and people were busy doing their daily activities. We met Veena in one of the narrow lanes leading to the village. As we started talking many other joined us. One of suggested that we could go the Church as it was humid and sunny outside.

We went to the Church. In few minutes time, entire village congregated in the Church. The discussion started with choir and revolved around the experience of the people and how did they respond when actually the tide made the rivers to swell. People were in the field and many women said that they were actually preparing food. It was just before the noon, children were playing and gradually it became windy and trees started shaking due to heavy wind. Meanwhile the river also started swelling and embankment started breaching when water started overflowing. Sensing the unusual and a very rare abnormality in the speed, of overflowing people took whatever food, both cooked and uncooked and found a safer place to stay. They might not had known at that time that things would become only worse and that they had to be there for more than two days without any basic requirements like, water, food, clothes milk or other food for the children.



People of Pachim Samnamaskar went to the Church which is the only concrete structure in the village everything else was constructed with mud. These mud houses actually can get damaged or dissolved whenever there is a heavy wind and torrential rain. Same thing happened during the time of Aila too.

The relief from the outside world came only after two days. Relief materials were dropped by the state from the helicopter as most of the villages became completely inaccessible by road. Usually in previous instances, people who live along the embankments shifts to village which are safer and less vulnerable but this time every village was affected and cut off from the other as the water submerged the entire southern part of the state.

People also shared about the kind of relief materials that they received from the state. Along with some potable water, medicine, tarpaulin, they received six kilograms of grain in the first week of the disaster. Since then they did not get anything substantial. This inadequate relief operations needs to be juxtaposed with government's approval of great failure in administering relief.

The discussion touched on the need to organize them to approach the local *panchayats* in getting the relief. Even though people remember the assessments done by the state government on agriculture, livestock and house damage it has not compensated them so far. During the discussion people realized the importance of following up the matter with the *Gram Panchayat* and if need be at the block level on the further assistance from the government as actually things are looking ominous because at least for year people may not be able to do anything in the field as salt water from the river has spoiled the land. In most of the places salt water is still there in the agricultural land as well as spoiled the minor water bodies which many houses have in their backyard.

The discussion and meeting ended with a moving prayer from a community member.

Community building initiatives: the way ahead

The vulnerability of this area has so far been not understood in terms of preparedness in case of a disaster. There is no basic cyclone protection structure; like high raise community centre in the most vulnerable places as these areas have to protect themselves against the fury of cyclones every year. The people of Pachim Samnamaskar actually could save themselves because they had Church building where they could take shelter. There are several villages where there are no such concrete structures. Ideally government should think of providing proper housing. Considering the 'limitations' of resource, atleast the state government should think in terms of common building for emergemngy purpose as

most of the islands in Sundarban are known for frequent flooding and submergence of islands as season changes...



The community seems to be an integrated community even though people have different political affiliations. There is a greater scope for community mobilisation not only to work for the *right to relief* but concentrate the local community on the habitat in general. Sundarban is one of the fragile eco systems across the world which faces the threat of changing climatic conditions and possible sea level rise (SLR). SLR increases the intrusion sea water into delta region which survive on agriculture and inland fishing.

Surrounded by water people of Sundarban live in water, move in water, and some time they are also forced to end their life in water...

In fact all the villages having congregations needs to be united and projected as **eco-system congregations** which stand up against the civilization and developmental process which is manifested with unending thirst for energy.

Some specific points to start with...

Relief and Rehabilitation

- The congregations need to be supported with an enquiry process with the local administrative structure (block and district) on what happened to the assessment done by the state and what is action taken on it. This can be done at the first instance by filing an RTI
- Monitoring the overall thrust of the relief and rehabilitation programmes of the state (it has recently granted with 1000 crore budgetary allocation from the central government) as there is always an inclination from the state to plan huge projects to strengthen the embankments at the cost reducing the micro level vulnerability of the communities like having concrete houses, proper emergency shelters, health centres, schools, roads etc. Even though embankments are important it is also essential to have a better programme for maintaining them too. Along with ensuring the basic needs, the government should take adequate measures to protect the mangroves which are the natural barriers against the sea water intrusion. In this process, the community should be given more roles.

Community Building Initiatives

- A short time case study can be done on the vulnerability of the place and particular problems faced by the communities due to cyclone and flooding and possible remedial measures
- By projecting the congregations as eco-system communities under Green-Church Model, the fragile habitat of the communities could be strengthened by linking them with the local churches and international congregations which are considered as green-Churches

Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands...stretching for almost three hundred kilometers...number in thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago...