

Multipurpose Cyclone Shelters and Caste Discrimination

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Dalits, who tried to seek shelter from the approaching Cyclone Fani in Odisha, faced humiliation and discrimination. While they were prevented from seeking protection during earlier natural disasters too, this time, young Dalits have been vocal about the injustice.

Caste continues to dominate all social relationships in “developing” Odisha. Even the severe cyclones that keep hitting the state’s coast repeatedly do not bring any respite for the victims of caste discrimination and untouchability. The multipurpose cyclone shelters stand as silent testimonies to this.

The Other Side

You are a Dom (untouchable Dalit). How dare you come here? Go away, go away!¹

Hours before Cyclone Fani made its landfall in Puri on 3 May 2019, shattering the city and devastating its villages, this was the response that 90-year-old Biswanath Malik received when he approached a cyclone shelter. Not only Malik, no one else from the Dom caste was allowed to enter the cyclone shelter. There were about 40 people, including 12 women and 20 children, said Jhadu Malik, who is unable to digest the humiliation he suffered on 2 May 2019, while pleading with upper-caste villagers for accommodating them in the multipurpose cyclone shelter of Balabhadrapur. Similar narratives emerged from all over the district and no attempts were visible to address the issue either by the state or civil society or any political groups. The story from Biripada village of Patali Panchayat in the same area has gone viral after the Odia daily *Sambad* published it on its 9 May 2019 edition (Panda 2019). The 25 Dom families, which included 85 members, were denied entry to a cyclone shelter which was effectively under the control of upper-caste villagers on 2 May. The government of the day could successfully evacuate more than 1.1 million people from vulnerable places, we have been told.

On 29 October 1999 a super cyclone devastated the coastal district of Jagatsinghpur, more particularly its

Ersama block where about 10,000 people died as they could not be evacuated to safer places and there was no cyclone shelter in the areas hit by the tidal waves.

Upper-caste Controllers

The state government was totally unprepared to deal with the disaster and its aftermath. In the post-super cyclone period, certain bilateral and multilateral agencies, international aid agencies and other state governments extended support to the government of Odisha for building good infrastructure to deal with cyclones and flood. As per the report of the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA 2019), “203 multipurpose cyclone shelters, including 65 by Indian Red Cross Society have been constructed in coastal districts of Orissa” and they seem to have been handed over to the community-based Cyclone Shelter Management and Maintenance Committees (CSMMC). Each cyclone shelter has been provided with 32 types of sophisticated equipment required for disaster management, including power saw, siren, free kitchen utensils, flexi water tank, solar light, stretcher, lifebuoy and life jacket, inflatable tower light, and generator, amidst other stuff, claims OSDMA.

This could also be the reason why this infrastructure is in the hands of a few powerful village elites who occupy a dominant place in the caste hierarchy. Doms in Balabhadrapur do not have a representative in the CSMMC and anytime a cyclone warning is given they come to know about it only a few hours before it actually hits the coast. By the time they get the crucial information and make desperate attempts to reach a cyclone shelter, the upper-caste people would have occupied it first and deny entry to Dalits, said Stephenian Pabitra Mohan Jali. Jali is from the fisher community, who served in the army before his speech got affected after a deadly attack by upper-caste tourist guides in Puri. Jali enjoys trust and confidence among the Doms. Even the fisher families were not allowed entry to the cyclone shelter. They lived in the local college,

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whereas another Dalit community, the Bhois, took shelter in the dilapidated structures of a local primary school along with the Doms. Interestingly, the Bhoi community considers their caste to be superior to the Doms in the social hierarchy and they are relatively better off compared to the latter.

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, a young Dalit.

Most of the Dom families are landless. The structures they had built on village land have been devastated by the cyclone and they are not sure if their case would be considered for being awarded compensation. The Dom community in Balabhadrapur earns its living from daily wages. Engagement of wage earners for any work, whether under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or private, is done by the upper castes. Thus, a confrontation with them would invite loss of livelihood, which they cannot afford. Accepting everything as fate, the victims of caste discrimination hope for benevolent gestures from the upper-caste sections though the result is never encouraging.

Kaveri Malik, a young mother of two small children, was denied access to the cyclone shelter the night before Cyclone Fani devastated their huts in the village. She narrated her deep anguish accumulated through successive cyclones—Hudhud, Titli, Phailin and now Fani. At each of these times, they have been made to feel that they were condemned human beings, and that they could not aspire to be treated equally with dignity even when a deadly disaster was approaching. Evidently, it was not one's vulnerability that determined the kind

of security they deserved to receive, but what really mattered here was the caste one belonged to.

Common Practice in Puri

Caste discrimination is not a new phenomenon in this place, which upper-caste elements claim to be the lord's own place. This area in Puri district is known for its perpetual caste atrocities. The Dalits might treat the cyclone as a disaster which comes for a day, but caste is an even more deadly disaster with which they are made to live every day of their lives. Pabir Malik, a young Dom Sahi who along with the only three others from his community who go to school, tells us,

If you cannot stop them from separating us in school, you can't say anything when it comes to the cyclone shelter. Did we or our parents commit any crime? Why is the teacher forcing us to sit at a distance from the upper-caste students? Even the mid-day meal cook serves us from a distance. Our elders are not served tea in the same glass when they go to a tea stall. A separate Dalit glass is kept for them. We can't go by cycling in the village. We can't take out a marriage procession in the village, though we are made to play the drum when their procession moves. How long will this injustice continue?

This is echoed by others too who were denied entry to the cyclone shelter on 2 May 2019.

The Scheduled Castes (scs) in Puri constitute 19.1% of the population, and stories of caste-based violence and torture are heard on a regular basis. Odisha was in the news a couple of years back for the rape and murder of Babina in Pipili (Puri). A powerful member of legislative assembly of the area reportedly offered protection to the culprits who belonged to the upper castes (*TheFactNow* 2018). All the accused were acquitted in the trial because of want of proof (Das 2012). President Ramnath Kovind and his wife during their visit to Puri in June 2018 also suffered humiliation at the hands of the servitors (*News18* 2018).

A distinguished teacher and social activist working on caste-based discrimination for the last two decades in this area of Puri district, Bagambar Pattnaik, says that laws against caste-based discrimination are not implemented. The police do not register complaints and no action is

taken against the culprits, making the complainant even more vulnerable. The barbers in this part of the district were victimised by members of the upper castes for defying the customary bondage system (Ghosh 2018) which was in practice for centuries.

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 against in schools. Why are they asked to sit at a distance in the classroom? Their teachers have no answers. The young Dalits want and 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.

NOTE

- 1 All quotes are from field interviews conducted during visit to three villages and two Multipurpose Cyclone Shelters in Balavdarapur, Dam Sahi and Gopinathpur in Bramhagiri area of Puri district on 15 May 2019.

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